

## William B. Jensen (1948–



William Barry Jensen was born on March 25, 1948 in Marshfield, Wisconsin, the oldest of the three children born to William Wickman Jensen, a sign painter by trade, and Betty Jane Tracy, a librarian.

His working-class childhood was spent largely in the nearby city of Wausau, Wisconsin, where he received his elementary and secondary education in the public school system. Jensen was attracted to chemistry at any early age. "I planned to become a chemist as early as the fifth grade and was an avid home laboratory enthusiast throughout junior and senior high school. My interest in history of chemistry developed around the seventh grade when I first encountered a

copy of Mary Elvira Weeks' *Discovery of the Elements* in the Public Library. Ever since then, it has been an inherent part of my interest in chemistry in general. I cannot conceive of devoting one's life to the study of a given science without also having an interest in the origins of its concepts and techniques."

Jensen received his higher education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, completing his B.S. in chemistry with honors in 1970, M.S. in chemistry and education in 1972, and Ph.D. in inorganic chemistry in 1982. "Most of my free credits were used to take courses in the history of science, and at one point I was asked to choose between a scholarship in history of science and one in chemistry. I decided that I was a chemist interested in history rather than an historian interested in chemistry. The employment opportunities were infinitely greater for a chemist than for an historian and I have never regretted my decision." After a brief period as assistant professor of inorganic chemistry at the Rochester Institute of Technology (1983–1986), Jensen was appointed Oesper Professor of the History of Chemistry and Chemical Education at the University of Cincinnati, a position endowed by the late Ralph E. Oesper, recipient of the first Dexter Award in 1956.

Jensen is the author of more than 150 papers and reviews in the fields of inorganic chemistry, chemical education, and the history of chemistry, and is the author of two books: *The Lewis Acid-Base Concepts: An Overview* (1980) and *Mendeleev on the Periodic Law: Selected Writings 1869-1905* (2005). A third book, *Philosophers of Fire: A Brief Outline of 600 Years of Chemical History for Students of Chemistry*, is in the final stages of completion. He is the author of the column "Ask the Historian," which appears bimonthly in the *Journal of Chemical Education* and was the founding editor of the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* (1988–1995). He is the curator of the Oesper Collections in the History of Chemistry at the University of Cincinnati, which include rare books and journals (some dating from the 16th century), a print and photograph collection, and a museum of historical chemical apparatus. The *Bulletin* is the only American journal devoted to the history of chemistry, and the museum is the largest collection of such artifacts in the United States outside of the Smithsonian.

Jensen's work in the history of chemistry has largely focused on late 19th and early 20th century physical and inorganic chemistry and the history of chemical apparatus. Most of his activities have been within the context of the chemical rather than the history community. "One of

the tragic consequences of the professionalization of the history of science, beginning in the 1960s, has been its increasing alienation from the interests of professional scientists. The Oesper Position in the History of Chemistry—one of the few located within a chemistry department rather than a history department—has provided me with a unique opportunity to bridge this gap and to convince chemists and students alike that a knowledge of their history can immeasurably enrich their understanding of chemistry.”

### Sources

Biographical information provided by William B. Jensen.

Photo courtesy of the Oesper Collections: University of Cincinnati.

Jensen is well-known for his caricatures, especially of scientists, some of which have appeared in the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry*. See

[http://www.measurenet-tech.com/WilliamJensenToProvideCaricaturesofNotedChemistsToMeasureNet\\_000.html](http://www.measurenet-tech.com/WilliamJensenToProvideCaricaturesofNotedChemistsToMeasureNet_000.html)