

# WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

*A series of tributes to hometown heroes who have made a difference.*

## William A. Noyes



**A** preeminent chemist, Dr. William Albert Noyes was founder of several significant academic journals and the recipient of the Priestley Medal, the American Chemical Society's most prestigious award.

The youngest son of Spencer W. and Mary (Packard) Noyes, William was born Nov. 6, 1857, on a farm near Independence, Iowa. In 1875 he enrolled at Grinnell College, intending to major in classical studies but became enamored with chemistry. He taught at a country school while attending college, earning two undergraduate degrees in 1879. For two years he taught analytical chemistry at his college

alma mater. In January 1881 Noyes enrolled at Johns Hopkins University to study with Dr. Ira Remsen, developer of the artificial sweetener saccharin and later president of Johns Hopkins. Writing *On the Oxidation of Benzene with Chromic Acid* as his dissertation, he earned a Ph.D. in 18 months. Between 1882 and 1886, Dr. Noyes taught at the University of Minnesota and the University of Tennessee.

During the summer of 1886 Dr. Noyes was engaged by Rose Polytechnic Institute of Technology as professor of chemistry, residing at 937 N. Seventh St. with his wife, the former Flora Collier, and infant daughter Mamie, who died on June 13, 1887, at age four. She was interred at Terre Haute's Woodlawn Cemetery. During 1889 Noyes took a leave of absence to study in Germany. He remained at Rose Poly for 17 years, securing a reputation as an outstanding teacher and scholar. Noyes built a residence at 2015 N. Ninth St. in Collett Park. Six-year-old daughter Ethyl died there June 30, 1899. Meanwhile, Flora gave birth to William Albert Noyes Jr. on April 18, 1898. Tragically, she died March 14, 1901, after an extended illness and is interred with Ethyl at Highland Lawn Cemetery.

On June 2, 1902, Dr. Noyes married Mattie Elwell. Following the 1903 school year, he resigned from Rose Poly to become the chief chemist of the National Bureau of Standards in Baltimore. Determined to ascertain the atomic weight of elements, he earned a worldwide acclaim for pinpointing the atomic weight of chlorine. As a result of that work, Noyes shared the 1908 William H. Nichols Award, presented by the American Chemical Society (ACS), with H.C.P. Weber. In 1902 he became editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*. He also founded *Chemical Abstracts* (1907), *ACS Scientific Monographs* (1919) and *Chemical Reviews* (1924).

Dr. Noyes accepted an appointment as chairman of the chemistry department at the University of Illinois in 1907, holding the position until becoming professor emeritus in 1926. Despite his early work in analytical chemistry, he earned a global reputation as an organic chemist, definitively proving the structure of camphor and other compounds. He received the coveted Priestley Award in 1935 for distinguished service in the field of chemistry. In 1939 the University of Illinois named its chemical laboratory in his honor. Son W.A. Noyes Jr., a University of Illinois graduate known as "Albert," followed in his father's footsteps, becoming president of the ACS and the International Union of Chemistry. They collaborated on the textbook *Modern Alchemy*.

The elder Dr. Noyes died Oct. 24, 1941, at age 83, in Urbana, Ill., while the younger Dr. Noyes died Nov. 25, 1980, in Austin, Tex.



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