VAN METER INVENTIVE GENIUS

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REPRINTED FROM

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY
NEW SERIES
1939

Royale Press
1941

PRINTED BY

BARON FRIEDRIK W. VAN METER

BOOK NUMBER

This

book is

affectionately

dedicated to our loving

Mother in reverent memory

of our beloved and distinguished

Father.

—Baron Van Meter

Los Angeles, California

November 25, 1941

James Wright Van Meter

Inventive Genius

FEW men in the history of science surpass in achievement the genius of JAMES WRIGHT VAN METER, one of the world's foremost inventors during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth. Few can boast a career as colorful and as interesting. His broad field of operation extended from the rolling Texas prairies to the Andes mining regions of Peru and Bolivia in South America; from the tableland of Mexico to the industrial and chemical heart of Germany. His versatility encompassed almost every phase of science; mining, agriculture, hygiene and communication were a few departments that were to benefit by his unique talents. He held a distinctive place among the great men of science of his generation and counted among his intimates such outstanding figures as Edison, Burbank, Marconi, Steinmetz, Tesla and many others of comparable note. With all this genius he was a personality endowed with a keen wit and a genuine humanness that won the affection and friendship of those who were privileged to know him. He has been described as a brilliant conversationalist and raconteur, and delighted his many friends and acquaintances with his witty and humorous stories of his experiences and travels.

A connoisseur of the fine arts, he was fond of the operas, fine music and singing. He could play any musical instrument by ear, especially the violin and piano, at which latter he would often sit and play his favorite Southern melodies. In short, he was a man whose interests were not circumscribed and who found stimulation and pleasure outside of his chosen field.

Mr. Van Meter was born on May 2, 1870 in Moorefield, Hardy County, West Virginia, the son of Colonel William Cunningham Van Meter, who was born in 1828, and Elfrida Victoria (Wright) Van Meter, the former of his native State. Paternally he traced his American ancestry to Dutch nobility, whose representatives came from Meteren, Gelderland, Holland, on the Good-ship *Foxe*, and settled in Nieuw Amsterdam on September 12, 1662. His mother was born in 1842, and was the first white child born in what is now Victoria, Texas. The town is named after her.

As a child, he returned to the latter State and spent his boyhood there. He attended the public schools and after completing this part of his education he attended the University of Texas, where he became the University's first Fellow in Chemistry and was granted the degree of Doctor of Physics and Chemistry. At this time, October 18, 1887, he was granted his first patent, on a windmill, which proved to be a commercial success. This was the first of the many score of patents granted by the United States and foreign governments to this highly organized "Inventive Genius." He left the university after a year's study to open the first electric supply house in the city of San Antonio. The young man, who had already manifested a keen interest in science

and the scientific achievemants of his age, was quick to recognize the opportunities some of the new developments offered. Nothing brings out this fact quite as graphically as his enthusiasm for the telephone. He saw this instrument, which was just coming into general use at the time, revolutionizing the business methods of his surroundings. His enthusiasm was contagious but not quite powerful enough to overcome the skepticism of those he tried to convince. The problem brought out a quality of resourcefulness in his character that he was to demonstrate on numerous occasions thereafter. His methods of converting the ranchers was unique. By using wire fences for telephone lines he soon was able to link a number of distant ranches to business centers in this territory. Results proved so satisfactory that he soon had the strongest doubters furnishing capital for better equipment and by 1890 owned a system of long-distance lines which he was later to sell at a handsome profit.

With the proceeds he began a career that was to take him to distant parts of the world and bring him fame and fortune. His first venture in this direction was the purchase of electric light concessions in Mexico. The proximity of his home State to that country had enabled him to master Spanish and acquire a thorough knowledge of the people. Through his personal charm, magnetism and integrity, he won the confidence of numerous high dignitaries, in the Mexican government, among them Manuel Romero Rubio, Minister of the Interior and father-in-law of General Porfirio Diaz, president of Mexico at this time. This dignitary was so impressed with the young man's novel method of combining volcanic gases with the natural spring

water of Mexico City for medicinal purposes that he commissioned him to build the now famous Peñon de los Baños on the outskirts of the aforementioned metropolis. Later, Señor Rubio made him his personal advisor and thus Mr. Van Meter began to make international contacts in the mining and scientific professions that were to lead him to prominence in other parts of the world. His dependability to produce at critical periods was never more evident. His first triumph in this direction which brought him world-wide recognition rested in the development of the Mexican quick-silver mines at the time there was an acute world shortage of this metal.

The implicit confidence the Mexican minister had in Mr. Van Meter's ability is further evidenced by the fact that he sent him as his personal representative to London, England. When Señor Rubio died, Mr. Van Meter remained in England and with the aid of British capital began to perfect his process for the flotation of minerals by means of oils. It ranks as one of the most progressive mining contributions in the history of the industry. So impressed were his British backers that they determined to send him to Rhodesia and it was on this journey that he met Octavio Valentine, wealthy Peruvian mine owner, who induced him to come to South America. Thus on June 16, 1902, the first successfull oil concentration plant in the Western Hemisphere began operations at the Hacienda de Santa Barbara, Yauli, Peru. The process was quickly adopted in other sections of Peru and Bolivia. Strangely enough his compatriots refused to accept the innovation seriously and even ridiculed his claims. Consequently, he sold his flotat-

ion patent to a London syndicate in 1904 and made an independent fortune that enabled him to establish himself as a manufacturing chemist at Bad Sulza, Germany, where, in 1907, he succeeded in separating asphaltum from monton pitch, a process which made possible the manufacture of the hard-mold phonograph record. A year later he evolved an insulating material which was adopted by the Russian government for the laying of its submarine cable in the Baltic Sea. In the meantime he was exploring other fields of science. He was experimenting with chlorine in contact with bacteria, as a possible agent in gold extraction and as a useful material in agriculture. The results were so startling and produced such satisfactory products that he founded the Deutsche Chlorine Works in Bad Sulza, Germany, and the Aust-Van Meter Chlorine Works in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Before long his chlorine products were known and used throughout the world.

In an account of his life entitled, "*Van Meter, Chemical Wizard*," written by the "*Alcalde*," a publication by the Ex-Students Association of the University of Texas, in April, 1933, the following passage is given over to his development of chlorine, its significance and its manifold uses. "His invention of chlorine control," the "*Alcalde*" says, "made it possible for bath houses and individuals to utilize chlorine which heretofore had been prohibitive on account of the high cost of intricate equipment and expert attendance required. His method and means for chlorinating fluids made possible the dechlorination of drinking water—another commercially successful invention. The disagreeable and repugnant odor of chlorine are removed from

water after its sterilization without affecting its bacteriological condition in the least. His chlorination apparatus made possible the use of chlorine in the preparation of bleaches, disenfectants and oxidizing agents. He also developed the method of chlorinating pools and filming the surfaces thereof. Aeroplanes spread Van Meter's gases in the mosquito infested swamps for the prevention of malaria, and the destruction of the pine beetle of Great Northwest. Chlorocyanic gas, a deadly insecticide and germicide, was discovered, named and put on the market by Mr. Van Meter. It made possible the daylight fumigation of lemon and orange groves to rid them of pests. Its safety to the operator and ease of distribution are features which recommend its utility. It is recognized by the United States Department of Agriculture as the most efficient, inexpensive and practical insecticide on the market today. . . . Chloro-arsenic gas, for removal of barnacles from shipbottoms, thus eliminating the necessity for cleaning in drydock; for killing of the prickly by needle injection at the base of the plant; chemical cartridges to be shot under water for the elimination of the water-hyacinth which menaces navigation in Louisiana and Florida waters; a process revolutionizing the case hardening of steel in the automobile industry, his stamp mills, pump mechanism, internal combustion engines, and methods of heating metal, glass or other materials to render the same workable: These are a few of Mr. Van Meter's successful commercial inventions of recent years."

And quite truthfully it has been stated that the aforementioned are but a few, for to give all with comment

would far exceed the space limits of this review. Suffice it to say that at the time of his passing he was re-entering the mining field with a chlorocyanic process that received wide attention, particularly in the "Phœnix and the Arizona Mining Journal," November 30, 1931, and January 15, 1933, and the magazine, "Popular Mechanics," of May 1933, which reviewed it in full. He also developed a Soft Water Stone, which as the name implies, converted the liquid into a more pleasing, palatable and useful state. Mr. Van Meter sold his German properties at the outbreak of the World War and returned to this country. When the United States entered the conflict he applied his knowledge and experience in standardizing equipment for the safe and efficient dissemination of deadly gases.

In 1904, at San Francisco, California, Mr. Van Meter married Esther Adams, great-granddaughter of John Quincy Adams, and former resident of Lima, Peru, where she was one of the owners of the famous Huacracocha mine, located near Yauli, Peru. Miss Adams is the daughter of Daniel Elias Adams, who was born in Lima, Vermont in 1846, and died at Darien, Wisconsin, in 1884. Her mother was Rosaura Victoria de Fournier, also of Lima, Peru, who was born in 1864 and died at San Francisco, California in 1926. Her father was Monsieur le Marquis Andre François de Fournier of Paris, France. His wife was Evangeline de Cubillas y Bañón, who was the daughter of the Marqués Fernando Enrique de Cubillas y Bañón of Lima, Peru. His ancestors disembarked at Callao, Peru in 1525 from Seville, Spain, with numerous others in quest of adventure.

During their residence in Berlin, Germany, Mrs. Van

Meter developed into a chemist of "exceptional ability." Mr. and Mrs. Van Meter were the parents of the following children:— 1. Lord Wright, born in Berlin, Germany; he married Gwendolyn Parataschek of Toledo, Ohio, February 19, 1938. 2. James Adams, born in Hamburg, Germany. 3. William Cunningham, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. 4. Esther Victoria, also born in Buenos Aires. 5. Daniel Elias, born in Buenos Aires. 6. Baron Friedrik Willem, born in Buenos Aires.

On January 18, 1938, at Los Angeles, California, where he had made his home for a number of years, James Wright Van Meter, "citizen of the world," died at the age of sixty-seven years, eight months and sixteen days. The true significance of his passing is best expressed in a tribute by Bradley L. Benson, which says in parts:

> Van Meter was a versatile and prolific inventor, a skilled and finished craftsman, who possessed a marvelous imagination and, at the same time, a capacity for untiring labor until his dreams became realities. . . . His contributions to science include pioneer processes in metallurgy, mining, ore reduction and, in California, his work in connection with insect and rodent control has added materially in the agricultural and horticultural wealth of the State. . . . Much of Van Meter's work is permanently recorded in the scientific literature of the day, in the records of the Department of the Interior, the Chemical Warfare Bureau, and in the text-books of our universities. . . . He belonged to that type of scientists who move in a world of their own, who place achievement ahead of reward, service above the accumulation of wealth, and who recognize no class distinction or social prejudice. . . . Van Meter enjoyed the friendship and esteem of men in all walks of life. His contributions to the scientific learning of his day caused him to be respected at home and abroad as a genius, an idealist and a benefactor. . . . He was a great appreciator of the talents of others and gave freely of his time and knowledge in assisting younger men to realize their ambitions. . . . Men of Van Meter's type are too often underestimated by their contemporaries and their achievements can be properly evaluated only when viewed in the perspective of time.

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Jacob van Meteren, the renowned printer of Antwerpen, printed the first Bible in the English language in the year 1535. He was the grandson of Abraham Ortels (Ortelius), world famous map maker of Augsburg and Breda.

Some of the towns founded by Van Meters

Van Meter, Iowa; Van Meter, Kentucky; Van Meter, Pennsylyania; Van Metre, South Dakota; Van Meter Flats, Texas; Elfrida, Arizona; Fort Van Meter (Fort Pleasant), Virginia; Morgantown, Pennsylvania; Victoria, Texas.