

WHAT IS A SHELF-WARMER?

BY PAUL C. OLSEN.

About ten years ago, the Druggists' Research Bureau was formed under the direction of a committee of representatives of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, the National Association of Retail Druggists and the National Wholesale Druggists' Association to collect and distribute facts about the business problems of pharmacy. When the committee first met there was immediate agreement that there were plenty of problems in retail pharmacy, but the question was their relative importance. Which one should be studied first?

In order to get a definite and worth-while answer to this question, queries were addressed to proprietors of retail drug stores of all types and sizes in all sections of the country. From the 2500 replies received, it was evident that the overwhelming majority of these drug store proprietors were convinced that stock control was outstandingly first in the harassing and involved business problems of retail drug stores. That illustrates how important is this question of, "What is a shelf-warmer?" because when a druggist says that stock control is an outstanding problem in his store, what he means is that he has trouble in having in his store the kind and quantity of merchandise that his customers want to buy. You can put the question the other way round by saying that drug store proprietors have trouble in determining what kinds of merchandise to stock in their stores.

Because of this very evident interest in stock control, or to put it in the form of the title of this paper, the interest in "What is a shelf-warmer?" the question was pursued further by the Druggists' Research Bureau. Drug store proprietors were not asked how many shelf-warmers they had in their stores. That is like asking a woman whose favorite literature is the confession and love story magazines, what magazine she reads. She would be likely to reply, "*Scribners* and *Atlantic Monthly*" just for the impression that it makes.

Accordingly, the question to drug store proprietors was phrased in the following manner. Of the stock of the following items which you have in your store, which ones will you reorder when present stocks are exhausted? Then followed a list of several important classes of cosmetic and toilet preparations sold in drug stores.

When the results of this investigation were compiled, it was found that less than one-fifth of the merchandise stock that these several thousand drug store proprietors had on hand, was merchandise that they said they would reorder when present stocks were exhausted. That meant, of course, that four-fifths of the money they had tied up in their merchandise stocks was composed of shelf-warmers. Again, we have an illustration of how important is this question of "What is a shelf-warmer?"

When such facts as these are brought to the attention of drug store proprietors, a common question is, do you recommend throwing away four-fifths of a drug store's stock? Certainly not. To be more specific, if a good customer asks for an item which is not in stock in the store, the proprietor should offer to obtain it for her. He should endeavor always to have in his store the different kinds of merchandise which his customers want to buy. The stock of a well-managed drug store is

bound to be constantly changing in extent and variety. Shelf-warmers do not result from the practice of such a policy. They come from entirely different sources.

One of the most important of these prolific sources of shelf-warmers is the high pressure salesman who says, in effect, "Doctor, you can't make any money selling national brands at cut prices. What you need is a private brand with your own label on it on which you can get your full profit."

I have no objection to national brands nor to private brands, but I do say with all the emphasis at my command that national brands or private brands which are unsalable in a particular drug store are certain to become shelf-warmers. In the case just cited, the contagious enthusiasm of the salesman may communicate itself to the proprietor, with the result that he may sell a package or two of the private brand but, try as he will, the rest of the huge quantity purchase necessary to get his own label on the private brand gathers dust and becomes a shelf-warmer.

Another important source of shelf-warmers is the unwarranted enthusiasm with which some drug store proprietors embrace new items. This statement may seem to be contrary to the one I just made above in which I suggested that drug store proprietors should aim to have all the new items in stock for which there is demand in their communities. I did say that. I say now that the shelf-warmers result not from the purchase of such items, but from the purchase of them in unwarrantedly large quantities. A call once a week for an item is no justification for buying that item in three-dozen lots, as I have seen happen frequently. A quarter-dozen purchase is probably all that is justified and, at the beginning, a quarter- or a sixth-dozen purchase is probably the wiser policy.

Thus, in answer to the question which is the title of this paper, we reach the conclusion that shelf-warmers in drug stores result, for the most part, not so much from the great extent and variety of the stock in drug stores to-day, but from the purchase of excessive quantities of items of unproved or uncertain salability.

FOSTER LECTURE FUND AT UNIVERSITY OF BUFFALO.

Receipt of a gift from Mrs. Orrin E. Foster of Buffalo to establish and endow a permanent lecture foundation in chemistry and allied sciences has been announced by Chancellor Samuel P. Capen.

The new foundation, which will be known as "The Orrin E. Foster Lecture Fund," was pledged by Mrs. Foster, in the University's endowment campaign of 1929, as a memorial to her husband, the late Orrin E. Foster. Long-time friends of the University, Mr. Orrin E. Foster and his family were the donors of Foster Hall, which was the first new building to be erected on the North Main Street Campus. Dedicated on October 27, 1922, in connection with Chancellor Capen's inauguration as head of the University, Foster Hall has already seen 15 years of service as a laboratory for chemistry and pharmacy students and has become the northeast corner of the new Campus quadrangle.

Since income from the new bequest is now available, plans have been completed to inaugurate the foundation at once, with a series of public lectures, beginning in March. Four of the lecturers and their subjects are as follows: Dr. Karl K. Darrow of the Bell Telephone Laboratories of New York City, "Atoms and Elements;" Dr. Marston T. Bogert, Professor of Chemistry at Columbia University, "Around the World in Search of Perfumes;" Dr. Frank C. Whitmore, Dean of Physical Sciences at Pennsylvania State College and president-elect of the American Chemical Society, "What Do the Organic Chemists Really Know?"
