

Profile

GEORGE CAVANAGH



Former AOCS President George Cavanagh is known professionally for his pioneering work in cottonseed oil solvent extraction and processing. Within AOCS, he is equally well known for his calm demeanor, dry sense of humor and a string of accomplishments most recently evidenced in his work as general chairman for the 1979 joint meeting in San Francisco of the AOCS and the Japan Oil Chemists' Society.

Somewhere on that string of accomplishments there has to be a place for his wife, Ginny. George successfully proposed in 1943 to Ginny via a long distance phone call from Florida to California—a collect telephone call.

Cavanagh grew up along the west coast of Oregon in the Coos Bay region, having been born in North Bend, Oregon. Both his parents were Canadians who had moved south. His mother was a teacher; his father a brand saw filer at a lumber mill. As he was growing up, Cavanagh realized the Depression era choice of avocations in the Coos Bay areas was limited to the lumber mill, dairy industry or fishing fleet. "I figured I'd have a better shot if I got a college education," he says, perhaps influenced by his mother and an uncle who was a high school principal in California.

After finishing high school in 1934, Cavanagh enrolled as a chemistry major at Pomona College with a partial scholarship and two jobs—one as a hot food carrier in the college dining room and the other as a chemistry lab assistant.

Cavanagh's first job after graduation in 1938 was at a hydroponics food plant owned by a doctor who, Cavanagh later found out, would prescribe the desiccated hydroponic foods for patients the doctor diagnosed as having dietary ills. Cavanagh's next job was with a pesticide company in South Pasadena which had no laboratory. He was in charge of "quality control"—adding sugar or arsenic, depending on whether the ant paste tasted bitter or sweet. In 1939, Cavanagh, with mild arsenic poisoning symptoms, had a job interview with a Pomona College alum at Producers Cotton Oil. Cavanagh was hired, thus beginning his career in the vegetable oil industry. This first chapter of his career ended abruptly in early 1942 when he joined the U.S. Army. It was in 1941 that he first met Ginny (Schultz), having been introduced by a mutual friend in the furniture business.

Cavanagh's first Army assignment in Hawaii was as a staff sergeant in chemical warfare at Hickam Field, Honolulu. Fourteen months later he was reassigned stateside to attend Officer Candidate School at Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland. After receiving his commission, he was assigned to a chemical warfare experiment station in the swamps near Bushnell, Florida. "We tested vesicant gases for use in tropical terrain, and had to watch out for rattlesnakes and cottonmouths," Cavanagh says. "They'd put rabbits, goats and people—volunteers—out there with varying degrees of protective clothing; some were really badly burned."

It was 1944 that he received orders transferring him to Terre Haute, Indiana. He called Ginny—collect—proposing she meet him in Terre Haute and they be married there. Ginny accepted and, on the strength of George's orders, she and her sister were able to get three new tires and gas ration stamps. The three new tires held up well, but the old tire did not. Before they reached Terre Haute, the sisters had bought six used tires for that same wheel. While Ginny was en route to Terre Haute, George's transfer to Terre Haute was cancelled. He did manage to get to Terre Haute on emergency leave, the wedding was held and the couple started driving to Florida with Ginny's sister. By the time

they reached Atlanta, they had replaced the fourth tire three more times. A sympathetic bureaucrat in Atlanta gave them authorization to buy a fourth new tire and the trip to Florida was completed without incident. After about a month in Florida, Ginny's sister returned to California by train.

When George left the Army in 1946, the two drove back to California and George returned to Producers Cotton Oil. Producers had been extracting cottonseed oil with hydraulic presses, then moved into continuous screw press extraction. In 1951, a new, smaller firm invited Cavanagh to join it. The firm, Ranchers Cotton Oil, was adopting solvent extraction of cottonseed oil. Cavanagh says he couldn't resist the opportunity.

By this time Cavanagh had become active in AOCS activities. He initially joined in 1941, two years after he joined Producers Cotton Oil, then again in 1946 when he returned from military service. During the late 1940s he served on several committees, presented papers on vegetable oil refining procedures, and was active in the Smalley program. The involvement continued during the late 1950s, and in 1962 he was elected to his first term as a member-at-large of the Governing Board. He was elected secretary in 1967, vice president in 1968 and served as president in 1969. He received his past presidents key ten years later in San Francisco.

Ten years later, Dick Purdy of PVO International, chairman for the 1979 San Francisco meeting, asked Cavanagh to be an "adviser" to the meeting committee, a selection that Cavanagh says bemused him since "my ability to advise was limited by my never having been involved in planning a national meeting." When PVO promoted Purdy and transferred him to the Philippines less than a year before the meeting, however, Cavanagh was a logical choice to step in as general chairman. "Nice things happen to people in San Francisco," he says.

Characteristically, he attributes the meeting's success (1,300-plus registrants) to hard work by the committee Purdy had assembled. Cavanagh says his role was mainly one of encouraging committee members and over-all coordination of their separate activities.

Cavanagh's dry wit has led to his serving as informal toastmaster at the annual dinners for past AOCS presidents held during each annual meeting. The affairs often resemble a "roast" of anyone attending, particularly the more recent past presidents.

Cavanagh has a couple of ideas about problems AOCS members should be considering. "We need to find less energy-intensive ways to obtain fats with particular physical characteristics." He also thinks someone should be concerned with alternates to current solvents used in the industry as petroleum becomes less readily available: "Who's going to say you can't drive your automobile because we need to produce vegetable oil, or visa veesa?"

George and Ginny's daughter, Peg Merrill, is married to an instructor in industrial design at UCLA. Their son, Doug, is following somewhat in Dad's footsteps as a chemical engineering with Pilot Chemical Co. in Fullerton, California.

Cavanagh describes his co-members of AOCS as the "most delightful people I know. It's unusual, but this is really the way every organization should be. There's a feeling that people care for each other."

And, of course, it's people like George Cavanagh who have made it that way. ●