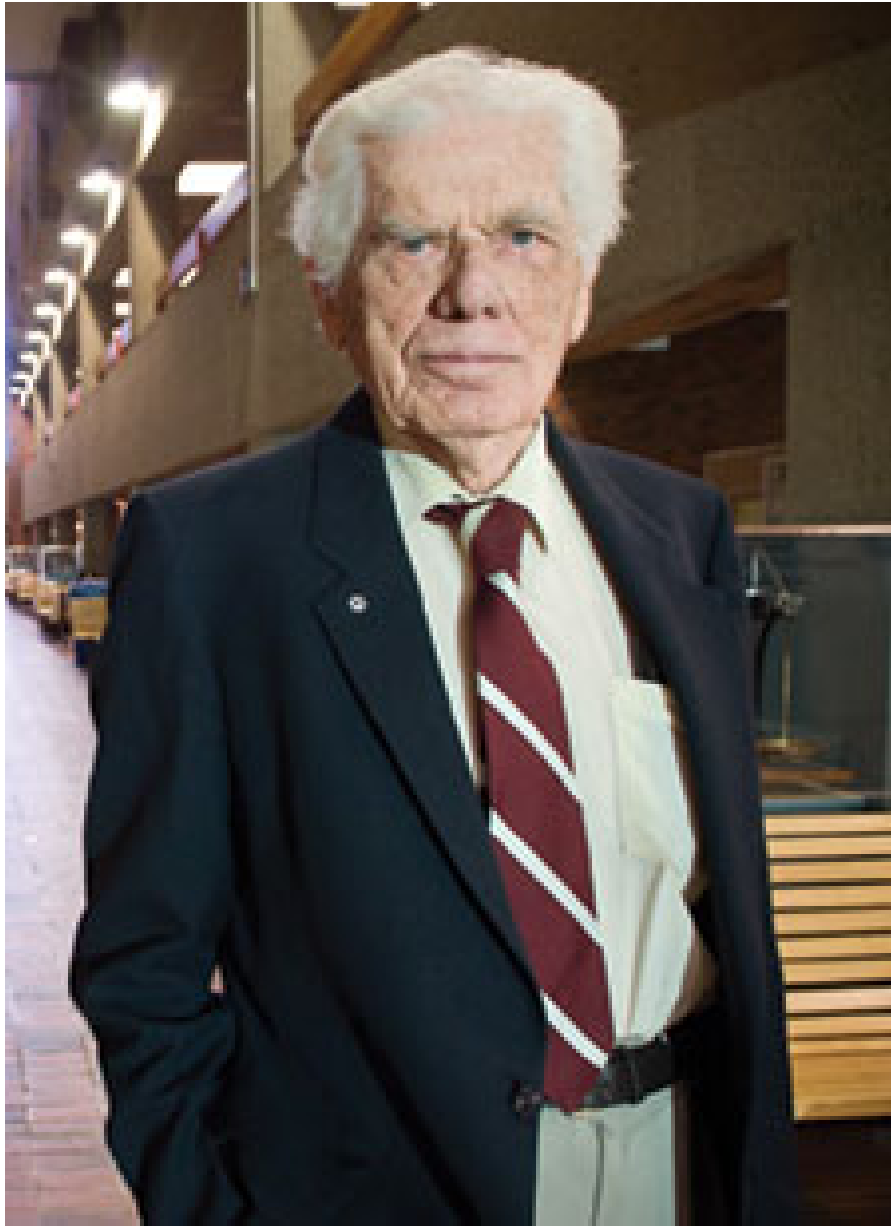


MICHAEL BROWN

Walter Harris
1915-2011



The university community is mourning the passing of a homegrown talent, one of the great researchers to work in the University of Alberta's vaunted chemistry department. Walter Harris. The prairie farm kid who almost single-handedly inspired the next generation of the world's analytical chemists, died Oct. 20. He was 96. Born June 9, 1915, Harris grew up on a farm near Wetaskiwin, which helped develop his curiosity about the way things work. After graduating from high school, he left for the U of A where he uncovered a passion for chemistry. He received his Bachelor of Science degree from the U of A in 1938 and his master's degree in 1939 for studies of the distribution of selenium. He left the U of A for the University of Minnesota to study under Piet Kolthoff - the father of analytical chemistry in North America-where he completed a PhD in 1944.

When Harris returned to the U of A in 1946 to take a teaching position, the chemistry department had six academic staff teaching chemistry to more than 2,000 students; there were no teaching assistants and no analytical chemistry divisions.

In 1957, Harris took a leave of absence to do research in gas chromatography at the Chalk River Nuclear Laboratories. During that time, analytical chemistry had begun to fall out of favour at cash-strapped universities. Despite post-war industry developing an ever-greater need for analytical chemists, universities across North America - including the University of Toronto and Massachusetts Institute of Technology- were closing their analytical programs. Harris returned to the U of A in 1958 and held steady to his chemistry convictions. He began recruiting and fostering an analytical program that would be the envy of universities around North America.

"Walter championed analytical chemistry at this university-without him it would be gone," said Ron Kratochvil at the U of A in 1998. Kratochvil was an analytical chemistry recruit who teamed with Harris to publish the seminal textbook *An Introduction to Chemical Analysis*. "There's a huge need for analytical chemistry now for the kind of work our people are doing," Kratochvil said at the time. "It's just growing in all directions. The analytical chemistry program here is the best in Canada, and, I'm told, among the top three in North America. None of it would have happened without Walter Harris and his battle to preserve it here."

In his first decade, Harris developed the first instrumental methods of analysis course in Canada that still bears his name. Harris would serve as chemistry department chair from 1974-1978. During his career he contributed to 25 scientific advisory councils and played a leading role in the proper disposal of Alberta's hazardous wastes. Harris was named to the Order of Canada, was a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, received two honorary degrees and served as an active professor emeritus at the U of A from his retirement in 1980 until his passing.

"He had a keen ability to see clearly," said Jed Harrison, chair of the chemistry department. "After retirement, Walter consulted for the provincial and federal governments, the university, Atomic Energy Canada, to name a few, playing a crucial role as an advisor that was quite

important and was a large part of what earned him the Order of Canada. Those kinds of invitations spoke to the clarity that he did have."

Harrison says he remembers a generous man who always gave his time, insights and thoughts about things freely. "It's striking how much his passing has impacted current and former members of the department." said Harrison. "It is clear from the sadness over his death just how much he meant to our department members."

*Article written by Michael Brown
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