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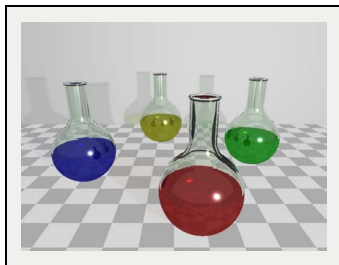
## ChemCraft and such . . .

Posted on October 26th, 2008 by earleholland

Reading about [Victor Deeb](#) was one of those "I missed the bullet" moments, the times when you could say that "it could have been me."

In truth, however, Deeb's travails are a product of modern times where our fear governs nearly everything we do.

Backing up, Victor Deeb is a 71-year-old professional chemist who had worked in industry for at least 20 years. Since retirement more than a decade ago, Deeb had used a makeshift chemistry lab in his basement to continue his science, most recently, he said, trying to develop a non-cancerous sealant for baby food jars.



But Deeb's downfall came this summer with a faulty upstairs air conditioner that caught fire, and an emergency call for help to the fire department. During the "mopping up" part of the fire call, firefighters had checked out the rest of the house for problems, found the lab and feared the worst. Calls to Hazmat, the state EPA and other agencies put Deeb's lab in the spotlight.

Ordered out of his house for months while inspections took place and materials removed, Deeb finally was allowed back home with a court order prohibiting him from rebuilding his lab. While no hazardous materials were ever found there, his "hobby" and home chemistry lab were finished.

Thank God, the authorities never checked out the lab I built in the bedroom of my parents' home during the 1960s.

They would have had a field day!

In those days, young boys and chemistry sets seemed a perfect match. And many, like me, weren't satisfied with the tiny bottles offered in [ChemCraft](#) or [Gilbert chemistry sets](#) for Christmas. Periodic whining and cajoling would lead to a parent driving me and a friend to a chemical supply house in Birmingham with penciled shopping lists and accumulated allowances. Back then, if you knew the local druggist, he might also pass along chemicals omitted from the sets.



Coming home with beakers, Florence flasks, retorts and condensers, as well as a small box of various aldehydes and aromatic hydrocarbons, it was

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better than a surprise movie and ice cream for the geeks on the block.

While kids today make science fair volcanoes from baking soda and vinegar, we used **potassium permanganate and glycerin**. We routinely made hydrogen and other gases. The night I generated bromine in the bedroom, filling it with noxious brownish-red gas, should have ended the hobby. But it didn't. There were even successful attempts at picric acid which, mercifully, we knew to keep damp.



It was a wonder that we survived.

Kids can't do such stuff now. And that's probably good, to some extent, given the level of everyday danger that surrounds us. But I do wonder what we've lost in the process, what magic vanished with the safety? National attention has been focused on STEM – science, technology, engineering, mathematics – to return our national prominence in science. But is that enough?

Don't we need the wonder as well?

How many lovers and doers of science started with home chemistry labs and survived to tell the tale? \_\_Earle Holland

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## 6 Responses to “ChemCraft and such . . .”

[earleholland](#) // Oct 26, 2008 at 7:31 pm

Thanks for the feedback, Paul, scathing though it may be.

You're absolutely right on the days versus months point. I simply erred in reading two of the several news reports which themselves were three months apart.

As to your other points, all the information I read did say that no biologic or radioactive materials had been found in his basement lab. Stories also reported that while some “dangerous” materials were removed, they were “no more dangerous than typical household cleaning products.”

And I certainly am not suggesting the storage of flammable materials next to the furnace, but then again, no story I read suggested that Deeb had done so, and not having seen the official police/fire reports on the incident, I can't say for sure if he did or did not do that. I'm assuming that a retired professional chemist would know better — otherwise, he probably wouldn't have lived long enough to retire.

I'm not suggesting that Deeb is a “poster child for science” but since neither you nor I were there when he was working, I'm not assuming he didn't follow safety rules either. Innocent until proven guilty is still the law of the land.

And the fact that he may have listed himself as a consultant doesn't

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necessarily mean his activities weren't a part of his hobby. Regardless, I think we'll probably agree to disagree on this case. My main point is, however, that a half-century ago, kids learned chemistry outside of the classroom in a much more dynamic way, and that that kind of experimentation—occasionally risky though it may have been—was most likely the impetus to drive them into careers in science. Personally, I know dozens of scientists who have specifically made that very point!

Earle

[Michael Payday](#) // Oct 27, 2008 at 1:35 pm

Earle you make a good point. I see it this way. Most kids pursue their hobbies for as long as possible, professionally if possible. Take a look at what kids are doing outside the classroom these days: sports and video games.

It's sad to know there is a professional "video gaming" industry. Paid to play a game? Can I win real money in a professional Monopoly game too? It's pretty ridiculous. Look at the professional gamers and athletes now a days. How many do you suppose graduated, or even went to, college? So many athletes leave campus early in order to play in the pros.

More and more often we see people picking their hobbies over their education. This was not so back in the day when hobbies and education were one in the same (ie: see home chemistry sets.) It's a sad state of affairs our country is in. Not too many kids going home trying to play with chemistry sets, do puzzles, or anything else fun that would stimulate learning.

[bed sheets](#) // Jul 31, 2010 at 10:32 am

I agree with Michael!

Even for myself, my job is to research quantum quarks. Basically I get to setup lab experiments everyday and try to break the gold foils.

[android background](#) // Sep 29, 2010 at 8:39 pm

I certainly hope you aren't promoting the storage of flammable materials next to the home heating furnace in a residential basement with no safety measures.

have a nice day.

[Marty Hobson](#) // Apr 28, 2011 at 6:27 pm

I myself have fond memories of my "Gilbert Chemical Experiment Lab" back in the sixties. Those were the days. As kids we didn't worry much about the consequences of what we were doing. Fortunately, the commercial sets didn't have anything really dangerous (we were smart enough not to eat any of the chemicals 😊).

It seems to me that Mr. Deeb took it all pretty well. I think I would be pretty hot under the collar.

After 9/11 every one is a little jumpy. I personally am concerned about the trend to prize "security" over "freedom". I'm not saying that there should be no regulation, just that we should have balance.

[cleaning in birmingham](#) // Nov 9, 2011 at 7:04 pm

Ah science! What fun we had in my childhood years. I miss doing experiments and making a mess in the backyard. 😊

I never get to do this stuff anymore. I just wish someday I can do one more experiment just for old time's sake.

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