

## **Centennial Interview – Jerry Harris**

Our industry legend interviewee this month is Jerry Harris. Jerry served as President & CEO of VWR from 1989-1999 and oversaw a number of changes and growth at the company during his tenure. Jerry was very active in SAMA and the LPA for a number of years and shares his thoughts with us.

### **Tell us a little bit about your background at VWR**

I was the marketing manager for VWR in 1973 and moved to the east coast after an acquisition of Will Scientific, then went back to the west coast as Vice President of Marketing for VWR in 1977. In the mid-1970s, VWR was Univar Corporation, which was headquartered in Seattle. The Scientific Division of Univar was called VWR Scientific Division.

In 1982, I took over the Scientific Division of Univar. In 1989, the Scientific Division completely spun off from Univar as a public company and became VWR Scientific traded on NASDAQ. At that point the headquarters moved from the west coast to the Philadelphia suburbs. I then became the President & CEO of VWR Scientific until 1999, when VWR was acquired by Merck.

### **Tell us about your involvement in the LPA and what the industry was like**

I got involved in the Laboratory Apparatus Section (today's LPA) of SAMA in the mid-1970s and was active on the market statistics committee initially. Between 1977-1981, I served on the section's board of directors.

When I got active in SAMA, the industry was certainly different from what it is today. The industry was more regionally structured. VWR (the Scientific Division of Univar Corp.) at that time was a west coast company and Fisher Scientific was an East coast company, each with their respective territories.

Prior to 1970, the industry was a conglomeration of regional companies that really did not compete against each other. You had Thomas Scientific in Philadelphia, Fisher Scientific in Pittsburgh, Sargent-Welch in Chicago, Curtin-Matheson Scientific in Cincinnati, and Scientific Supplies in Seattle...just a bunch of regional companies that didn't overlap too much.

In the early 1970s American Hospital started getting involved in the industry and they were really the first national organization in the industry and SAMA. They started competing against all the regional competitors. As a result, the industry began to transition and mergers and consolidations started to occur. This changed the dynamics of the industry and people weren't as interested in working together as they had been in prior years.

Along with the mergers and consolidations, we saw the advent of private labeling. These industry changes also prompted changes in SAMA and its affiliated groups. There was a shifting of what SAMA was all about and the value it provided.

One point that people may not be aware of is that VWR and Fisher actually considered merging, as VWR was Fisher's west coast distributor. However, there was concern that that the merger would not be allowed by the FTC due to antitrust issues, so it was not pursued.

**What were some of the major issues the association was dealing with at that time?**

SAMA was working on market statistics, keeping track of the size of the industry through the Copeland Report primarily, which was produced by the Copeland Economics Group for a number of years. SAMA was also working on common labeling and packaging issues amongst its members and subgroups. Keeping on top of government regulations, especially on the chemical side, was very important to the members of all the SAMA groups. SAMA also did quite a bit of lobbying on behalf of its members in these areas.

**Is there a specific SAMA/LPA meeting that stands out and why?**

In the mid-1970s, I served as the chair of the meetings program committee. We were having an Annual Meeting at the Del Coronado Hotel in San Diego and it was my job to brief the speakers on SAMA and make sure they had somewhat of an understanding of the audience they would be speaking to. One morning, I had breakfast with our keynote speaker who happened to be Tom Brokaw to brief him. As I went to fill him in on SAMA, he came across as very uninterested in what I had to say and was very obnoxious. Of course, that made me a bit uneasy as he went to deliver his keynote. However, he ended up doing a fantastic job tying in a number of things I had mentioned.

**Where do you see the industry heading?**

While I have only kept marginally involved in the industry since retiring, I think there will continue to be a lot of innovations in the industry, especially on the biotech side. The industry will certainly continue to grow and evolve.

**What are you doing today?**

Well, I completely retired from the industry in 1999, but keep very active. I serve on the board of directors of Black Rock Capital Investment Corporation as well as a couple other boards. I have been very involved in wetlands conservation and own a farm (Mallard Haven Farm) in Church Creek, Maryland on the Eastern Shore, where I live.