

Lawrence K. Cecil: The Father of AIChE's Environmental Division and a Legacy of Compassionate Leadership



Lawrence K. "Larry" Cecil
January 17, 1895 - December 26, 1981

Fondly known as "Larry" to all who knew him, Lawrence K. Cecil was celebrated as the "Father of AIChE's Environmental Division." A pioneering environmental chemical engineer, his dedication laid the foundations for the field within AIChE and inspired generations of engineers. His professional legacy and personal warmth have left an indelible mark on those who knew him, and his values continue to shape the field today.

Larry was born in Illinois in 1895. In November 1918, he married Jennie L. Anderson, and together they raised two daughters, Elizabeth and Patricia. He graduated in 1924 from the University of Illinois with a Bachelor of Arts in Chemistry. Following graduation, he embarked on a distinguished career at Infilco, Inc., where he served in influential roles, including Vice President, Product Manager, and Vice President of Pacific Coast and Asia Operations, over a span of 35 years. His technical contributions at Infilco were just the beginning of his environmental advocacy. After retiring in 1961, he committed himself to a second career in water pollution control, focusing on consulting, public service, and efforts to protect and restore water resources. His dedication and commitment to the environmental field, particularly in the water area, is exemplary.

Within AIChE, Larry became a transformative figure. Recognizing the urgency of environmental issues, he played a pivotal role in creating the Environmental Division. Established on December 1, 1970, this Division unified the Water, Air, and Solid Waste Committees under one organizational umbrella, marking the formal beginning of environmental engineering's presence within AIChE. Membership surged in response, with over 1,100 members joining within the Division's first ten months. By early 1972, the Environmental Division had become the largest Division within AIChE, exemplifying the interest Larry had sparked and the Division's role as a pioneering force in environmental science.

In recognition of his monumental contributions, Larry was the first recipient of the Environmental Division Award in 1972. The award, later renamed the Lawrence K. Cecil Environmental Award, stands as one of AIChE's most prestigious honors, given to engineers who have made outstanding contributions to environmental preservation.

Larry's influence extended deeply into the publishing world. From 1967 to 1972, he served as editor of AIChE's "Water" monograph series, which became a cornerstone for environmental research and knowledge sharing. The Water monograph series served as the basis and was the precursor to the Environmental Division's journal, *Environmental Progress (and Sustainable Energy)*. Long-time Division member and 2006 Cecil Award winner Professor Larry Erickson reflected, "I appreciated his service to the Environmental Division as editor of the AIChE Symposium Series on Water," underscoring the series' essential role in advancing the field.

Larry's spirit and leadership style were integral to the camaraderie that defined the Division. Known for hosting Division banquets with humor and charm, he often invited members to share "stupid questions" in

lighthearted “panel discussions,” creating an environment where everyone, regardless of rank, felt included. Dr. Richard D. Siegel, 1975 ENV Division Chair and 1985 Cecil Award winner, fondly recalled, “After one dinner, I remember receiving an unexpected letter thanking me for ‘volunteering’ for a new role. Of course, I’d been volunteered by Larry. It was classic Larry.” His gatherings became known for their community-building spirit, bridging generational and professional divides and contributing to the Division’s rapid growth.

In addition to organizing impactful conferences, Larry volunteered as Field Representative to form Pollution Solution Groups nationwide, encouraging local sections to address their unique environmental challenges. His work laid the foundation for AIChE’s ongoing collaborations with government agencies, notably the EPA, and positioned AIChE as a key resource for both industry and government on environmental issues. Larry’s leadership in organizing Complete WasteReuse conferences drew hundreds of professionals to explore critical topics, including municipal-industrial symbiosis and multi-media pollution control.

Reflecting on Larry’s courage, A. Roy Price, the 1973 ENV Division Chair, recalled a pivotal moment in 1967 at a water pollution workshop in Houston, Texas, co-sponsored by AIChE and the League of Women Voters. The Houston League, one of the most outspoken critics of industry and scientists at the time, had a strong environmental stance that often clashed with industry’s practices. Knowing this, Larry “threw down the gauntlet,” boldly leading his small team into what was viewed by many as “the enemy camp.” As Price described, “Not so Larry, who chose to meet them on their own ground.” Price admired Larry’s courage and ability to open up dialogue in challenging environments, setting a standard for transparency and collaboration in environmental engineering.

Professor Gary Bennett, the 1972 ENV Division Chair and 1975 Cecil Award winner, also spoke of Larry’s lasting impact, saying, “He leaves us a legacy of ‘Water,’ AIChE’s annual publication of water pollution papers, which was so successful it spawned, I believe, the newly inaugurated Environmental Progress (now Environmental Progress & Sustainable Energy) whose growth resulted in formation of the Environmental Division, now (then) AIChE’s largest, and, lastly, of the Pollution Solution Groups for whom he went on the road that encouraged local environmental activity.”

Larry passed away on December 26, 1981, in Enid, Oklahoma, at the age of 86. At the heart of his life was his love for Jennie. As a close friend and colleague put it in his eulogy, “I believe it was this love for Jennie so assiduously practiced, so constantly expressed, that spilled over for Larry into a love of people in general, man and women, and this was the basis of his power over people and of his accomplishment. There will never be another like Larry Cecil, but the many of us who knew him all carry, for the better, something of him in themselves.”

Larry’s legacy lives on through the Lawrence K. Cecil Environmental Award, inspiring chemical engineers to pursue innovation and collaboration. His life exemplified service to his field, family, and the public good, leaving a legacy that continues to grow through AIChE’s Environmental Division and the countless lives he touched.