



History of the Waterborne Symposium: A 40-Year Retrospective

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As the Waterborne Symposium prepares for its 40th anniversary celebration, we track the origins of this prestigious technical event, and recognize those who have been instrumental in its development.

THE EARLY DAYS

The idea of an annual technical conference for the coatings industry was conceived and founded by three faculty members of the Department of Polymer Science at The University of Southern Mississippi (USM): Drs. Gary Wildman, George Bufkin, and Shelby Thames. The results of their efforts—the first “Water-Borne and Higher-Solids Coating Symposium”—was held August 13–15, 1973, in New Orleans, LA. The technical program consisted of papers from industry and academia, including contributions from scientists at Union Carbide Corporation; American Cyanamid Company; DeSoto, Inc.; Lehigh University; and University of Houston. The Symposium, held at the Sheraton–Charles Hotel, attracted 135 attendees.

Following the success of the first Symposium, the founders decided that future symposia would be more advantageously scheduled during the winter in New Orleans, and particularly just prior to Mardi Gras. Thus,

the second Symposium was held February 3–5, 1975, and was thereafter succeeded by annual Symposia up to the most recent—held February 15–17, 2012. With only three exceptions (including the first Symposium), the program has always been held the week immediately prior to Mardi Gras. Due to hotel scheduling issues, the 15th Symposium was held one week earlier, and the 20th Symposium was held immediately after Mardi Gras, with the opening day on Ash Wednesday.

From its inception until 1997, the Symposium was cosponsored by the Department of Polymer Science at USM and the Southern Society for Coatings Technology (SSCT). In 1998, USM became the sole sponsor of the Symposium, and the SSCT began sponsorship of The Technology Showcase, a tabletop technology display conjoined with the Symposium. Throughout its entire history, the Symposium has published its *Proceedings*, and these volumes represent an important technical resource within the published literature in the field of paints and coatings.

From its early beginnings, the Water-Borne and Higher-Solids Symposium grew in popularity, slowly at first and then more rapidly, with the number of papers presented and the attendance rising through



Shelby F. Thames



From the early days: Gary Wildman (left)



Waterborne co-chairman George Bufkin (center)

Table 1—Charting the Symposium’s Name Over the Years

Years	Name
1973–1990	Water-Borne and Higher-Solids Coatings Symposium
1991–1993	Water-borne, Higher-Solids, and Powder Coatings Symposium
1994	Waterborne, Higher-Solids, and Powder Coatings Symposium
1995	Waterborne, High-Solids, and Powder Coatings Symposium
1996–present	International Waterborne, High-Solids, and Powder Coatings Symposium ("The Waterborne Symposium")



the 1980s and early 1990s. During the mid- and late-1990s, attendance was routinely in excess of 425, and the number of papers presented each year was in the range of 35–55. A record-high attendance of 507 occurred at the 25th Symposium, held in 1998, with 44 papers presented. In their review the following year, the *European Coatings Journal* described the Symposium as “. . . North America’s most prestigious conference in the field of paints and coatings.”

High attendance numbers prevailed until the 29th Symposium in 2002, when attendance was severely reduced due to travel restrictions resulting from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Several years later, on August 29, 2005, the city of New Orleans suffered the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. There was great concern whether city services such as air travel, hotel, restaurants, etc., would be recovered sufficiently to hold the Symposium the following February. The city did, indeed, recover, and the 33rd Symposium was successfully held as scheduled on February 22–24, 2006. Post-Katrina, the Symposium has steadily recovered, and attendance for the last two years has averaged 265 (domestic and international).

EVOLUTION OF THE PROGRAM

The original name, Water-Borne and Higher-Solids Coatings Symposium, reflected the focus of the Symposium—the science and technology of low-volatile organic compound (VOC) coatings. Although the Symposium has stayed true to this theme, the name has evolved over the years (*Table 1*). The most significant change occurred in 1991, when “Powder Coatings” was added to reflect the growing importance of this sector of the industry. In 1994, “Water-Borne” was modified simply to “Waterborne.” The change reflected the increasing acceptance of this word

in the lexicon of the English language. In recognition of the trend toward worldwide participation at the Symposium, the word “International” was added in 1996. In 2007, a simpler, abbreviated name was adopted for branding purposes: “The Waterborne Symposium.” However, the full name, “International Waterborne, High-Solids, and Powder Coatings Symposium,” has been retained for abstracting purposes and other formal references.

Without exception, the Symposium has been organized as a three-day meeting: two full days, plus a “shortened” third day (ending midday or early afternoon) to allow attendees to return home that evening. The early symposia were held Monday through Wednesday; however, in 1985, the program moved permanently to a Wednesday to Friday format. The program has historically included a reception on the opening day of the Symposium. Beginning in 1991 and extending continuously through 2011, this reception has been generously sponsored by Eastman Chemical Co. Eastman will once again sponsor the reception at the upcoming 40th Anniversary Symposium.

Over the years, the Symposium has expanded into a week-long event encompassing multiple activities. In 1989, Monday and Tuesday short courses were added to the program. In subsequent years, as many as six short courses were offered per year, some starting as early as the Saturday prior to the Symposium. The Technology Showcase was added in 1998, as a forum for scientists and engineers representing manufacturers, suppliers, and service providers to present their most recent developments in an interactive booth format. The Technology Showcase typically begins on the Tuesday prior to the Symposium and extends through the second day of the



Director Robert Y. Lochhead



Robson F. Storey, Melanie Heusser, and James W. Rawlins

Table 2—Waterborne Symposium Chairmen

Years	Chairmen
1973–1981	Gary Wildman and George Bufkin
1982–1983	Gary Wildman and Robert Burks
1984	Gordon L. Nelson
1985–1989	Gordon L. Nelson, Charles E. Hoyle, and Robson F. Storey
1990–2002	Robson F. Storey and Shelby F. Thames
2003–2004	Robson F. Storey, Shelby F. Thames, Marek W. Urban, and Douglas A. Wicks
2005–2010	Robson F. Storey
2011–present	James W. Rawlins and Robson F. Storey

Symposium. From 1998 through 2011, the Technology Showcase was sponsored by the SSCT.

BEHIND THE SCENES

From its inception, The Waterborne Symposium has been organized and executed by faculty, staff, and students of the School of Polymers and High Performance Materials (formerly the Department of Polymer Science) at USM. *Table 2* lists the chairmen of the Symposium, all of whom were USM faculty members during their chairmanship. Symposium founders Wildman and Bufkin served as co-chairs for the first eight Symposia. The author of this article has been a chair of the Symposium from 1985 to present, and, for many years during this period, he co-chaired the Symposium with one of the founders, Shelby Thames. The current co-chairs are James Rawlins and Robson Storey.

Since the early 1980s, the execution of Symposium operations has been carried out by the Symposium Coordinator, a full-time USM staff employee. *Table 3* recognizes the individuals who have filled this important role. In addition to the coordinator, other USM faculty and staff members have assisted over the years, notably Gerald Mattson, Beverly McNeese, and Deborah Witherby.

The Symposium has been held in various hotels in New Orleans over the years. Starting in 1978 and extending for 26 consecutive years, the Symposium was held in the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Poydras Plaza. In later years, the Symposium resided at several different hotels, most of which are directly adjacent to the French Quarter. The upcoming 40th Anniversary Symposium will be held at the New Orleans Marriott, on February 6–8, 2013. The 2014 and 2015 Symposia will be located directly across the street at the Sheraton New Orleans Hotel, February 24–28, 2014 and February 9–13, 2015.

IMPACTING THE INDUSTRY

A number of important technologies in the area of low-VOC coatings have been introduced at the

Table 3—Waterborne Symposium Coordinators


Years	Symposium Coordinators
1983–1988	Velda Moore
1989–1990	Tonya Terral
1991–1993	Velda Moore
1994–1997	Kathleen McCormick
1998–2002	Laura Fosselman
2003–2004	Rick Durden
2005–2010	Laura Fosselman
2011–present	Melanie Heusser

Symposium throughout its 40-year history. For example, many of the early developments in supercritical fluid spray technology, by such companies as Union Carbide Corporation and S.C. Johnson and Sons, were first introduced at the Water-Borne and Higher-Solids Coatings Symposium. New emulsion polymerization technologies affording better latex particle size and distribution, and superior latex particle morphological control were first reported at the Symposium. Surfactant technologies that have enabled new water-reducible vehicles and improved stabilization of existing vehicles were also first reported at the Symposium. Finally, a number of thermosetting latex technologies have debuted at the Symposium, including the vegetable oil macromonomer technology developed in the Thames–Rawlins Research Group at USM.

Proceeds from the Symposium are very important to USM and the School of Polymers and High Performance Materials. Funds received are used for various elements of academic program development, including graduate student stipends, junior faculty development, equipment acquisition and maintenance, and—especially—scholarships for undergraduate students majoring in Polymer Science, most of whom enter the coatings or related polymer industries upon graduation. These scholarships are critical to the university's efforts to recruit the highest-achieving students into our program.

As we make plans for the 40th Anniversary Symposium, we look confidently to the future of the Symposium, and we will strive to maintain its position as a leading technical symposium within the field of paints and coatings.

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