

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

KEN A. DILL

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Robert Kohler, Naomi Morrisette, and Hilary L. Domush

at

The University of California, San Francisco
San Francisco, California

on

12 December 1989 and 9 and 10 February 2009

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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KEN A. DILL

1947 Born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, December 11

Education

1971 BS, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mechanical Engineering
1978 PhD, University of California, San Diego, Biology

Professional Experience

1978-1981 Stanford University
Postdoctorate, Chemistry under Paul J. Flory

1981-1982 University of Florida, Gainesville
Assistant Professor, Chemistry

1982-1985 University of California, San Francisco
Assistant Professor, Chemistry
1985-1989 Associate Professor, Pharmaceutical Chemistry
1989-2010 Professor, Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Biochemistry/Biophysics,
Biopharmaceutics
2010 Distinguished Professor, Pharmaceutical Chemistry,
Biochemistry/Biophysics, Biopharmaceutics

1985-1989 University of Utah
Associate Adjunct Professor, Pharmaceutics
1989-2007 Adjunct Professor, Pharmaceutics

1996-present Lawrence Berkeley National Lab
Faculty Biochemist

2011 Stony Brook University
Louis and Beatrice Endowed Chair of Physical and Quantitative
Biology
2011 Director, Laufer Center for Physical and Quantitative Biology

Honors

1971-1974 National Science Foundation Pre-doctoral Fellowship
1979-1980 Damon Runyon-Walter Winchell Postdoctoral Fellowship

1985-1989	Pew Biomedical Scholar
1987	Distinguished Teaching Award (UCSF) Academic Senate
1987	Joseph M. Long Foundation Prize for Excellence in Teaching (UCSF,
1991	Elected Fellow, American Physical Society
1997	Elected Fellow, AAAS
1998	Hans Neurath Award, Protein Society
2002	Elected Fellow, Biophysical Society
2004	Elected Fellow, Institute of Physics
2007	Distinguished Service Award, Biophysical Society
2008	Elected Member, National Academy of Sciences
2010	UCSF 53 rd Faculty Research Lecturer
2012	Emily Gray Award, Biophysical Society
2012	Appointed Distinguished Professor, SUNY
2013	Elected member, American Academy of Arts and Sciences

ABSTRACT

Ken A. Dill grew up in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, one of two children. His father was an engineer for the telephone company and his mother a housewife. Having displayed an early interest in electronics, Dill attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), obtaining a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and a master's degree in bioengineering. His master's degree experience convinced him he wanted to do research so he applied for and received a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant and matriculated at the University of California, San Diego. Rotations there gave him an interest in questions about the origins of life. He settled in Bruno Zimm's lab because he liked Zimm's personality and his bio-related physics lab. Dill finished his PhD when he got reproducible results with the DNA separator he had designed and built. He went next to a postdoc at Stanford University, to Paul Flory's lab to study micelles, hoping that their simpler structures would help him understand the more complex structures of proteins. Dill says that Flory "thought like molecules do."

Dill accepted an assistant professorship at the University of Florida, where he worked on protein folding, molecular evolution, and the origins of life. Although he liked Florida, Dill left there for the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), where there were many more groups doing similar work. At the beginning of Dill's career Cyrus Levinthal declared that learning how sequence determines structure was the grand challenge in their field; Dill published his paper using polymer statistical mechanics to postulate that requirements for compactness limited proteins' structures. Others questioned the use of statistical mechanics for thinking about proteins, but Dill developed simple exact models, especially the hydrophobic-polar model. He also developed funnel-shaped energy landscapes.

Dill moved to studying peptoids, or artificial molecules, collaborating with Ronald Zuckermann, to see if they could make the peptoids fold the way proteins do. They called these folding peptoids foldamers and believe that foldamers could have many important biological applications. Dill's lab now works in three main project areas: computer modeling of structures; water; and nonequilibrium statistical mechanics. Dill's work was originally funded by Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences but has since been supported by NIH. He still loves to work with pencil and paper.

Wanting to contribute to science policy, Dill cofounded, with Mary Barkley, the Bridging the Sciences Coalition, which is composed of fifteen basic research organizations. Dill discusses Representative John Porter's help with legislation and procedures; the Coalition's white papers; Congress's responsiveness; and the importance of a large vision for science. He believes deep innovation is important for the future of science. He points out some other countries' approaches to science policy and stresses the importance of public outreach.

Dill shares thoughts on science education and grant reviewing. At the time of the second interview Dill had just been elected to the National Academy of Sciences and had yet to attend the inauguration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

12 December 1989

Early Years	1
Grew up in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Parents' background; science in the family. Interest in electronics. Junior high school in Westfield, New Jersey. Ham radio. Influential high school teachers. Fixing radios to make money.	
College and Graduate School Year	4
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Changing major from math to mechanical engineering. Biomedical engineering new and exciting. Master's degree in pain transmission. Padmakar Lele. Interest in origins of life questions. National Science Foundation (NSF) fellowship; University of California, San Diego. Rotations. Bruno Zimm, friend and mentor. Polymer physics. Stanley Miller and Leslie Orgel and origins of life. Creationism.	
Postdoctoral Years	10
Postdoc at Stanford University with Paul Flory. Bilayer membrane structures and micelles; implications for protein folding. Boom in the field. Flory's integrity and intellectual capacity. How folding occurs; bearing on molecular evolution.	
Beginning in Academia	16
Assistant professorship at University of Florida. George Butler's support. Long-distance relationship with future wife. Move to University of California, San Francisco. Folding and membranes. UCSF more biological than Florida; supportive environment for biophysical chemistry. Space limited; collaboration encouraged. DARPA grant for protein design shared by Dill, Irwin Kuntz, Robert Langridge, Peter Kollman, and Fred Cohen. Dill's lab at Laurel Hill campus. Writing papers in his lab.	
Continuing Work	21
Origins of folding problem; Kendrew and x-ray crystallography. Thermodynamics and prediction of structures. Looking for way to measure errors resulting from simple models. Difference from Chou-Fasman rules. Collaboration with John Dorsey on properties of bilayer membranes; NIH grant; Collaboration with Anna Christina Balazs. Collaboration with Miriam Wattenbarger. Lecturing at University of Utah; new teaching ideas.	
General Thoughts	33
Reviewing for NSF. Review process overburdened. Science in United States now micromanaged. Balancing work and family. Jogging, swimming, hiking. Electronics with son someday. Upon retirement hopes to study philosophic foundations of statistical mechanics and information theory.	

9 February 2009

Early Years	30
From Oklahoma to New Jersey. Building rockets with father. Early interest in science. Reason for choosing Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Switching from mathematics to mechanical engineering. Padmakar Lele's electronics setup; staying for master's degree. Alexander Rich's course inspires interest in origins of life. D.G. Wilson and tandem bike design. Undergraduate research in analysis of spectrum of noise.	
Graduate School Years	35
Choosing University of California, San Diego. National Science Foundation fellowship. Intellectual difference between Oklahoma and MIT. Rotations. Bruno Zimm. Lab management. Designing and building DNA separator. Ruth Kavenoff and viscoelastometer. Teaching assistant in biology courses. Passing biology tests. Roommates; barter system; fixing cars; social life.	
Postdoc Years	44
Zimm's leads to Paul Flory's lab at Stanford University. Origins of life problem too speculative; focused on protein folding. Disputes with creationists. Stanley Miller. Eugenie Scott and National Center for Science Education; movie <i>Expelled</i> . Russell Doolittle, Duane Gish debate. Performance and persuasion. Irreducible complexity and Michael Behe. University's legal difficulties with protesters from various groups.	
Academic Career	53
Investigated industry but wanted only academia; University of Florida. Moving to University of California, San Francisco. Lab does little experimentation, some computer work, and lots of analytical theory. Discussion of Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences. Missing meeting for birth of son. Protein folding work funded by National Institutes of Health.	

10 February 2009

Academic Career (continuing)	62
Changes in the field. Levinthal Paradox. Statistical mechanics for thinking about proteins. Entropies. Peter Wolynes. Hydrophobic-polar model. Funnel-shaped energy landscapes. Main project areas: computer modeling of structures (bioinformatics); water; nonequilibrium statistical mechanics. Collaborations. Foldamers. Biological applications. University of Utah adjunct. Family and travels.	
Science Policy	72
Bridging the Sciences Coalition. Cofounder Mary Barkley. Representative John Porter's help with legislation, procedures. President George W. Bush's increase of NIH funding. White papers. Congress's responsiveness. Importance of large vision	

for science. Other countries' approaches. Importance of public outreach. COSMOS. Hands-on fun for kids.

Thoughts about Science Education	85
Carl Wieman and physics education. Clickers. Livescribe Pulse pen. Television. Learning as a social experience. Alfred Einstein and theory. Importance of writing, communicating well. Reviewing; scientists and comprehension. "Three-decimal-place" reviewing. Role of taxpayers.	
National Academy of Sciences	97
More reviewing as well as more credibility. Peer validation. Family to attend ceremony. Wife's work; children; brother's computational chemistry.	
Index	101

INDEX

A

American Chemical Society, 72
American Physical Society, 72
Anderson, Bradley D., 25
Asilomar Conference Ground, 69
Atomic Energy Commission, 77

B

Balazs, Anna Christina, 25
Barkley, Mary D., 73
Barron, Annelise E., 70
Bates College, 87
Behe, Michael J., 51
Bell Laboratories, 12, 72
bioinformatics, 67, 89
biological origins. *See* origins of life
biomolecules, 9, 10, 11
Biophysical Society, 73, 74
Biopolis, 80
BITNET, 26
Black Swan, The, 94
Blackerby, Don, 3
Bloomfield, Victor A., 25, 26
Boston, Massachusetts, 99
Boydston, Milton, 3
Boyer, Herbert W., 18
Breitenfeld, Frederick (maternal cousin), 1
Breitenfeld, Sigmund (maternal great-grandfather), 1
Bridging the Sciences Coalition, 72, 74, 77, 90, 98
Bush, President George W., 74, 78
Butler, George B., 16

C

California Institute of Technology, 68
California State Summer School for Mathematics
and Science, 81
CalTech. *See* California Institute of Technology
Cancun, Mexico, 58
CASP. *See* Critical Assessment of Protein Structure
Prediction
China, 80
Chiron, 69, 98
Chou-Fasman rules, 23
Cohen, Fred E., 19
collaboration, 16, 19, 24, 25, 26, 68, 69, 70, 71
Collins, Francis S., 50
colloids, 25, 44
Coutsias, Vageli, 69
creationism, 6, 7, 22, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53

Crick, Francis H.C., 21, 32
Critical Assessment of Protein Structure Prediction
(CASP), 67

D

Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation, 44
Danforth, William H., 27
DARPA. *See* Defense Advanced Research Projects
Agency
Darwin, Charles R., 50
Darwin's Black Box, 51
deep innovation, 72, 73, 74, 76, 77, 94, 95
Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, 19, 58
Dewey, C. Forbes, 34
DeYoung, Linda R., 24
Dill, ? (father), 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 28, 30, 31, 43, 81
Dill, Jim (brother), 1, 2, 31
Dill, Tyler (son), 28
Dingell, Congressman John D., 27
DNA, 11, 21, 38, 39, 43
DOE. *See* United States Department of Energy
Doolittle, Russell F., 49
Dorsey, John G., 16, 24, 26

E

Eigen, Manfred, 5
Eisenhower, President Dwight D., 77, 78
England, 33, 37
entropies, 64, 65, 66, 67
Europe, 71
Evans, D. Fennell, 25, 26
Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed, 48

F

Faraday Discussions, 14
Feher, George, 10, 11, 36
Feynman, Richard P., 83
Flory, Paul J., 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 24, 37, 43, 44,
45, 46, 53, 54
foldamers, 69, 70
Fox, Sidney W., 5, 35
Frank, Sir Charles, 14
Fusionopolis, 80

G

Gates, William H., III, 85
Gellman, Samuel H., 70
Genentech Inc., 81
Gish, Duane T., 49

Goyan, Jere E., 17
Graham, Ed, 42
grants/funding, 10, 16, 19, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 42, 44,
57, 59, 60, 72, 75, 76, 77, 81, 83, 92, 93, 94, 95,
97, 100
Great Depression, 7, 8

H

Harris, Loyd E. (paternal uncle), 1
Hartline, Daniel K., 10
Harvard School of Public Health, 4
Higuchi, William I., 71
Hodes, Larry, 2, 32
hydrophobic-polar model, 65

I

India, 80, 99
irreducible complexity, 51
Italy, 63, 67, 71

J

Jobs, Steven Paul, 85

K

Kampman, Rosalba, 74
Kavenoff, Ruth, 38
Kendrew, John C., 21
Kennedy, President John F., 77, 78
Kenyon, George L., 17
Kirshenbaum, Kent, 70
Kollman, Peter A., 19
Kuntz, Irwin D., Jr., 17, 19

L

La Jolla, California, 42
Langridge, Robert, 19
Lawrence Berkeley National Lab, 69
Lele, Padmakar P., 4, 9, 32, 34
Lettvin, Jerome Y., 4
Levinthal Paradox, 63
Levinthal, Cyrus, 62, 63
Livescribe Pulse pen, 86
Lucas, Adam R., 85

M

Madison, Wisconsin, 40, 70
Manhattan Project, 77
Massachusetts, 35, 99
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8,
9, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 41, 85, 86
Mexico, 50, 58, 59

micelles, 10, 12, 16, 44, 46, 54, 55, 63
Miller, Robert, 25
Miller, Stanley L., 5, 6, 36, 47, 48
MIT. *See* Massachusetts Institute of Technology
molecular evolution, 4, 5, 6, 11, 15, 28, 32, 46, 49
Molecular Foundry, 69
Mountain View, California, 57
Muller, N., 5

N

NASA. *See* United States National Aeronautics and
Space Administration
National Academy of Sciences, 97
National Center for Science Education, 48
National Institutes of Health, 27, 50, 57, 59, 60, 72,
73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 80, 93, 94, 95, 96
National Science Foundation, 5, 27, 35, 37, 39, 42,
57, 72, 74, 76, 77, 78, 80
neutron scattering, 13
New Jersey, 30, 31, 35
New York City, New York, 30
New York University, 70
NIH. *See* National Institutes of Health
Nixon, President Richard M., 79
Nobel Prize, 13, 44
NSF. *See* National Science Foundation

O

O'Neil, Edward H., 57
Oakland, California, 48, 50, 57, 58, 69
Oklahoma, 30, 32, 35, 78
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1, 3
Oregon, 99
Orgel, Leslie E., 5, 6, 36
origins of life, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 16, 32, 35, 36, 46, 53
Outliers, 85

P

Pattee, Howard H., 5
Pelosi, Nancy, 74
Pennsylvania, 48
peptoid, 69, 70
Perutz, Max F., 21
Pew Charitable Trusts, 50, 57
Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences,
56, 59, 77, 81, 82
pharmaceutical chemistry, 8
Phillips, Robert B., 68
Phoenix, Arizona, 58
polymer physics, 6, 9, 10
polymers, semi-crystalline, 13
Porter, Representative John E., 73, 74, 76, 80, 82, 96
Poulos, Thomas, 42

Procter & Gamble Co., 53
protein folding, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22,
25, 44, 46, 54, 55, 59, 60, 62, 65, 66, 67, 91
public policy. *See* science policy
publishing/publication, 19, 26, 91, 92
Puerto Rico, 58
Putnam City High School, 3

R

Record, M. Thomas, Jr., 41
Rich, Alexander, 5, 9, 32
Rimel, Rebecca W., 57
RNA, 70
Rodgers, Mary C., 2

S

Salk Institute for Biological Studies, 5, 6, 36, 39
San Diego, California, 6, 25, 42
San Francisco, California, 26, 82
Schreurs, Jolanda (wife), 16, 28
science policy, 27
Scott, Eugenie C., 48, 49
Scripps Research Institute, 42
Shafer, Richard H., 17
Shakespeare, William, 22
simple exact model, 65, 90
Singapore, 80
Slovenia, 68
Sputnik, 78
St. Mary's College of California, 85
Stanford University, 9, 10, 12, 16, 17, 18, 21, 43, 44,
45, 52, 54, 57, 70
statistical mechanics, 19, 25, 28, 51, 64, 66, 68, 87,
89
Stein, Ben, 48, 49
Stockmayer, Walter H., 13
Sun Microsystems, 20

T

thermodynamics, 9, 21, 22, 25, 28, 49, 51, 64, 68, 95
Time magazine, 74
Truman, President Harry S., 77, 78

U

UCSD. *See* University of California, San Diego
UCSF. *See* University of California, San Francisco
United States Congress, 73, 74, 76, 78, 82, 96

United States Department of Energy, 72, 77
United States House of Representatives, 74, 76
United States National Aeronautics and Space
Administration, 78
United States Navy, 1, 42
United States of America, 27, 72, 74, 77
United States Senate, 74, 76, 78
University of California, Berkeley, 52
University of California, Davis, 81
University of California, Irvine, 42
University of California, San Diego, 5, 9, 35, 36, 39,
41, 42, 43, 44, 47, 48, 49, 98
University of California, San Francisco, 16, 17, 18,
19, 20, 25, 26, 30, 52, 54, 55, 56, 62, 68, 82, 85,
89, 90
University of Cincinnati, 24
University of Colorado at Boulder, 85
University of Florida, 10, 16, 19, 21, 24, 54, 59, 63
University of Miami, 5, 35
University of Minnesota, 25, 26
University of New Mexico, 69
University of Pittsburgh, 25
University of Utah, 25, 71
University of Wisconsin, 40, 41, 70
Urey, Harold C., 5

V

viscoelastometer, 38
Vlachy, Vojko, 68

W

Washington, DC, 58, 72, 73, 74, 76, 81, 98
Watson, James D., 21
Wattenbarger, Miriam, 25, 26
Weiss, Ellen, 74
Westfield, New Jersey, 2
White, Judith M., 18
Wieman, Carl E., 85
Wilson, David Gordon, 33
Wolynes, Peter G., 65
World War I, 1
World War II, 77, 80

Z

Zimm, Bruno H., 6, 9, 10, 12, 17, 24, 36, 37, 38, 39,
41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 53
Zuckermann, Ronald N., 69