

Waldo L. Semon Biography

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Biography

In 1912, the European scientist Klattes had discovered that hydrochloric acid combined with acetylene gives vinyl chloride. Another European, Ostromislenski, in the same year patented the production of a rubber-like material from vinyl chloride. However, it was not until 1930, when the American Waldo L. Semon advanced the use of high-boiling organic esters, especially phosphates, to plasticize polyvinyl chloride, yielding rubber-like masses, that polyvinyl chloride began to find widespread use. Plasticized polyvinyl chloride soon found applications as cable insulation, substitute leather cloth, and in packaging.

Pressed to find additional uses for rubber, Semon came up with the idea of bubble gum, a form of rubber. He patented his idea in October of 1931. Semon's expectation was that bubble gum would replace conventional chewing gum. His employer, B.F. Goodrich, however, looked upon the bubbles as a product defect, and declined to develop and commercialize Semon's invention. After the time had run out on the patent, Bazooka trademarked the product, and Semon ended up having no financial stake in the commercialization of his invention.

In the course of his 37-year career with B.F. Goodrich, Semon made significant discoveries in the areas of diarylamine rubber antioxidants, synthetic rubbers and oil-resistant nitrile rubber. From 1954 to 1961, he was Director of Polymer Research at B. F. Goodrich where he provided the technical leadership that fueled the discovery of three major new families of polymeric materials: thermoplastic polyurethane, synthetic 'natural' rubber, and the first oil-resistant synthetic rubbers.

Semon was born in Demopolis, Alabama, in 1898. He moved to the Pacific Northwest when he was seven. In 1916 he entered the University of Washington determined to be a chemist. He graduated cum laude in 1920 then continued his studies at the University of Washington, where he received his Ph.D. in chemistry in 1923. After a short period as an instructor at the university, Semon joined B.F. Goodrich. Following his retirement from that company in 1963, he served as a research professor at Kent State University. In the course of his career Semon was awarded 116 patents. In recognition of his contributions to polymer science, Semon received the ACS Charles Goodyear Medal, the Edward W. Morely Medal, and the Thomas Midgely Award; he was also inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame.