90th Anniversary Celebration, October 2019

Building the Future with Renewable Bioproducts Renewable Bioproducts Institute Celebrates 90th Anniversary

The Renewable Bioproducts Institute is celebrating its 90th anniversary on October 17-18, 2019 at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Alumni, friends, and the Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture, Gary Black, will gather to celebrate 90 years of contributions to the forest products industry.
Since its inception as the Institute of Paper Chemistry in the fall of 1929, the research institute continues to advance the science and technology in renewable resources.

“The legacy of IPC is integral to the mission of RBI,” said Meisha Shofner, Interim Director of the Renewable Bioproducts Institute (RBI) at Georgia Tech. “The technical foundation provided by the pulp and paper industry has shaped the bioproducts research that drives the Institute today as we consider how to use natural resources to produce more sustainable chemicals, materials, and products to address societal needs.”

Today, RBI delivers innovation in converting biomass into value-added products, developing advanced chemical and bio-based refining technologies, and advancing excellence in manufacturing processes. The three strategic thrusts of the Institute are paper, packaging and tissue; biochemicals and fuels; and biocomposites and nanocellulose.

But that’s not how it started. Ninety years ago, RBI was the Institute of Paper Chemistry (IPC), founded in October 1929 at Lawrence College in Appleton, WI. That original Institute was created to provide science, technology, and education in support of the pulp and paper industry which, at the time, was a rapidly growing sector of the economy.

There were delays in starting the school, primarily financial in nature; founders estimated it would require $200,000 to $250,000 to construct a building, purchase equipment, and hire professors. The president of Lawrence College, Henry M. Wriston, pushed the idea forward; along with Ernst Mahler, who was then the vice president and general manager of the Kimberly-Clark Corporation in Neenah, WI. Mahler — then known for research in cellulose chemistry — had emigrated from Austria to work in the U.S. and establish one of the first research labs in the industry. He was able to acquire financial support from 19 pulp and paper companies that encompassed 90 percent of the state's paper industry and, in 1929, IPC was created.

The curriculum at the newly formed IPC applied a liberal arts philosophy to the teaching of science and technology. Faculty encouraged imagination and creative thinking, grounded in thorough knowledge of fundamental research procedures. With a rich tradition upon which to build and a progressive attitude toward evolving technologies and practices, the Institute flourished as it was led by a succession of individuals who preserved its integrity while allowing enough flexibility to adapt to the changing times.

With the boom of information technology in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Institute’s board of trustees approved a plan to relocate to the Georgia Tech campus in Atlanta, Georgia. IPC then became the Institute of Paper Science and Technology (IPST). The move to Atlanta aligned the Institute with a premier research university with significant strengths in engineering and science, including the relatively new computer science and technology field.

The Institute became one of Georgia Tech’s interdisciplinary research institutes. The merger in 2003 meant that paper science and engineering fellowships were continued to be offered by IPST, but degrees were managed by the academic schools at Tech. The integration was declared complete in 2004.

For the next decade, IPST built on the rich traditions of the past and continued to evolve as tremendous changes took place in economics, manufacturing, environmental policies, and industry objectives. The explosion of research technology opened even more doors to advances the paper industry never imagined.

That evolution would entail a new name and an expanded scope of work and research in May 2014. The move enabled the Institute to acknowledge its broader focus in the area of bioproducts, which had included research in the areas of pulp and paper, chemicals and materials, and manufacturing. Thus, the Renewable Bioproducts Institute was born.

Also, in May 2014, RBI received a $43.6 million gift from the Institute of Paper Chemistry Foundation (IPCF). This major grant, one of the single largest gifts in Georgia Tech's history, affirmed the Institute's position as a leading driver of the future of the forest bioproducts industry. That endowment currently supports approximately 30 students who advance the research mission of RBI through their faculty directed research.

Today in the year 2019, RBI has more than 1500 alumni and empowers students from different backgrounds and scientific interests to address interdisciplinary research needs. The Institute works closely with industrial partners; discovers inventive technical solutions to society's challenges, and trains future leaders to ultimately create an efficient, competitive, and profitable bioproducts industry from nature's resources.

Event Recap

On October 17 and 18, the Renewable Bioproducts Institute celebrated the 90th anniversary of the Institute of Paper Chemistry at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

The celebration to recognize the many contributions to the forest industry drew former Paper Institute presidents, alumni, professors, students, and notably, Gary Black, the Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture. The speaking events included a retrospective of 90 years and the future of the paper industry, history of the museum's pilot paper machine, and the importance of forest products for Georgia and the United States.

Commissioner Black provided thoughtful insights about crops in Georgia and the health of our forests. Jim Ferris, Ph.D. (MS Class of '69; PhD '74), former president of the Institute of Paper Science and Technology, was in attendance of the celebration and called it an "excellent event," and that he left "feeling very positive about the future."

The celebration also included letters from former faculty and friends that were unable to attend but sent their congratulation letters that were shared with the crowd. This included letters from Nick Triantafillopoulos (Ph.D. '89), John McKibbon (MS '87; Ph.D. '94), Art Ragauskas and Ted Wegner.

A highlight of the celebration was the tour of the Robert C. Williams Museum of Papermaking. It was an interactive tour with Commissioner Black getting his hands wet making paper and touring the museum. In addition, tours of the Institute's innovative research were provided at the Manufacturing Related Disciplines Complex and the Marcus Nanotechnology building.

The celebration concluded after the tours on the evening of October 18 with a reception and dinner.

“This celebration was a special opportunity to recognize the people and technical contributions of the Institute of Paper Chemistry and its successor organizations, the Institute of Paper Science and Technology and the Renewable Bioproducts Institute,” says Meisha Shofner, Interim Director of the Renewable Bioproducts Institute at Georgia Tech. “As the industry has changed and evolved over 90 years, the Institute has been a reflection of those changes while continuing to produce innovative research and train students to pursue careers in the bioproducts field. We were honored to share this occasion with our community and look forward to celebrating again on the 100th anniversary.”