A Career in Chemistry and Chemical Information: Interview with Bill Town, Chair of the CINF Publications Committee

By Svetla Baykoucheva

Svetla Baykoucheva: Bill, you have been a fixture for the members of the ACS Chemical Information Division (CINF), as you have played many different roles in it. You have recently been appointed Chair of the Publications Committee, in which capacity you will be overseeing all publication-related activities, including the print *Chemical Information Bulletin* (*CIB*) and the online publication, *CINF e-News*. Could you tell our readers what working for CINF has given you professionally and in personal plan?

Bill with a buryat folk musician near Listvyanka, Lake Baikal, Russia.

Bill Town: In the early days of my involvement in CINF, my interest was in organizing symposia (at ACS national meetings), which would expand the range of topics covered by CINF symposia and enliven CINF programming. Richard Love, who was CINF Program Chair at the time, and I both had an interest in software for personal computers and that was one of the first topics we covered together. Through CINF, I developed a network of professional friends and that continues to be one of the greatest strengths of the Division. One role led to another and suddenly, to my surprise, I found myself Chair of the Division. I was ill prepared—as my previous experience was only in CINF programming and publications—and very busy running ChemWeb (then part of Elsevier), but with support of my colleagues I struggled through the year. I vowed then to continue to work for the Division and to encourage new committee members, and I am not yet ready to retire from CINF involvement. I have also recently rediscovered my original interest in CINF programming.

"The eclipse experience is both intellectual and emotional and one which is never the same twice. However, the peripheral aspects are also fascinating – the elephant visiting the water hole as the eclipse starts or birds roosting on a church tower at mid day confused by the changing light," says Bill.

Eclipse camp in the Sahara desert, Libya.

SB: You hold a PhD in Chemistry from Lancaster University in England, and you have started your career in Sheffield University working on structure searching systems. Could you give us some insight as to how your chemistry background has shaped your professional interests and career? Why did you get involved in chemical information?

Composite image of the 2006 eclipse as seen in Turkey.

BT: During my PhD research in X-ray crystallography, I made my first contact with computers and computing, which was then still in its infancy and a very exciting discipline. At the end of my PhD, I moved to Sheffield and joined a research group, lead by Michael Lynch, which, *inter alia*, performed some of the basic research that led to the chemical structure search systems which are commonplace today. It is difficult to convey what computing involved in the 1960s—computers had tiny memories and operated in batch processing mode only, and one had to be able to hand punch and read 80-column punch cards to enter programs and data into the computer. My career has remained a blend of computers and chemistry ever since and has ranged from software development to database publication and web-based community development. The common theme has always been chemistry, which was my first love.

SB: You have been involved in the most important chemistry-related commercial and professional organizations in the world. How do you see the availability and access to chemical information change in the next few years? How much would the availability of freely-accessible information challenge commercial publishers to make concessions with respect to pricing and access?

BT: The evolution of chemical information delivery systems is driven by technological change. The first chemical information systems were batch systems; online systems developed at the end of the 1970s, and the current technological revolution started with the development of the first web browser some 15 years ago. This revolution has led to end user access to vast amounts of published information in the form of journal articles and databases and has required publishers to radically change their business models. Those business models are being challenged again by the open access publishing model and, with the acquisition of BioMed Central by Springer, the tipping point from toll access to open access has moved closer. In my role as Chair of the CCDC (Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre) Board of Governors, I am closely watching the challenge which free databases are making on the database subscription business model. In my optimistic view, there will be a dichotomy, which will develop between free public databases and added value subscription databases—and each, serving a different market segment, will survive. The other important factor in pricing is the outsourcing of production and new product development to India and China, which should help to reduce costs and stabilize or reduce prices.

SB: What are your current professional interests?

BT: Apart from my involvement with CINF and CCDC, I continue to be involved with IUPAC—I chair a task group on graphical representation standards for chemical structures. I also continue to run my consulting business and my main clients at present are an Indian company, Molecular Connections, and JISC (the UK Joint Information Systems Committee) for which I am studying the take up of new information technologies and resources by UK chemists.

SB: What do you think of the *Chemical Information Bulletin* and *CINF e-News*? Could you share with our readers some of the plans for the future of the CINF publications and the Web site?

BT: *CIB* and *CINF e-News* are vital to CINF as the prime means for communication with division members. Both have been managed well but have not really taken full advantage of the new technologies available for the delivery of publications. At its last meeting, the CINF Executive Committee decided that the two publications should merge and become an 'electronic only' publication which will appear four times a year. The details will be worked out by the CINF Publications Committee during 2009 and the Committee will also review how the CINF website can be integrated into this publication.

SB: You have traveled to many exotic places in the world—to deserts, to Siberia. How do you decide where to go and which of your past travels you remember most often?

BT: I travel for business and pleasure. My pleasure travel is driven by my interest in the history and cultural differences between countries. In 1999, however, I witnessed my first total solar eclipse in France and that added a new dimension to my travel plans. Since then I have travelled to Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, Spain, Libya and Russia (Siberia) to view more total eclipses, but the travel always also has a cultural element. In 2007, I was also able to join a small group touring Thailand and Cambodia visiting many ancient Siam capitals and Angkor Wat and its many temples but also learning to appreciate what can result when normal society breaks down – as happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and in Thailand during World War Two. The travel itself can be interesting and exciting – for example canoeing down the Zambezi River and camping on its shores among the hippos and crocodiles or living on a train for five days crossing the Siberian plain.

SB: Thank you, Bill, for sharing with us your interests and experiences.