Russell Marker Biography

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Biography

Russell Earl Marker is credited with discovering the process of creating progesterone from a steroid found in Mexican yams. One of the functions of progesterone is inhibiting ovulation. He thus prepared the path for the development of the birth control pill. The process was named Marker degradation. He recognized immediately the potential in his discovery and tried to interest American investors but to no avail. He then moved to Mexico where he found eager business partners, an American and a German. He named his company Syntex, "Synt" for Synthesis and "ex" for Mexico. However, a short time after starting the company, he had a falling out with his partners and he returned to the United States.

Marker had an interesting personality. While working on his Ph. D., like James Prescott Joule, he refused to study the courses that did not interest him. He even finished his dissertation, but could not be awarded a Ph. D. because of the courses he had not fulfilled. Still, without his doctorate, he managed to find a research position at Pennsylvania State where he worked from 1934 until 1944 when he left for Mexico. When he returned from Mexico, he accepted a teaching position at Pennsylvania State where he stayed until his death in 1995, at age 92. He never did finish his doctorate.

Although he may have been gruff with his business partners, he did had a sense of humor. He named newly discovered compounds after his friends. Rockogen was named for a friend whose nickname was Rocky. Someone returned the favor and so a compound is named after Marker, marcogen.

Marker's discovery is important because of the impact that it has had on twentieth century society. The development of the birth control pill has been assumed to have initiated the "sexual revolution," which had greatly influenced modern western culture. Synthetic progesterone has also had a positive effect on helping women through menopause and other conditions of low hormones.