

A History of Cryonics

by Ben Best

Robert Ettinger is widely regarded as the "father of cryonics" (although he has often said that he would rather be the grandson). Mr. Ettinger earned a Purple Heart in World War II as a result of injury to his leg by an artillery shell. He subsequently became a college physics teacher after earning two Master's Degrees from Wayne State University. (He has often been erroneously called "Doctor" and "Professor".)

A lifelong science fiction buff, Ettinger published a short story having a cryonics theme in 1948 titled The Pentultimate Trump. In 1962 he self-published THE PROSPECT OF IMMORTALITY, a non-fictional book explaining in detail the methods and rationale for cryonics. He mailed the book to 200 people listed in WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA. Also in 1962, Evan Cooper independently self-published IMMORTALITY: PHYSICALLY, SCIENTIFICALLY, NOW, which is also a book advocating cryonics. In 1964 Isaac Asimov assured Doubleday that (although socially undesirable, in his opinion) cryonics is based on reasonable scientific assumptions. This allowed THE PROSPECT OF IMMORTALITY to be printed and distributed by a major publisher. The word "cryonics" had not been invented yet, but the concept was clearly established.

In December, 1963 Evan Cooper founded the world's first cryonics organization, the Life Extension Society, intended to create a network of cryonics groups throughout the world. Cooper eventually became discouraged, however, and he dropped his cryonics-promoting activities to pursue his interest in sailing. His life was ended by being lost at sea. Cooper's networking had not been in vain, however, because people who had become acquainted through his efforts formed cryonics organizations in northern and southern California as well as in New York.

In 1965 a New York industrial designer named Karl Werner coined the word "cryonics". That same year Saul Kent, Curtis Henderson and Werner founded the Cryonics Society of New York. Werner soon drifted away from cryonics and became involved in Scintology, but Kent and Henderson remained devoted to cryonics. In 1966 the Cryonics Society of Michigan and the Cryonics Society of California were founded. Unlike the other two organizations, the Cryonics Society of Michigan was an educational and social group which had no intention to actually cryopreserve people — and it exists today under the name Immortalist Society.

A TV repairman named Robert Nelson was the driving force behind the Cryonics Society of California. On January 12, 1967 Nelson froze a psychology professor named James Bedford. Bedford was injected with multiple shots of DMSO, and a thumper was applied in an attempt to circulate the DMSO with chest compressions. Nelson recounted the story in his book WE FROZE THE FIRST MAN. Bedford's wife and son took Bedford's body from Nelson after six days and the family kept Dr. Bedford in cryogenic care until 1982 when he was transferred to Alcor. Of 17 cryonics patients cryopreserved in the period between 1967 and 1973, only Bedford remains in liquid nitrogen.

In 1974 Curtis Henderson, who had been maintaining three cryonics patients for the Cryonics Society of New York, was told by the New York Department of Public Health that he must close down his cryonics facility immediately or be fined \$1,000 per day. The three cryonics patients were returned to their families.

In 1979 an attorney for relatives of one of the Cryonics Society of California patients led journalists to the Chatsworth, California cemetery where they entered the vault where the patients were being stored. None of the nine "cryonics patients" were being maintained in liquid nitrogen, and all were badly decomposed. Nelson and the funeral director in charge were both sued. The funeral director could pay (through his liability insurance), but Nelson had no money. Nelson had taken most of the patients as charity cases or on a "pay-as-you-go" basis where payments had not been continued. The Chatsworth Disaster is the greatest catastrophe in the history of cryonics.

In 1969 the Bay Area Cryonics Society (**BACS**) was founded by two physicians, with the assistance of others, notably Edgar Swank. BACS (which later changed its name to the American Cryonics Society) is now the cryonics organization with the longest continuous history in offering cryonics services. In 1972 Trans Time was founded as a for-profit perfusion service-provider for BACS. Both BACS and Alcor intended to store patients in New York, but in 1974 Trans Time was forced to create its own cryostorage facility due to the closure of the storage facility in New York. Until the 1980s all BACS and Alcor patients were stored in liquid nitrogen at Trans Time.

In 1977 Trans Time was contacted by a UCLA cardiothoracic surgeon and medical researcher named Jerry Leaf, who responded to an advertisement Trans Time had placed in REASON magazine. In 1978 Leaf created a company called Cryovita devoted to doing cryonics research and to providing perfusion services for both Alcor and Trans Time.

By the 1980s acrimony between Trans Time and BACS caused the organizations to disassociate. BACS was renamed the American Cryonics Society (ACS) in 1985. Jim Yount (who joined BACS in 1972 and became a Governor two years later) and Edgar Swank have been the principal activists in ACS into the 21st century.

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