



Child victim of the Bhopal Disaster, Pablo Bartholomew

The Backroom Boys

If you define 'liability' simply as the ability to lie, then Dow is in liability up to its ears.

Ryan Bodanyi, Students for Bhopal

NATION: **DOW CHEMICAL**

FOUNDED: 1897 (Herbert H. Dow)

CAPITAL: Midland, Michigan

MOTTO: Living. Improved Daily.

CLAIM TO FAME: Financially liable for history's worst industrial accident

Milestones in Dow's Illustrious History:

1886: German chemist Viktor Meyer synthesizes sulfur mustard, in the process inadvertently poisoning his lab assistant. To make sure the victim's symptoms aren't just psychosomatic, he tests the compound on laboratory rabbits, most of which die.

1897: Viktor Meyer commits suicide by drinking cyanide. Chemist Herbert H. Dow founds the The Dow Chemical Company.

The business is based on a new method of extracting bromine from brine (saltwater).

1913: English chemist Hans Clarke reformulates Meyer's sulfur mustard compound while working in Berlin. Hospitalized for severe burns after a flask breaks, Clarke dutifully reports the incident to the German Chemical Society, setting Germany on the path to building chemical weapons.

1916: Dow is contracted by the U.S. Army to produce mustard gas in a top secret program. During World War I, mustard gas and other chemical weapons cause 1.3 million mostly non-fatal casualties, but most of Dow's production is stockpiled and dumped into the ocean after the war ends.

1918: Having rapidly expanded its product line, 90% of the company's business is now involved in producing war materials, including tear gas, flares, and explosives.

1930: Henry H. Dow dies of liver failure, likely facilitated by his lifelong habit of ‘taste-tasting’ new chemicals at Dow.

1942: During a test run of Project X-ray at a U.S. Army base, bats armed with incendiaries escape and set fire to the airfield’s hangars, barracks, and a general’s car. Frustrated by these setbacks, American Chemist Louis Fieser redirects his attention to the development of napalm, working in a secret laboratory at Harvard University.

1943: Searching for a way to speed up the growth of soybeans, botanist Arthur Galston discovers a chemical that in higher concentrations acts as a defoliant. His discovery is subsequently used to create Agent Orange.

1945: Napalm is used extensively during World War II, notably in the firebombing of Japanese cities. On one night alone, a raid over Tokyo causes an estimated 100,000 deaths, more than died at Hiroshima.

1951: Dow is contracted to operate the Rocky Flats Plant under construction near Denver, Colorado, which will fabricate plutonium triggers for hydrogen bombs.

1965-1969: Dow and other companies produce 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other defoliants for use in the Vietnam War. Dow will be the top customer of the U.S. government for toxic herbicides, which are sprayed on 3,000 Vietnamese villages.

One U.S. soldier expresses his gratitude to Dow for creating the flesh-burning chemical: “We sure are pleased with those backroom boys at Dow. The original product wasn’t so hot. If the gooks were quick they could scrape it off. So the boys started adding polystyrene [and] now it sticks like shit to a blanket!”

From 1965 until Agent Orange is banned in 1971, its inventor, Arthur Galston, is a vocal advocate against its use, warning of its damage to humans and the environment.

Millions of Southeast Asians and thousands of U.S. war veterans will suffer death or illness as a result of Agent Orange.

That same year, Dow competitor Union Carbide builds a substandard factory in Bhopal, India, to produce a toxic insecticide.

1977: Louis Feiser, the inventor of napalm, dies at age 78. Unapologetic until the end about his creation, the chain-smoking Feiser also served on the U.S. Surgeon General’s panel on the dangers of smoking, accepting its findings only after contracting lung cancer.

1984: An explosion at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal releases 30 tons of highly toxic methyl isocyanate gas, killing at least 8,000 people and injuring over 500,000. The accident is considered to this day be the worst industrial disaster in history.

1980s-present: Dow is fined billions of dollars for health and environmental violations, including the sale of banned pesticides and defective silicone breast implants, routine release of dioxin and other toxins, asbestos poisoning, and massive radioactive contamination at Rocky Flats.

2001: Despite warnings that it would inherit liability for the Bhopal disaster, Dow buys out Union Carbide in an \$11.6 billion deal. In 2017, Dow merges with major competitor DuPont, before being spun out as a separate company again just two years later.

2012: Dow is judged to be the largest single contributor to toxic air pollution in the U.S.

The company continues to deny it has any liability to compensate victims of the Bhopal disaster (beyond a paltry \$470 million out-of-court settlement in 1989) or responsibility to clean up the still highly contaminated site.

Dow representatives have thus far ignored six summonses to appear in Bhopal District Court to respond to charges. The most recent court hearing took place in January 2023. ■