



Willard Frank Libby

December 17, 1908 - September 8, 1980

Died: Los Angeles, California

Willard Frank Libby died in Los Angeles on September 8, 1980. He was seventy-one. Born in Grand Valley, Colorado, on December 17, 1908, and raised partly in Sebastopol, California, among apple orchards and a father who had tried mining, he took to chemistry the way other boys took to engines. The University of California, Berkeley, gave him a doctorate in 1933. The University of Chicago, and the war, gave him a problem that was not academic: the Manhattan Project needed men who could think about tritium and heavy water without losing the thread of a measurement.

After the war he stayed in Chicago long enough to ask a civilian question. Carbon-14 is made in the upper air, taken up by living things, and starts to decay when they die. If you could count that decay, you could date a beam, a cloth, a bone - not to the hour, but to a span archaeology had never had. He and his students built the counters. They dated the Dead Sea Scrolls and charcoal from camps that had been stories. In 1960 the Nobel Prize in Chemistry named the method. He treated the prize as a citation for a technique, not a personality. Critics later refined the calibration curves; they did not retire the idea.

Eisenhower put him on the Atomic Energy Commission. He argued for peaceful atoms with a stubbornness that made some colleagues wince and others grateful. UCLA became the later laboratory and the house in Los Angeles. He married twice, kept a practical wardrobe, and liked a clear notebook better than a banquet.

Grand Valley was the start. Chicago was the invention. Los Angeles was the last address. This memorial does not invent a graveside the family did not publish.

Services

Died in Los Angeles, California, on September 8, 1980. Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 1960, for radiocarbon dating.

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