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Phoney Litre evaporates

Canadian professors created metric father over scotch

The Canadian Press

KITCHENER, Ont. – He was a giant of science who left shoes that were impossible to fill.

His name was Claude Emile Jean-Baptiste Litre (1716-1778), French maker of wine bottles and father of the metric litre, revealed to the modern world in a 1978 edition of a University of Waterloo magazine.

But he left a trail that led modern scientists nowhere because he was a phantom, a joke. He never existed.

Yet this fantasy child of two university professors, conceived over glasses of scotch, fooled scientific journals, the *New York Times* and the CBC.

"It was fun just to sit back and watch as the thing developed," recalls Ken Woolner, now an associate physics professor, who created Litre with Reg Friesen, assistant dean of science.

It began when Friesen heard the 16th General Conference on Weights and Measures was considering changing the abbreviation of litre from l to L.

'It seemed reasonable'

Since capital letters are used for units named after individuals, "it seemed reasonable that one should be invented," Woolner said.

So Jean-Baptiste Litre was born with an article in the April 1978 edition of *Chem 13 News*.

The report was called a "masterly account" with "an abundance of corroborative detail" by one Australian journal.

But most scientists got the joke. Some joined the fun, creating a daughter for Litre, named Millie, said Woolner.

The prank unravelled when a summary of the article made its way into a newsletter of the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry, prompting mixed reactions.

"It is assumed that communications from established scientists are sincere," said the miffed editor of *More Random Walks in Science*, an anthology published by The Institute of Physics in Bristol and London.

A local high school teacher recently wrote to *Chem 13 News* complaining that until he read Woolner's explanation, he had been teaching his students about Litre.

The article EM8901 reprinted above is used in Figure 2.17 of the STAT 220 Course Materials, in Figure 1.3 of the STAT 231 Course Materials and in Statistical Highlight #1.

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