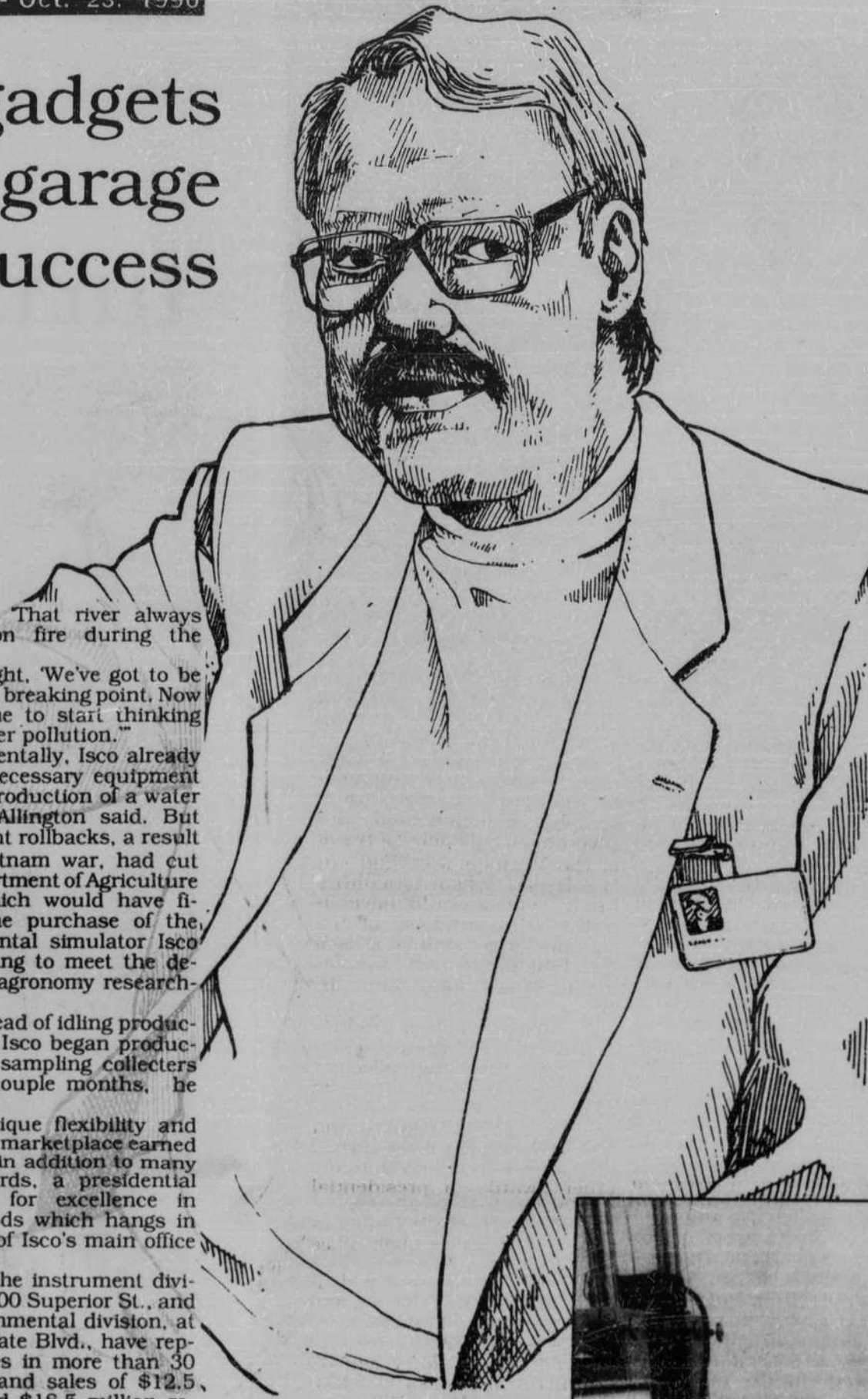


# 'One shot' gadgets move from garage to sprawling success



Bob Allington began his small business by cranking out "one-shot" inventions from his parents' garage. Today, 32 years later, he's at the helm of a sprawling \$30 million corporation with more than 400 employees.

Why then does the founder and president of Isco Inc. of Lincoln have an ID that reads: "Bob Allington, #2," instead of #1?

Allington explained that when the company decided to use employee numbers in 1966, there weren't any personnel records, and he and his partners could not remember who had been working for the company the longest.

"I knew that I was second . . . because while I was still a graduate student, my partner hired a tool maker full time — so he would've been No. 1.

"And my brother, not wanting to overlook a big chance, said it should be alphabetically; his name is John and my name is Robert — so he's No. 1. I decided, what the hell, either way I'm No. 2," Allington said.

The 55-year-old Lincoln native, who has placed about 45 U.S. and about 90 international patents, said his father's "gadgetarian background" and encouragement accentuated his own creativity when he was young.

"He'd give me advice on hints on how to build things and how to build things better. He liked to work in a workshop, so we had a basement full of small power tools.

"It was a mixture of facilities he provided, plus inspiration," he said.

Allington said the supportive environment his father created during his grade school years extended into his study at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and became even more important after he was stricken with polio.

Allington said he was working in Boston in the summer of 1955 when he experienced backaches and was hospitalized within three days.

As he was lying on the hospital bed, he said, he told himself that his case of polio "wasn't

going to be serious." Although the disease didn't consume him, he now uses a wheelchair and has limited motion in his arms.

Yet Allington managed to keep building Isco during his hospitalization in Boston via telephone calls to his partner in Lincoln. After returning to Nebraska, he said, he needed to prove he could work so society wouldn't shut him out.

"Bear in mind, 1960 was before accessibility to places for handicapped people, before there were equal opportunity rights laws, before the movement for mainstreaming people in society — they'd just put them away and store them.

"I didn't want to live like that." From its tenuous beginnings over the phone, Allington's garage-founded business has grown into a vertically integrated corporation.

Isco manufactures and markets worldwide a host of instruments for chemical, biochemical and medical research, as well as water sampling equipment for monitoring compliance with pollution regulations.

In the infancy of his business, Allington said, the UNL College of Agriculture was his start-up customer.

He repaired equipment and made unique "one-shot," not mass-produced, products for faculty members in exchange for their expertise in helping him solve problems.

The most bizarre of these inventions, he said, came in 1964 when he built an indoor model to simulate spray and flame treatment of weeds.

"Somebody came in two years ago looking for a replacement part; he asked if we still had the drawings for it. I thought that was the funniest thing I heard," Allington said.

It was about that time when his partner, Jacob Schafer, unexpectedly left Isco to start his own machine shop, Allington said. Because Schafer wanted 50 percent of Isco, which had no liquid assets, Allington said he was forced to turn to friends and relatives who purchased company stocks and

loaned him money to cover the severance.

"Today they're millionaires," he said of those who paid \$30,000 for 3 percent of Isco.

Allington credits the rapid growth of his company to three patents he recorded to improve an analytical separation instrument, a device that would measure characteristics of chemicals being separated from a solution.

He said he got his first idea for improving the instrument when a chemist who wanted to upgrade the device's capabilities approached Allington to discuss how to overcome a technical problem.

"Minutes is maybe how long it took; I had it figured out before I got done talking to him," Allington said.

Because Isco had a patent lock on the device, Allington said, the company had "a tremendous advantage" over competitors. The instrument was in sufficient demand to expand production.

Allington said he first became interested in analytical separation instruments when, in 1960, he saw that the biological science instrument market wasn't being served well by the manufacturers of the time.

"Everything was in such a primitive state that I could make a lot of dumb mistakes and still survive. It was like riding along on a wave rather than having to use a lot of power to get there myself."

Similarly, in the late '60s, Isco opened an environmental division because Allington perceived a swing in public opinion for greater environmental protection.

"There was a great deal of talk about the environment, but nobody was willing to do anything about it," he said.

While en route to a meeting in Cleveland, Allington said, he saw smoke rising from the Cuyahoga River. When he asked the taxi driver what was happening, he said, the driver replied, "Well, the river is on fire."

"I asked him if I heard that right. He was a little annoyed

and said, 'That river always catches on fire during the summer.'

"I thought, 'We've got to be reaching a breaking point. Now is the time to start thinking about water pollution.'

Coincidentally, Isco already had the necessary equipment to begin production of a water sampler, Allington said. But government rollbacks, a result of the Vietnam war, had cut U.S. Department of Agriculture funds, which would have financed the purchase of the environmental simulator Isco was building to meet the demands of agronomy researchers.

So, instead of idling production lines, Isco began producing water sampling collectors within a couple months, he said.

This unique flexibility and feel for the marketplace earned Allington, in addition to many other awards, a presidential certificate for excellence in export goods which hangs in the lobby of Isco's main office building.

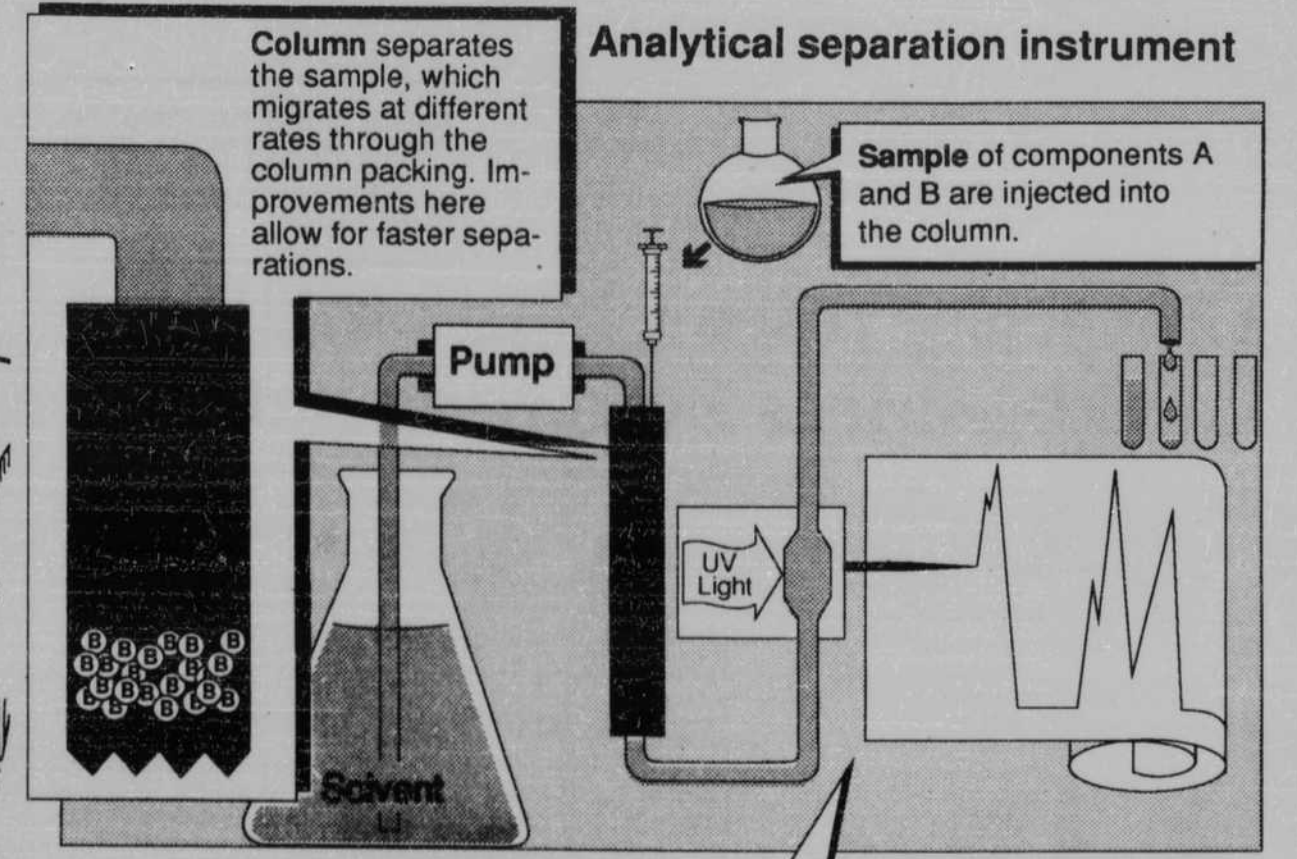
Today, the instrument division, at 4700 Superior St., and the environmental division, at 531 Westgate Blvd., have representatives in more than 30 countries and sales of \$12.5 million and \$18.5 million respectively, he said.

Allington said his career has not only been a wonderful experience, but also serves as a role model for other handicapped people who come into contact with him.

Describing how polio changed his life, Allington quoted Samuel Johnson, who said, "Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

"The concentration Johnson was talking about wasn't about brooding about being hung; he was talking about trying to figure a way to get out of it," he said.

— James P. Webb  
Staff Reporter



Detector radiates ultraviolet light through the separated sample. The amount of absorbance is measured on the running graph, appearing as peaks. This is used to help identify the components of the sample. More sensitive detectors allow for the slopes of the graph to be measured as well as the height of the peak. This improvement gives more accurate and more readable running graphs.

Brian Shellito/Daily Nebraskan



Photo by Kiley Timperley