

The Danforth Foundation

Edwin F. Taylor

"The Danforth Foundation was one of the largest private profit foundations in the [St. Louis Metropolitan](#) region. It closed its doors in 2011 after 84 years of operation and more than a billion dollars in grants distributed" (Wikipedia)

The Danforth Foundation came from an experience William H. Danforth had as a sickly boy. His teacher confronted him with, "I dare you to be the healthiest kid in the class." He took the dare and achieved his goal.

He told us years later that he wanted to become a teacher, but, "God gave me a tradin' mind," so he founded the Ralston Purina Company in St. Louis in 1894.

William H. Danforth put a pile of profits away into a foundation in the early years of the twentieth century to avoid taxes. In the late 1940s or early 1950s Congress said, "Nothing doing! You MUST have a foundation officer and dispense a specified percentage of your foundation money each year." William H. Danforth changed the goal of his foundation to support graduate study for aspiring college and university teachers "who consider teaching to be a Christian vocation." So narrow a goal would not be permitted now, but at the time it was perfect for me. As a high school student, I thought of becoming a minister and took a trip to the Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS) at their expense. My memory is that as I talked in a group, the CTS leader leaned to one side to identify me and then made a notation after my name on his list of attendees. Becoming a minister would have been a catastrophe: I loved Big Ideas, but had neither street smarts nor the first clue about people. (Much later the process of divorce from Helen Thompson Taylor helped me with both.)

In 1953, as an Oberlin College senior, I received a letter from the Danforth Foundation that began, "Welcome to the second class of the Danforth Fellows." I said to myself, "Why am I second class?" The letter meant the second year of the grant.

As Danforth Fellows, we did not have a fixed grant amount. Every spring we submitted a budget for the coming academic year, which Kenneth ("Kib") Brown, former president of Wooster (?) College and his Danforth staff approved.

Harvard awarded me its graduate school Whiting Fellowship in Physics, which convinced me to go to Harvard instead of to Yale or Cornell, all of which admitted me. At the time I knew nothing whatsoever about any of them.

After two years at Harvard, Helen Thompson married me and took the name Helen Thompson Taylor. When we returned to graduate student housing at Harvard, I included in my budget Helen's two-year study for a master's degree at Boston University; the Danforth Foundation simply added her expenses to my budget.

Helen and I graduated without debt. It never occurred to me that there was any other way.

The story goes on. We live it now.