A prominent part of C&EN’s business coverage over the years has been stories about corporate mergers and acquisitions, or M&A. They are some of the most exciting stories that we write. We wake up to the news that a chemical company we have long known will be acquired and absorbed into another, usually bigger, firm. Transaction amounts are eye popping, in the tens of billions of dollars for big deals nowadays. And executives try to dazzle investors with explanations of why the two businesses will be stronger in combination than they are as separate entities.

Familiar names like Ciba, GE Plastics, Rohm and Haas, and Union Carbide disappeared from the scene through single large deals. Other companies, such as Hoechst and Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), were whittled away through many transactions.

Other times, new companies are created when parts of large chemical makers are spun off or sold to investors. Chemours, Corteva Agriscience, and Trinseo, for example, are now prominent names in the chemical industry thanks to this process.

As part of C&EN’s centennial celebration, we are highlighting the transformative nature of M&A with the following timeline infographics. They chronicle the dealmaking histories of six chemical companies that, through mergers, acquisitions, sales, and spin-offs, did much to reshape the structure of the industry.

Four of them are the traditional companies DuPont, Solvay, BASF, and Dow. All four originated before C&EN was born. All of them have humble beginnings in a single product line: gunpowder for DuPont, soda ash for Solvay, dyes for BASF, and bromine for Dow. All found themselves diversifying in the 20th century, particularly after World War II. And all once had pharmaceutical businesses.

We also selected two relatively new firms: Sabic and Ineos. C&EN covered the birth of both companies. Sabic grew as a development project of the government of Saudi Arabia. Ineos’s beginning was entrepreneurial, and it grew almost entirely by acquiring businesses from more traditional chemical companies.

All six firms have been significantly remodeled over the years, but all are survivors in a consolidating industry. Of course, the timelines take us only to the present. We could wake up one day to find that one of these companies is the latest to be consumed in a merger.
In addition to being one of the foundational companies of the US chemical industry, DuPont’s reach has extended far beyond chemistry. DuPont was an early investor in General Motors and owned a stake in the carmaker well into the 1960s. The companies collaborated in areas such as Freon refrigerant through their Kinetic Chemicals joint venture. DuPont’s $7.4 billion takeover of the oil company Conoco in 1981 was the largest-ever transaction at the time. Recent years have seen DuPont shedding traditional businesses. Fibers went with its sale of Invista to Koch Industries in 2004. It spun off Chemours, a maker of titanium dioxide and refrigerants, in 2015. The merger and subsequent split with Dow Chemical took DuPont out of agricultural chemicals and seeds. Last year, DuPont sold Celanese its engineering polymer unit, which held the last vestige of its business in nylon 6,6.
The Solvay synthetic soda ash process, developed in the 1860s, made Solvay a major chemical company by the turn of the century. It was family owned until its initial public offering in 1967. And the firm was pivotal to the founding of Allied Chemical, which is part of present-day Honeywell, and once owned a large stake in the British firm ICI. Solvay grew with Europe’s recovery after World War II and got into polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and other polymers. In recent years it has been transforming into a specialty chemical maker. It divested PVC through transactions with Ineos. It purchased the French chemical giant Rhodia in 2011 and the US aerospace material specialist Cytec Industries in 2015. Solvay has retained the soda ash business all these years, though it has plans to split into two companies—one focused on commodities like soda ash and another on specialty chemicals.
When BASF became independent again in 1952 after 27 years as part of IG Farben, it was centered on a single production site, in Ludwigshafen, Germany. What is today the world’s largest chemical maker wasn’t even the largest chemical producer in Germany at the time. That was Bayer. Acquisitions helped BASF grow, diversify, and internationalize. The Dow Badische Chemical joint venture, formed in 1958, and the Wyandotte Chemicals acquisition in 1969 established a US infrastructure for BASF. For the past 25 years, the company has been honing its portfolio. It sold its pharmaceutical business to Abbott Laboratories in 2001. A series of transactions put its polyolefin and styrenic resin businesses in the hands of LyondellBasell Industries and Ineos, respectively. Major purchases during this period—including Engelhard in 2006 and Ciba in 2009—emphasized value-added chemistry rather than commodities.
Dow isn’t a serial dealmaker, but the transactions it has made have been transformative. Buying Union Carbide in 2001 strengthened Dow’s petrochemical and polyethylene operations. Rohm and Haas made it a huge player in specialty chemicals. And the merger with DuPont allowed Dow to divest its agricultural chemical unit to form Corteva Agriscience while gaining DuPont businesses that paired well with its own, such as DuPont’s packaging resin franchise. All the while, Dow cleaned up its portfolio with divestitures, such as the sale of its chlorine chemical business to Olin and its styrenic resin unit to a private equity firm to form what is now called Trinseo.
Sabic has an origin unlike that of any other major chemical company. In the 1970s, Saudi Arabia was a big oil exporter. But the country didn’t have a market for the ethane and methane that came out of the ground along with the oil. Saudi Basic Industries Corporation was established in 1976, in part to end the practice of flaring these gases by upgrading them into exportable chemicals. During its first decade, Sabic formed joint ventures with major foreign firms such as Exxon Chemical, Shell, and Mitsubishi Corporation to build massive petrochemical complexes in Saudi Arabia. In the aughts, the company grew internationally with the acquisition of European petrochemical businesses from DSM and Huntsman. The purchase of GE Plastics was a major leap internationally and added specialty materials to Sabic’s offerings.
Founded in 1998, the British company is one of the youngest of the world’s major chemical makers. Ineos’s rapid growth is primarily the result of acquisitions of older operations cast off by more established firms. But Ineos doesn’t purchase chemical plants willy-nilly; its transactions over the years fit logical patterns. For example, through a series of deals, the company has reassembled the old BP Chemicals. The biggest of those deals was its $9 billion purchase of BP’s petrochemical and polyolefin business Innovene. It was followed by purchases of BP’s aromatics business and a 50% stake in the petrochemical complex Shanghai Secco Petrochemical in China, originally a BP joint venture with Sinopec. Ineos has also been a consolidator in polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and styrenic resins. Major PVC acquisitions include EVC and Solvay’s PVC business. In styrenics, it has purchased assets from Lanxess and BASF.