

Robert Elzworth Wilkinson

July 27, 1916 — February 13, 2003

Robert Elzworth (Bob) Wilkinson began his association with Cornell University in 1940, when he entered the Graduate School to study plant pathology. He joined the faculty of the Department of Plant Pathology in 1948, and remained active in the departmental program until several years after his official retirement in 1987. His area of expertise was pathology of vegetable crops and management of vegetable crop diseases.

Bob was born in the farming community of Mt. Ayr, Iowa, where he grew up on the farm owned by his parents, Clara Long Wilkinson and George Roy Wilkinson. He attended a one-room elementary school and later Mt. Ayr High School, and then moved on to the University of Northern Iowa at Cedar Falls, where he received the B.S. degree in 1938. His involvement with plant pathology began in that year, when he entered Iowa State College at Ames and worked as a Research Fellow while studying corn smut disease. His M.S. degree in Plant Pathology was completed in 1940.

He enrolled in a doctoral program at Cornell in 1940 and there worked as a Research Assistant with F.M. Blodgett in the Department of Plant Pathology studying diseases of potatoes. His doctoral study, like that of many others in his academic generation, was interrupted in 1942 by military service. He served in the U.S. Army Air Corps as a communications officer with the rank of First Lieutenant, and while overseas was stationed in England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. On returning to Ithaca after military discharge in 1946, he resumed research on the X-virus of potatoes, which was one of the principal viral causes of yield depression. His Ph.D. degree was awarded in 1948; his dissertation title was “Studies on the X-virus of potatoes with special attention to a local lesion host.”

Bob remained at Cornell. In 1940, he was appointed Assistant Professor with responsibility for research on disease resistance in vegetables, an assignment that continued until his retirement. His emphasis was on onions, cucumbers and beans, the major effort being development of root disease resistance in beans. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1952, and was elected Professor Emeritus upon retirement. He collaborated extensively with plant breeders. A colleague in Africa reported that a disease-resistant bean from the Cornell program had been important in countering a food shortage in Africa. Bob was author or co-author of over 40 articles dealing with viral and fungal diseases of vegetables and development of disease resistant varieties. These appeared in both scientific and trade journals as well as conference proceedings.

Bob's sabbaticals were sponsored by USAID and FAO. In 1955-56, he spent 18 months in Israel helping to set up a research program on virus diseases. In 1963, he spent a year in Egypt, helping to develop a program on onion diseases, and he returned to Egypt at intervals over the next six years as an advisor. In 1971-72, he was Visiting Professor at Viçosa University, Brazil, where he advised on a research program on bean diseases.

In 1943, Bob married Antoinette Miele, a union that lasted 60 years. They remained in Ithaca after retirement. Bob died of complications from a fall. Antoinette (Toni) and their three children survived him. Antoinette has since passed away.

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