

Neal Frederick Jensen

October 4, 1915 — November 24, 2003

Neal Frederick Jensen, Professor of Plant Breeding, Emeritus, died on November 24, 2003 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Neal obtained his Ph.D. degree at Cornell in Plant Breeding in 1943. He returned to the department as a faculty member in 1946 and until his retirement in 1978, he was responsible for the breeding of small grain varieties, primarily wheat and oats. The products of his research were significant to northeast farmers and his ideas and skills in breeding small grains were recognized by his peers nationally and internationally and were evident in the graduate students who obtained their degrees under his guidance.

Neal was born in Hazen, North Dakota on October 4, 1915, one of eight children. His family lived on a ranch in the Red Butte area where he attended grade school. He went to high school in Hazen. Following his graduation from North Dakota Agricultural College in 1939 with a B.S. degree in Agronomy, he came to Cornell for his graduate studies with Dr. H.H. Love. He was awarded his Ph.D. degree in 1943, after he had entered the U.S. Navy as an Ensign in October 1942. After serving three and one half years on active duty, mostly in the Pacific, he continued in the Reserves and retired in 1963 with the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Neal rejoined the Department of Plant Breeding in 1946 as an Assistant Professor. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1948 and to Professor in 1951. He retired and was granted Emeritus status in 1978.

In his 33 years of tenure on the faculty, Neal distinguished himself by the 22 varieties of wheat, oats, and barley he developed, the 20 graduate students who obtained their degrees with him, and the extensive writing he did on specifics of cereal breeding and the broad areas of plant breeding methodology. For his contributions, in 1978 he was selected for one of the first Liberty Hyde Bailey professorships in the college. In addition, he was the first recipient of the DeKalb Crop Science Distinguished Career Awards awarded by the Crop Science Society of America.

Neal Jensen was an original thinker who was widely known among scientists for his innovative breeding methods. Probably his best-known contribution was the concept of intravarietal diversification, which led to multiline varieties. Multiline varieties were found to be effective in reducing losses due to foliar pathogens, buffering against environmental extremes and increasing grain yield. Other significant contributions include various breeding methods and techniques, extension education, and graduate teaching.

New York farmers and consumers also benefited from Neal's research. His breeding programs produced a steady flow of superior cereal grain varieties for farmers in New York and surrounding regions. New York farmers liked Neal's varieties. For nearly two decades, they planted them on over 95% of their wheat and barley acreage and 70% of their oat acreage. Such wide acceptance of a breeders' developments is rare. His wheat variety, Yorkstar, was the leading variety in New York, Michigan and Eastern Canada for nearly a decade. Neal's varieties were noted for high yields and strong disease resistance. They returned millions of dollars to New York farmers and to the state's agricultural economy.

In addition to his dedication to small grains breeding, Neal had a lifelong interest in baseball, which was common with several other members of the department at that time. He also applied his plant breeding skills to the creation of new peony varieties. He developed a strong interest in Civil War history, spending much time searching for artifacts in farm fields adjacent to important Civil War battlefields. After his retirement, Neal and his wife, Mary, moved to Arizona where he took on many new interests including painting and searching for gold. His penchant for writing led him to write a textbook of plant breeding methods and a memoir of his experiences during World War II. In 1984, the Jensens moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico.

At the close of the war in 1946, Neal married Mary Willard Webb of Nashville, Tennessee. They had four children: Barbara, Lawrence, Margaret, and Thomas. Mary taught fourth grade at Belle Sherman School for many years. She died just five months before Neal.

Ronnie Coffman, Mark Sorrells, Robert Plaisted