

Axel Ferdinand Gustafson

November 24, 1880 — March 10, 1949

Axel Ferdinand Gustafson, Emeritus Professor of Soil Technology, passed away March 10, 1949 as a result of an automobile accident. The tragic event shocked the community beyond measure and brought to his bereaved family sympathy and condolences from far and near. Professor Gustafson had been enjoying the best of health and was pursuing objectives that not only would have further enhanced his professional reputation but also would have redounded greatly to the benefit of agricultural science. He was a man of many interests and his niche in life will be hard to fill.

Professor Gustafson was born near the village of Aledo, Mercer County, Illinois on November 24, 1880. Here he received his early education and here he imbibed the sympathetic understanding of rural folks that later distinguished his extension teaching and the more formal duties of college instruction. In 1907 he was graduated from the University of Illinois with a Bachelor of Science degree and until 1918 was a member of the staff of the College of Agriculture of that institution, attaining the rank of assistant professor. It was during these years that his knowledge of farm life and its technical problems was broadened and humanized and his interest in teaching and research stimulated and matured. He was one of the first to sense the dangers of soil erosion and he immediately prescribed methods by means of which such waste could economically be checked. In this respect he was a pioneer and he lived to see the complete vindication of his prophetic vision.

In 1912 he was granted a Master of Science degree by the University of Illinois after which he zealously applied himself to the investigation of methods of soil fertility maintenance. The results of this experimentation and research may be found in the publications of the Illinois State College of Agriculture and elsewhere. In 1918 Professor Gustafson, feeling the need of further professional study, entered the Graduate School of Cornell University as a candidate for Ph.D. The work for this was done in soil science, geology, and chemistry, and the degree was granted in 1920.

So favorable was the impression made by Axel Gustafson during his graduate studies at Cornell that he was retained in the Department of Agronomy as an assistant professor in Extension. And so outstanding was his subsequent work, that he was promoted, after two years, to a full professorship. As an extension specialist, Dr. Gustafson worked in every county in the State and it was during these busy years that he made his greatest contribution to the betterment of New York agriculture. In 1931 Professor Gustafson began his resident teaching and his soil and field

crop surveys. It was during this latter interval, a span of 17 years, that he did much of the writing, both of bulletins and books, which has contributed so much to his reputation. In respect to Cornell bulletins, Professor Gustafson is author of 17 and senior or co-author of 12 others. This is an enviable record. His Extension Bulletin, "Liming New York Soils," has been in print since 1924 and has gone through six revisions. Dr. Gustafson's Experiment Station bulletins include his "Soil and Crop Management" series which covers practically all of the important agricultural areas of New York. This set of publications has been of inestimable value in many ways and is a testimonial of his energy and of his field ability.

As to books, Professor Gustafson was author and co-author of seven. The first was "Soil Physics", published in 1917 in association with Professor J. G. Mosier of the University of Illinois. It was written while Dr. Gustafson was assistant professor of soil physics at that institution and indicates clearly his ability to organize and present technical ideas in such a manner as to stress properly their practical applications. Of the six other books that followed, the last entitled "Using and Managing Soils" appeared in 1948.

Throughout his professional career, Professor Gustafson was especially interested and active in soil conservation. As already stated, he was one of the first soil scientists in the United States to study soil erosion losses and to suggest methods of regulation. In 1935 he was chief erosion specialist and chief agronomist with the United States Soil Conservation Service in New York. Later he served as Chairman of the Empire State Chapter of the Soil Conservation Society of America. These activities and his books on conservation are ample evidence of his leadership in this field.

Professor Gustafson was a charter member of the American Society of Agronomy, the Soil Science of America and the Soil Conservation Society of America. He also was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Forestry Association. Two honorary Societies, Sigma Xi and Alpha Zeta, have placed his name on their rolls. Genial in disposition, cooperative in spirit, and conscientious in the face of duty, Axel Ferdinand Gustafson exerted a wholesome and helpful influence wherever he went. His sincerity and earnestness of purpose inspired confidence and his kindly interest in people won him a host of friends. To lose such a man while in vigorous health and still capable of contributing much to society is indeed a tragedy.

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