

Jeffery Earl Dawson

July 18, 1920 — February 2, 1969

Jeffery Dawson died suddenly on a Sunday morning, ending a struggle with diabetes and its complications that began in boyhood.

He was born in Newberry, Florida, and educated in the public schools of the state and the University of Florida. After receiving the B.S.A. degree in 1942, he came to Cornell as a graduate student. He was awarded the Ph.D. degree in 1945 and in the following year joined the Department of Agronomy staff as assistant professor of soil technology. He became associate professor in 1949 and professor in 1955. His first sabbatic leave was spent as a Guggenheim Fellow at the Biochemical Institute of Uppsala, Sweden, in 1952-53, and the second in the laboratories of the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1961. For several years he served as a special consultant on organic soils to the United States Soil Conservation Service.

Through his work on the chemistry of organic soils he became a recognized authority on those soils and on soil organic matter. He was gifted with a bold, imaginative, and analytical mind, however, and there were few topics within the scope of his competence that he did not consider and speculate upon. At one time or another he worked on the chemistry of boron in soils and boron deficiency in plants, continuing this interest from his Ph.D. dissertation. He investigated the transformation of nitrogen and its equilibrium levels in soils, the effect of soil factors on the fungal diseases of banana, and the nature of organo-copper complexes in soils, in addition to problems of crop plant behavior in organic soils. In recent years his knowledge of organic structure in soil and command of analytical techniques led him to a cooperative series of fundamental studies of how pesticides decompose in soil or are metabolized in plants. He saw his profession as science applied to the world's need for food; in a quiet way he rejoiced in the mission as well as the science, and in his own part in these.

He approached even the most applied problem in terms of simplest theoretical considerations first, then through sifting existing data for consequences others had overlooked, and, finally, to analysis or experiment. On one occasion he was persuaded to examine the drying process in hay because farmers were being sold a useless chemical for this purpose; quite characteristically, his seminar report on the study began with the Second Law of Thermodynamics and proceeded to the energy requirements of drying and the unexpectedly large contribution of mold respiration.

Colleagues and graduate students came to him for advice on equipment and techniques, and even more frequently for the insights which discussion with him so often generated. His firm grasp of chemistry and soil science was

coupled with a fondness for concept above detail, and a shrewd appreciation of research strategies. No matter how unfamiliar, a problem that a colleague found interesting must be worthy of attention, and he was willing to give the full resources of his mind to its exploration.

He studied his disease dispassionately with the interest and objectivity he gave to analysis of any scientific problem; few physicians could have known as much about its biochemistry. He was conscious of the numbering of his days in a way that few men are, though of this he rarely spoke. Nevertheless, the feeling intensified a dedication to his own research and his generosity of outlook. An unintended acknowledgement of this came once in a comment on an unproductive and dissatisfied acquaintance; the man, he said, has never lived with Death looking over his shoulder.

Until increasing ill health began to limit participation, he was active in the affairs of his department and profession. He served in numerous departmental committees, as Field Representative to the Graduate School for several years, and as an effective member of the Cornell coordinating committee on computer use during the formative years that led to the present Computing Center. Among other societies, he was a member of the American Chemical Society, Soil Science Society of America, International Society of Soil Science, and a Fellow of the American Society of Agronomy and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He was elected a Fellow of the American Institute of Chemists, although notice of this honor arrived too late for his attention before his death. He was twice chairman of the Division of Organic Soils in the Soil Science Society of America, chairman of the Soils Section at the Copper Symposium at Johns Hopkins University in 1950, and served on committees for the monographs and advances published by the American Society of Agronomy.

He carried into his personal life the same zest in understanding and a delight in good conversation, mingling ideas and observation, logical argument and humanity. Few topics were beyond his wide ranging interest and no company dull in his presence. In this his wife, Elizabeth Ritchey Dawson, was an able companion, and many colleagues and graduate students recall with pleasure an evening at the Dawson home.

He is survived by his wife; a son, Leonard J. Dawson; a daughter, Loretta Dawson; and also by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lonnie S. Dawson; a grand-mother, Mrs. E. C. Sapp; and a sister, Mrs. Mildred Bryant, all of Florida; and by nieces and nephews.

W. T. Federer, M. D. Glock, E. L. Stone