

Raymond R. Birch

March 30, 1881 — July 26, 1959

In the death of Professor Emeritus Raymond R. Birch on July 26, 1959, Cornell lost a distinguished educator of nearly forty years' service, and the veterinary profession a wise counselor and leader. Dr. Birch retired in 1949 as Professor of Veterinary Research and head of the Veterinary Experiment Station. A life-long lover of the soil and animals, he spent the ten years of his retirement managing his farm in a near-by community. No land received better care or responded more bountifully; it was a case of mutual love and understanding.

Basically conservative, Professor Birch never reported a research project or propounded a basic principle of disease or disease control unless it was based on sound scientific evidence. He brooked no deviation from truth. Expediency was never permitted to compromise fact. Because he was a lover of lucid, understandable English, readers of his numerous publications were never at loss to understand his meaning. His research reports were clear, concise, and capable of exact duplication. His wise and friendly counsel was often sought and at all times freely given.

Dr. Birch was born on a farm, March 30, 1881, at Zeandale, Kansas. He was continuously associated with farming and animal production. In 1906 Kansas State College granted him the degree of B.S. Agr.; he had majored in animal husbandry. Immediately after graduation he went to the Philippines where, for two years, he did outstanding work in the control of foot-and-mouth disease and rinderpest. Realizing his lack of education and training in animal diseases he resigned the position and entered the New York State Veterinary College. Dean Moore in 1910 appointed him, while he was still a student, instructor of pathology and head of the Experiment Station, then little more than an abandoned farm. In 1911 he married Olive McKeeman and lived at the Station until his retirement. Cornell University granted him the degree of D.V.M. in 1912 and Ph.D. in 1916.

Hog cholera studies engaged most of his time from 1909 to 1921. Together with Dr. Milks he initiated hog cholera serum and virus production in New York. He conclusively proved that hog cholera is transmitted by uncooked pork trimmings, and that standard meat inspection methods failed to prevent spread of the disease by this means. The tenets laid down in his book on hog cholera are as sound today as the day they were written.

After the retirement of Dr. W. L. Williams in 1921, Dr. Birch changed his major research from diseases of hogs to brucellosis of cattle. Brucellosis had been for many years a widespread disease resulting in great economic loss to cattle owners. Against great opposition, he proved that brucellosis was a true infectious disease and that it could be controlled by the application of the basic principles his research revealed. Not content with an experimental herd,

he carried his methods to the farm and put them into practical application. At one time he supervised fifty-two herds containing over five thousand cattle scattered throughout the state. Use of these so-called “demonstration” herds illustrated his principle of leadership by example and education. Dr. Birch was often criticized for his conservatism in the acceptance of vaccination against the disease. Early attempts by others had resulted in failure. He demanded that the method be economically and biologically sound before its widespread use in the field. When his research and that of others proved the method to be sound he was one of the first to advocate its use. He formulated the early official regulations for state control of the disease. As a result, New York and many other states are now virtually free of the disease.

For almost thirty years he saw almost continuous duty on disease control committees. His teaching of the subject of animal health to agriculture students was widely praised and appreciated by animal owners and veterinarians alike. He was the author of numerous publications on hog cholera and reproductive diseases of cattle. Many graduate students serving under him later assumed positions of responsibility in teaching, research, and official disease control agencies.

Dr. Birch was the first member of the Faculty of the New York State Veterinary College to receive the Borden Award for distinguished work in the control of disease in dairy cattle. In 1926 he was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship for study in Europe. He was a member of the Procurement and Assignment Service, Second Call Area, U. S. Army, from 1942 to the end of World War II, accomplishing his task with distinction. Soon after the war, he served as a member of a commission to survey veterinary colleges and services in Europe.

Dr. Birch was past master of Hobasco Lodge 716, Free and Accepted Masons, and past president of the Ithaca Rotary Club.

H. L. Gilman, D. W. Baker, M. G. Fincher