

Loren Clifford Petry

September 22, 1887 — May 4, 1970

The death of Loren Clifford Petry, professor of botany, emeritus, ended the career of an outstanding student and teacher of botany. Not only was Dr. Petry renowned as a teacher of introductory botany to thousands of students at Cornell but his dedication and vitality became equally famed during his retirement years on Cape Cod.

Petry was born of Quaker parentage in New Paris, Ohio. His first interest was engineering and his B.S. degree from Earlham College in 1907 was taken in that field. A year later he earned a second B.S. at Haverford College. During the following two years he taught science in the high school at Urbana, Ohio. On the advice of another noted teacher of botany, Millard Markle of Earlham, he decided to further his interest in plants by pursuing graduate studies in botany at the University of Chicago. There he earned the M.S. degree in 1911 and the Ph.D. in 1913.

Petry's first post was an instructorship at Syracuse in 1914. He was raised to assistant professor in 1916 and associate professor in 1919. From 1922 to 1924 he was on leave from Syracuse as acting assistant professor of botany at Cornell. During the years 1919-25 he served as director of Summer Session at Syracuse. Finally, in 1925, he was appointed professor of botany at Cornell where he remained until his retirement in 1955. His administrative talent was recognized again when he was appointed director of Summer Session at Cornell in 1934, a post which he held until 1944. During this period he reorganized and coordinated what had been four separate units. From 1943 through 1944 he served as director of the Army Specialized Training Program and in 1944 he became director of Veterans Education, resigning this post in 1948. At the outset about a dozen veterans were attending Cornell under G.I. benefits. When he left the post the number had risen to about five thousand. For the years 1953 and 1954 he served as secretary of the Faculty Senate, State University of New York.

Throughout his career at Cornell, Loren Petry served on significant University and college committees and participated actively in faculty affairs.

Particularly valuable was his effectiveness in the teaching of introductory botany. An inveterate traveler and observer of all aspects of the environment, he felt that facts should be used as tools in the solution of problems rather than as things to be memorized and stored away. As a result, his lectures emphasized ways of learning and using rather than memorizing. His students were encouraged to think. Two tangible results of this attitude were a laboratory manual for introductory botany written in collaboration with E. M. Palmquist and *Keys to Spring*

Plants, written in collaboration with W. C. Muenscher. Approximately twelve thousand students were exposed to his botanical wisdom during the thirty-year span of his teaching at Cornell.

Optional Saturday afternoon field trips were a hallmark of Perry's teaching. Many a prospective major student was encouraged to undertake a botanical career by these excursions. It was not simply plants that were observed on these trips. Geology, physical geography and any other item of possible interest was fair game for his and the student's powers of deduction. Perry's success with undergraduates is reflected in a study by the National Research Council which showed that Cornell led the nation between 1936 and 1950 in the production of undergraduate botany majors who subsequently went on to the Ph.D. degree at this or some other institution.

Equally important were the breadth and understanding of botany imparted by Loren Petry to the more than one hundred graduate students who assisted in the freshman botany course. Many of them went on to highly successful careers as faculty members at other institutions partly because of this exposure.

The honor most prized by Dr. Petry was the Professor of Merit Award voted him by the senior class of the College of Agriculture in 1952.

Petry's research interest centered around the first plants to occupy dry land (Devonian Period). His early collecting expeditions to the Gaspé Peninsula resulted in a splendid collection of Devonian plants at Cornell that has been increased by his students until it is now one of the best in the world. His enthusiasm led others to this area of study and the plants of this period have now become a critical item in studies of plant evolution. Petry's enthusiasm for paleobotany also led him and Ralph Chaney of Berkeley to found in the late thirties a paleobotanics section of the Botanical Society of America. Petry served as the second chairman of this group (1938).

Loren Petry served botany also through participation in its national organization, the Botanical Society of America. In 1933 he was elected to be its secretary for a three-year term. In 1937 he was elected vice president of the Society. From 1936 to 1939 he was a member of the Society's Committee on Education where he was instrumental in the production of two publications, *An Exploratory Study of the Teaching of Botany in the Colleges and Universities of the United States* and *Achievements Tests in Relation to Teaching Objectives in General College Botany*. Both of these reflected some of his own philosophy in teaching.

In addition to his activity in the Botanical Society of America, he was a member of the American Association for Advancement of Science, Sigma Xi, Phi Beta Kappa (president, Cornell Chapter, 1954), Phi Kappa Phi (president, Cornell Chapter, 1950), American Association of University Professors, Gamma Alpha, Research Club of Cornell

University (president, 1953), Statler Club of Cornell University (an organizing member and later president, 1951), Hoh-Nun-De-Kah (student honor society, Cornell), Quill and Dagger (student honor society, Cornell).

One of Petry's outside interests demonstrates well the breadth of his vision and enthusiasm. In the early twenties he became interested in motorless flying and in 1927-28 he saw the first glider school in America in operation at Corn Hill, Cape Cod. From 1930 onwards he attended glider meets in Elmira, New York, and from 1938 to 1940 he helped with the operation of the Ithaca Glider Club. On several occasions he served as an official at national glider meets in Elmira. Both Petry children were caught up in this activity as daughter Ruth became an expert glider pilot and son Loren V. is now a pilot for TWA on overseas runs.

The extent of Dr. Perry's dedication to observation, to interpretation, and to teaching can be measured by his activity in the fifteen-year period following his retirement in 1955.

He taught for various periods at the University of Missouri, Hofstra College, the University of Utah, and Wellesley College. He was also a member of a national panel of lecturers sponsored by the American Institute of Biological Sciences. In 1960 he moved permanently to Cape Cod and continued to lecture locally and abroad, including one series at the University of Reading, in England.

On Cape Cod he became associated with the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History, Brewster, Massachusetts, for which he led trips for young and old to view geological phenomena, salt marsh plants, and wildlife in general. He cut and marked nature trails. He lectured on a range of topics from edible mushrooms to salt marsh plants to the glaciation of New England. He devised exhibits and experiments to attract and to explain.

He was also active in the establishment of the Cape Cod National Seashore through the Yarmouth Conservation Commission. Here, sponsored by the National Park Service, he lectured on "Vegetation of Cape Cod—an Historical Account" and "Salt Marshes of Cape Cod."

Many of Loren Petry's thoughts were brought together in his essays, *A Beachcomber's Botany*, illustrated by Marcia Norman and published by the Chatham Conservation Foundation, Inc. He was also working, with Mrs. Petry, on another series of essays to be entitled *Places of Scientific Interest in New England and the Maritimes*. For many years Mrs. Petry's keen interest in mineralogy had led them to many an overlooked spot in search of new specimens. Never did they fail, on such trips, to note all the interesting features of the area. Much of this lore would have appeared in the proposed book.

Many of his former colleagues will understand quickly the joy he took in the Cracker Barrel Club at Yarmouth, Massachusetts, where a segment of his general philosophy and wit was summarized by a single remark. He arrived at a meeting to find the places all occupied. Immediately he observed, “Mr. President, I always stand when I speak ... and vice versa.”

It was no surprise that in 1966 his alma mater, Earlham College, rewarded him with an honorary D.Sc. nor that he was immensely pleased to be presented for that degree by the late Millard Markle, who had originally influenced him to go on to graduate work at Chicago.

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