

Burt Green Wilder

Professor of Neurology and Vertebrate Zoology

1841 — January 21, 1925

By the death on January 21, 1925, of Dr. Burt Green Wilder, Cornell University loses almost the last member of her original faculty. The pupil of Oliver Wendell Holmes, of Jeffries Wyman, of Asa Gray, of Louis Agassiz, and attached to these great teachers by an almost religious affection, he brought to our chair of zoology notable traditions. Since 1866 he had been Agassiz's assistant and it was Agassiz who, backed by Asa Gray, named him for the new institution, in whose fortunes both were deeply interested. Appointed among the very first of its professors in September of 1867, more than a year before our doors were opened to students, Dr. Wilder was of great help in the gathering of our equipment; and for more than forty years, till his retirement from teaching in 1910 and his return in 1911 to the Massachusetts home of his boyhood, he served this university with a singular fidelity,

Born at Boston in 1841, he was a precocious lover of nature and his studies were from the first chiefly devoted to natural science; but at his issue from Harvard in 1862 the country's call took him into the hospitals of the civil war and to the front as a surgeon, and on his return in 1865 a further year was given to the completion of his medical studies. Then, however, he turned to the career of the scholar. At Cornell he showed himself from the start a teacher of rare powers. He was a master of exposition. The charm of his diction and the lucid grace of his style made him captivating alike by voice and pen. His lecture room was always crowded and his articles found welcome in our best magazines. But he was, before all, the patient and conscientious leader of research. Working quietly but tirelessly in the midst of his students, and ever ready to interrupt his investigation to listen to a question or to share with those about him some fascinating discovery, his laboratory was a fruitful nursery of budding scholarship. Nor was his interest in his students confined to class room and laboratory. Many bear in lifelong memory the kindly word or thoughtful act that showed his sympathy in their personal haps and mishaps,

As did few others Dr. Wilder shared the unconventional ideals of the young university, and to the end he was their champion. For his personal convictions, too, he was always ready to do battle, and it never dismayed him if his cause was unpopular. For the simplified spelling of English, for a better nomenclature in anatomy, for temperance rather than abstinence in the use of alcoholics, against tobacco, against secret societies, against intercollegiate athletics, he stood with uncompromising frankness, regardless of opposition and of ridicule. Discrimination because of race or sex found always in him a zealous foe. This ruggedness of personality has given him large place in student legend as well as in the memory of his colleagues. In the faculty he was often a minority of one; but

he held his ground, and the music of his diction, coupled with his unwavering courtesy, made him always gladly heard.

From the poverty of Cornell's early years none perhaps suffered more than Dr. Wilder and his work; but he bore its burdens and deprivations with exemplary patience, and through it all, despite the weight of his duties, he was a prolific contributor to the literature of science. His published papers number many scores. But he welcomed with joy the growing prosperity which enabled him to turn over division after division of his biological teaching to new and soon independent departments and permitted his larger attention to those neurological studies which were ever the center of his interest. If even in this best loved field he leaves behind him no work of long breath, it is due not less to his sacrifice of self to his teaching and to the public spirit which spurred him to a share in righting every wrong than to his unbounded conscientiousness and his all too scrupulous concern for the details of method. Both as teacher and as investigator he leaves a name not soon to be forgotten.

Source: Fac. Rec., pps. 497, 1410 Adopted By The Trustees And Faculty Of Cornell University June, Nineteen Hundred And Twenty-Five