

David Clinton Gillespie

Professor of Mathematics

— *October 31, 1935*

In the sudden death of David Clinton Gillespie on October 31, 1935, Cornell University lost an able scholar and teacher, and his colleagues lost a beloved friend. He had served the University for twenty-nine years, first as Instructor and later as Assistant Professor and Professor.

The significance of Professor Gillespie's influence as a scholar and teacher can be fully appreciated only as one understands his concept of the subject to which he devoted his interest and intellectual activity. To him, mathematics was a mode of thinking; and for each individual mathematics must consist of only such truths as were inevitable consequences of his own rational thought; there could be no acceptance of authority. For him the vast accumulation of mathematical knowledge became knowledge only when his mind had followed through the reasoning and found the conclusion to be inescapable. He was essentially a critical scholar in the best sense. He was not only unable to give assent to fallacious reasoning on the part of others, but he had the rarer type of intellectual honesty that made it impossible for him to delude himself.

His colleagues in his department profited by his keen, but always kindly, criticism. If he could not follow their reasoning they found it wise to examine it more critically for themselves, and thus he helped to set a high standard for clear, straight thinking. It was probably inherent in his concept of mathematics that his own published contributions should be few and fundamentally important rather than numerous or lengthy, and that they should have to do with the strengthening of the foundations of the subject rather than the development of new systems and theories. For the service which he rendered on the editorial staff of the *American Mathematical Monthly* and later on that of the *Annals of Mathematics* he was particularly well qualified.

Naturally the teaching of such a man could never be perfunctory or formal. His students found, often to their surprise, that he was not asking them to learn rules from a textbook, but was trying to encourage them to do their own thinking. Utterly sincere himself, he expected sincerity in others. The disingenuous student found his patience short and his classroom uncomfortable, but the sincere and earnest student learned in time that his patience was really inexhaustible.

David Gillespie's personal character was outstanding. To those of his colleagues who came to know him well outside of the formal relationship of the campus, he revealed a side of his character which endeared him to them by

the closer ties of friendship. True, faithful and dependable, he was incapable of any meanness or jealousy. He was not only quick in his sympathies with all that concerned his friends, but he had a rare sense of humor combined with the innate charm and courtesy of the true Virginian. Hospitable himself, he was always a welcome guest in the home of a friend. On the golf course he was the ideal companion in a foursome. To Cornell undergraduate activities he gave loyal and enthusiastic support, and was always ready to help and advise in the affairs of the local chapter of his fraternity. Towards his students he was, naturally, reserved. He did not go out of his way to win undergraduate popularity, but students recognized his friendliness and came often to consult him. At reunion time, and, indeed throughout the year, the Gillespie home was the goal of the visit of many an alumnus to Ithaca. To them he epitomized the best traditions of Cornell.

David Gillespie will be long remembered by a host of friends for his quiet effective life. In his passing the University, the community, and his personal friends have suffered a great loss.

Source: Faculty Records, p. 1905 Resolutions of the Trustees and Faculty of Cornell University, December, Nineteen Hundred And Thirty-Five