Paul J. VanDemark

June 17, 1923 — June 27, 1988

Professor Paul J. VanDemark retired from Cornell University on March 1, 1988 and was appointed professor emeritus. As the result of a rather sudden, totally unexpected illness, he passed away on June 27, 1988. In a sense, he had reached the apex of his professional career, which started at Cornell in 1950. In 1986, as senior co-author, he had published a textbook for beginning students of microbiology entitled, *The Microbes: An Introduction to Their Nature and Importance*, and was preparing as co-author the fourth edition of a widely recognized laboratory manual entitled, *Microbes in Action*.

His contributions as a teacher of microbiology to undergraduate students were publicly acknowledged in March of 1987 when the American Society for Microbiology, the largest, single discipline, scientific society in the world with approximately 35,000 members, selected him to receive the Carski Foundation Distinguished Teaching Award. The purpose of the Carski Award is to provide recognition of a mature individual for his or her distinguished teaching of microbiology to undergraduate students and for encouraging such students to further achievement. It can be given to no more than one person per year. The award committee stated that, in their opinion, Paul VanDemark represented “the epitome of a Carski Award winner.”

In June of 1987, New York State also honored Paul VanDemark for his many years of teaching by presenting him with the New York State Chancellors Award for Excellence in Teaching.

While a member of the faculty at Cornell, Paul VanDemark developed a nationally recognized research program concerning the physiology and metabolism of the bacterial genus known as *Streptococcus*. A number of graduate students received the Ph.D. under his supervision and most went on to have successful careers of their own as microbiologists.

Paul received a B.S. degree from Cornell in 1947, an M.S. degree in 1948 and a Ph.D. in 1950. He began his thesis research under the direction of Professor Wayne Umbreit (who later left Cornell) and finished his research under the supervision of Professor James Sherman. After receiving the Ph.D., he was appointed to the faculty as an assistant professor of bacteriology in the Department of Dairy Industry and taught the introductory microbiology lecture course (290) and was in charge of its laboratory component (291).
He was promoted to associate professor in 1954 and professor in 1958. As a result of organizational changes in the college, he became, sequentially, a member of the Department of Food Science, the Section of Microbiology of the Division of Biological Sciences, and the Department of Microbiology, this last formed in 1977.

In recent years, after increasing enrollment required the introductory course to be taught every semester, Paul took responsibility for the course during the spring semesters when enrollment was the highest. He taught this course for thirty-eight years. The enrollment steadily rose during this period of time, reaching 362 students in the spring semester of 1985. He also taught the summer session of the course (without extra compensation) for many years, and always had other teaching responsibilities in more advanced microbiology courses, involving both lectures and laboratories.

Paul always put extra effort into his teaching. As enrollment in the introductory course grew larger he developed the concept of the “prefecture”. This consisted of a three-to-four minute commentary on some current topic of microbiology before every lecture period to hold the students’ attention while late arrivals found seating. He voluntarily divided the lecture of the spring session into two sections (offering it at 9:05 a.m. and 11:15 a.m.). In doing this, he doubled the number of lectures he offered, but was also able to maintain enrollment for each section under two hundred for the benefit of the students. He also initiated introductory microbiology autotutorial group sessions (292)—one-hour, one-credit, weekly meetings where students from the large lecture sessions met in small classes to explore, in depth, specialized areas of microbiology. These discussion sections used guest lecturers, field trips, films, and other teaching aids to explore the relevance of microbiology as a science.

Microbiology has grown rapidly, thus increasing the enormous amount of basic material. To present this in a reasonable fashion, Paul abandoned the “old-fashioned” method of writing extensively on the blackboard while talking. Instead, he prepared copies of condensed lecture material in outline form (updated yearly) containing page references in the textbook for expanded coverage. A copy was available to each student at the start of each lecture.

Another major feature of Paul’s presentation was the use of slides and projection equipment. He felt that good slides—labeled photographs, diagrams, etc.—made a powerful impression on the observer and permitted an increased pace of presentation. He collected and prepared hundreds of slides, many from authors of recent publications, carefully selecting those useful in a given lecture. By using a microphone and projection equipment he reached his large classes effectively.
When Paul left Stocking Hall late in the afternoon, his professional day was not over. A special room in his home was filled with reference books, journals and projection material. Although he thoroughly enjoyed social gatherings, he was reluctant to attend one on an evening prior to a lecture.

Paul functioned as an advisor to undergraduate students since 1954, working with and advising well over 500 students. Since 1974 he served as the program coordinator for all of the undergraduate majors in microbiology at Cornell. He also arranged and supervised a clinical microbiology program where undergraduate students majoring in microbiology spent their senior year in the Microbiology Department of the Cornell Medical College in New York City, obtaining practical experience in clinical microbiology.

In collaboration with the Career Center Education Committee of Cornell, Paul interviewed premedical students. His recorded impressions were used to supplement the students’ applications to medical schools.

Paul participated in many activities of the American Society for Microbiology, serving on national committees, faithfully supporting the local Central New York Branch, and serving as its president. He also played roles in the complex university community, at times as representative of the Graduate Field of Microbiology, as a member of the Faculty Council of Representatives and as a member of university, college and departmental committees too numerous to mention.

Paul’s scientific process was recognized by a Fulbright Award in 1985. He was a veteran of World War II, serving in the European Theater. By nature, he was a highly competitive individual. He was keenly interested in professional and college sports, specifically baseball, football, hockey and lacrosse. He was a communicant of St. James the Apostle Church in Trumansburg and was past president of the church council.

Paul was devoted to his family and found moments of relaxed enjoyment at his cottage on Seneca Lake. Fishing was a favorite pastime. He enjoyed various chores — masonry, carpentry and plumbing — and took pride in the maintenance and improvement of his properties.

Of his immediate family, Paul is survived by his wife Eileen, five sons and eight grandchildren.