

Francis Marion R. Isenberg

May 13, 1910 — March 18, 1997

Francis Marion R. Isenberg, better known as “Ike”, died at age 86 after several years of poor health in Pennsylvania at the Masonic Home in Elizabethtown, where he and his family had moved seven years before. He was born in Pennsylvania when Halley’s Comet was observed in 1910, and always felt that he came in with the comet and might go out with it like Mark Twain, and was therefore very worried about its reappearance during May 1986.

Dr. Isenberg was Professor of Vegetable Crops at Cornell for 23 years specializing in postharvest physiology, and was involved in extension, research, and teaching in the area of handling and storage of vegetables. He will always be remembered for his innovative part, in cooperation with other Cornell workers, in extending the process of Controlled Atmosphere Storage (CA), which had already been successful in prolonging the storage period with apples, to the cabbage industry in New York State. The nation’s first cabbage CA storage was built on a commercial farm in New York State and has been very successful. He was also instrumental in developing the commercial use of maleic hydrazide (MH), a chemical sprout inhibitor, to extend the storage life of onions. When applied in the field just before maturity, MH prevents sprouting and increases the storage longevity of onions placed in storage. He introduced the paper carton packing box for lettuce and the method of vacuum cooling harvested lettuce. As well as such practical research, he was well known for his basic research particularly in early plant hormone research, and was one of the first to try an early version of the now sophisticated high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). As an active member of the international postharvest community of the International Society for Horticultural Science, he organized the Third International Symposium on Vegetable Storage that was held at Cornell, and was well known and respected by the International Postharvest Working Group.

Ike had a very active and fertile mind, and after retirement in 1975 he continued to work with growers as a consultant on problems of cabbage storage. The New York State Vegetable Growers Association honored him in recognition of his outstanding service to the vegetable industry, and the Oswego Vegetable Association also cited him for his many contributions. He later carved out a special niche for himself as a special consultant in legal disputes, planning experiments to solve problems between growers and shippers when produce arrived in an unacceptable condition.

Ike grew up in Altoona, Pennsylvania, and was full of stories of that town when he was a boy. He attended Penn State Nautical School and served as the Junior Captain for one year, graduating in the class of 1932. He was in the

Merchant Marine from 1932-34. During the Depression, only three of thirty ships “fitted out,” so he therefore went into business selling office equipment. Because of his nautical training and experience, in World War II, he served the United States as a Navy Reserve Officer, volunteering for active duty in 1941. He served four and a half years in the navy, mainly as captain of a minesweeper in the Pacific, around Australia, and in the Indian Ocean, and as commanding officer of a small fleet of mine sweepers in the South West Pacific and Indian Oceans. He served the United States Navy, the British Navy, and the Australian Navy. At the end of the war he returned to school on the GI Bill, going back to Penn State University for Graduate School. Originally intending to become a diesel engineer, he was sidetracked by a charming Professor of Horticulture (his words), and obtained a Master’s degree in Soil Chemistry followed by a Ph.D. degree in Horticulture with Biochemistry and Physiology as minors in 1953.

He was an active member of the Ithaca Rotary Club and also served terms as president and treasurer, and he attended Rotary meetings in Stratford, England, when he was on sabbatical at the Vegetable Research Station at Wellesbourne. He was also a Mason, and a long time member and officer of the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca.

He is survived by his wife of nearly 58 years, Arlee; and by his daughter, Nancy.

James R. Hicks, William C. Kelly, Henry M. Munger, Pamela M. Ludford