

Ernest Van Alstine

April 15, 1882 — September 12, 1977

Professor Ernest Van Alstine retired and was appointed professor of soil technology emeritus on June 30, 1950, after nineteen years of service to Cornell and the farmers of New York State. As extension professor of agronomy from 1931 to 1932 and professor of soil technology from 1932 to 1950, he served as extension specialist for the entire area of agronomic subject matter but concentrated on soil fertility and liming. He shared responsibility for outlying agronomic field experiments during his first ten years at Cornell. He introduced field methods for determining lime needs of soils, which were used by county agents on fifteen thousand samples a year by the time he retired. He saw the use of lime on New York farms triple to 300,000 tons a year during his tenure. He also supervised the extension phases of a program of rapid soil testing for fertility diagnosis during its formative years, in the 1940s. Immediately after World War II he concentrated on the potential of the newly developed selective chemical herbicides for weed control on New York farms. He was extension project leader for agronomy from 1947 until his retirement.

Professor Van Alstine was reared on a farm near Grand Ledge, Michigan. He graduated from Lansing High School in Michigan and was awarded the Bachelor of Science degree by Michigan Agricultural College (now Michigan State University) in 1907. He was especially interested in chemistry and on graduation served for eleven years as chemist in the soil laboratory of the Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station. Methods of determining lime and fertilizer needs of soils became a major interest during this period.

Professor Van Alstine was awarded the Master of Science degree by the University of Illinois in 1917 and completed the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Rutgers University in 1920. During the following year he worked on commercial production and evaluation of new fertilizer materials in Baltimore.

In 1921 Professor Van Alstine began a career in agricultural extension, which he followed until his retirement in 1950. During the first ten years, 1921 to 1931, he served successively as assistant professor, associate professor, and professor of agronomy at the University of Vermont, with resident teaching responsibilities in addition to his extension activities. It was there that he acquired the dry sense of humor characteristic of rural Vermont people, which served him well in his work with New York farmers from 1931 onward. His good nature, practical outlook, and ready wit, combined with his genuine concern for people's welfare, made Professor Van Alstine highly effective with farmers.

After retiring from Cornell in 1950, Professor Van Alstine operated a custom chemical weed control service for farmers of the Ithaca area until 1957. He and Mrs. Van Alstine, the former Adah M. Stowell of Lowell, Michigan, have lived in Clearwater, Florida, since that date. He held life membership in the American Association for the Advancement of Science and maintained his interests in science during retirement. Space science, especially, intrigued him during his later years. He maintained his interest in the natural sciences through reading and culture of the fruit and ornamental plants at his Florida home.

Professor Van Alstine is survived by his wife, Adah; a daughter, Mary Lou Andersen of Boulder, Colorado; a sister, Mrs. Etta Holton of Mulliken, Michigan; and nieces and nephews.

Harry A. MacDonald, Gerald W. Olson, Marlin G. Cline