

GARY HOWARD REMEMBERED

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by Joe Ogradnick

GENEVA, NY: Gary Howard died on Friday, March 24, at his home in North Rose, NY, after an extended illness. He graduated from Cornell University in 1951 with a B.S. in agriculture and a focus in pomology, was a veteran of the Korean War and worked in many areas of agriculture before coming to the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY, in 1968 as an experimentalist. It was at the Station, according to Robert Pool, Cornell University professor of viticulture, that "he found his real home." Howard retired from the Station in 1992 as a research support specialist. He was born on April 4, 1929, and grew up on an apple farm on the Niagara frontier where his family had lived for many generations.

"Gary loved nature, the outdoors, and hands-on work," Pool went on to say. "He loved to teach and he loved to preach. He was a great mentor to the graduate students in the grape research program. He was an institution at the grape grower meetings where his enthusiasm and raconteurial skills allowed him to educate while entertaining. His ability to communicate with humor made him the most demanded toastmaster in the grape industry and at the Experiment Station."



Suggested caption: Gary Howard in the field, pruning grapevines.

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According to Pool, "Gary loved understanding his vines and learning ways to help our

growers produce better grapes and wine." Of the many things Pool appreciated about Howard, Howard's dedication and honesty were the most important. "He taught me much about grape growing, and he taught me about friendship. He was an inspiration to many, but was indispensable to the success of Cornell's effort to improve New York wine quality," said Pool.

Steven Lerch, a research support specialist in the Experiment Station's viticulture program, knew Howard for 23 years, and remembers him as the quintessential giver of advice. "Howard reveled in starting discussions on controversial subjects, and insisted that the participants stayed on topic," said Lerch. "He was a master at drawing out peoples' opinions, and somehow was always able to prevent these discussions from becoming polarized and devolving into arguments. He had such an open, disarming style that you just couldn't stay upset with him for long, even when you violently disagreed with his position."

Senior research associate Martin Goffinet paid tribute to Howard at the March 29 memorial service for Howard, which was held at the Farnsworth-Keysor Funeral Home in North Rose. Goffinet provided some perspectives on Howard's activities-his work for a quarter century as a viticulture specialist, and his lifetime passion for hunting and fishing.

Howard came to the Station in 1968 to work with esteemed Cornell viticulturist Nelson Shaulis as an experimentalist, replacing Herman Amberg, who left to work at his own business. At the time, Howard had served as the contractor for PepsiCo's subsidiary, Empire State Sugar Co., and was well versed in sugar beet production and processing.

Howard was new to grapes at that time, but, by all accounts, learned well and quickly. He was soon trained in all aspects of viticultural research: pruning and training, weed control, rootstock evaluation, evaluation of vinifera grape varieties, and maintaining research trials across the state, from Long Island to Fredonia. About the time Shaulis retired in 1978, Howard was promoted from experimentalist to research support specialist and soon moved into Robert Pool's viticulture program, at which time his duties were expanded to include giving presentations to a host of audiences.

Howard spoke at grape meetings for two reasons: One, he had a firm grasp of the topics, and two, he had the world's best delivery and presentation style. For years following his retirement in 1992, surveys taken after extension meetings inevitably contained the plea, 'Put Gary Howard on the program!'

Howard's job application stated his hobbies as golf, hunting, fishing, camping and conservation. He was very active in Ducks Unlimited, serving as a committeeman, and donating much time, talent and cash to that organization. He was also interested in grouse and pheasant habitat improvement

Waterfowl hunting was Howard's particular passion-a pursuit he no doubt learned very early, growing up on the edge of the Niagara River. His father, a fruit farmer in Youngstown, NY, was an avid bird hunter and did some writing for outdoor magazines. Perhaps this combination helped mold Howard's art for telling the good story. Certainly Howard perfected the mix of fact, technical expertise, and the right amount of "blarney." The results were

usually manifested as anecdotes, tall tales, and Howard's inimitable "points of view," often delivered to a slack-jawed audience.

Many enjoyed listening to Howard's sporting escapades, but Goffinet enjoyed being *in them* more.

"Fishing expeditions generally began after dawn, but duck hunting often meant leaving his house at 4 a.m., driving an hour, and then launching a boat in the pitch black in some windswept marsh or bay," recounted Goffinet. "After the decoys are spread, the boat camouflaged, the dog attended to, the coffee gets poured. The wait is on, anticipation is high, and I am not disappointed, for Gary is about to begin our morning's conversation in earnest.

"And what do we talk about? Why, you, of course, and a whole host of people, places, things too numerous to mention. You peopled Gary's world and he recorded these interactions with you in the most outlandish yet affectionate stories imaginable. I was always impressed that Gary did not spare himself in those stories and he often put a humorous twist on his own ineptitude and misfortunes. I thank him for those insights into you, into himself, and into me. He was actually quite a good psychologist; you might say a one-man Employee Assistance Program. He certainly helped me decipher what is and is not important at work and in my personal life, and he did it with humor and a good heart."

Goffinet went on to say, "We have all been cast as players in Gary's stories and our 'comedy of errors' performed to critical acclaim. He was a Charles Schultz to us Peanuts characters. Our stories and memories of Gary are as intertwined as his stories intertwine us. Our stories now go on, and Gary's memory goes with them."

Goffinet closed his eulogy at the service with this one picture. "Gary is approaching St. Peter in his camouflage coat, Jones hat, and Bean's khaki pants. St. Peter says, 'Gary E. Howard, come forward and tell me a little bit about yourself.' Gary's face pans toward us and a broad knowing grin appears on his face. St. Pete is about to get an earful!"

Howard is survived by his wife, Nancy Smith of North Rose; two children, Susan, who lives in Long Island, and Mitchell in Rochester; one sister, Judy (Ben) Moss of Medina; nieces and nephews-and his buddy and hunting companion, Max, his dog.

Notes to Editor: This obituary was written by Joe Ogradnick, with help from Martin Goffinet, Robert Pool, and Steven Lerch.

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