Rollins Adams Emerson

May 5, 1873 — December 8, 1947

Rollins Adams Emerson, who for twenty-eight years was Professor and Head of the Department of Plant Breeding at Cornell University, died in Memorial Hospital, Ithaca, New York, December 8th, 1947. He was born at Pillar Point, Jefferson County, New York, May 5th, 1873. At the age of five years, he removed with his family to Kearney County, Nebraska where his early years were spent on a farm. Amid considerable hardship and only by determined effort, he acquired the grade and high school education necessary for entrance to the University of Nebraska. He was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Science by that institution in 1897. The two years following his graduation he spent in the Office of Experiment Stations of the United States Department of Agriculture and in 1899 returned to his Alma Mater where he served as Assistant Professor, Professor and Head of the Department of Horticulture until 1914. He gave a year, 1911-12, to advanced study at Harvard University where the degree of Doctor of Science was conferred upon him in 1913. On July 1st, 1914 he became Head of the Department of Plant Breeding in the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University which position he held until his retirement from active administrative duties, October 1st, 1942. As Emeritus Professor, he continued his work of research in corn genetics and his practical breeding work on celery and field beans.

Professor Emerson's compelling scientific interest was in Genetics and he was among the first to recognize the corn plant as material particularly suitable for genetic analysis. His clear grasp of the numerous and perplexing problems presented and his skill in devising methods in attempting their solution were such that he became the acknowledged leader in this exacting field of research. Through his work and that of his students, he gained world-wide reputation and more is now known about the genetics of corn than of any other plant. To his initiative, inventiveness and persistent efforts are largely due the establishment of the ten linkage groups and for the location of a large number of genes in the linkage maps of the corn chromosones. His brilliant analysis of gene interaction in relation to plant color, of multiple alleles affecting pericarp color patterns and his approach to a genic interpretation of quantitative inheritance in relation to ear row number and other characters of economic importance are classic examples of the best type of genetic research. Though the major part of his effort was directed toward theoretical genetics, he was also very much interested in the application of genetic principles to practical plant breeding.

His achievements as a scientist and his forcefully attractive personality brought to him students from all parts of the world. Gifted with sound judgment in evaluating the work of others, his constructive imagination was

constantly suggesting new and fascinating lines of investigation. As a teacher he had the unique gift of imparting to others his own contagious enthusiasm and zeal for research. Students went out from his laboratory to positions of leadership and responsibility in numerous high ranking institutions in this country and abroad. Their noteworthy achievements and continuing devoted loyalty stand as an enduring monument to him, a truly great teacher.

Professor Emerson's efforts were not wholly confined to scientific research, practical improvement of crop plants and to teaching. He also served with distinction in other positions of high responsibility at Cornell University. For six years (1925 to 1931) he was Dean of the Graduate School and for three years (1925 to 1928) he acted as Faculty Representative on the University Board of Trustees. In 1923-24 he visited the principal maize-producing areas in South America and brought back a large collection of maize seeds for further genetical study. This trip was sponsored jointly by the United States Department of Agriculture and Cornell University. In 1935 he went to Yucatan at the request of the division of archeology of the Carnegie Foundation to collect information on the probable kinds of food crops grown and consumed by the ancient Mayan peoples. His administration as Dean of the Graduate School was characterized by a devotion similar to that he gave to his Professorship. Though attentive to the detailed work of that office, he had also a wide perspective which embraced the relationship of Graduate studies to the whole university. As chairman of the General Committee his openness of mind and willingness to consider all shades of opinion gained for him the respect of all members of that body. In all his University assignments he showed leadership which eventuated in quiet steady progress.

Professor Emerson was the author of many papers on the technical phases of Maize Genetics. Other and earlier publications dealt with matters pertaining to general horticulture. His wide interest and outstanding ability as an investigator in the fields of Plant Science won for him the distinctive honors of election to both the American Philosophical Society and the National Academy of Sciences. For many years he was a member of the National Research Council. In 1923 he was President of the American Society of Naturalists and in 1933 President of the Genetic Society of America. He was a charter member of the American Society of Horticultural Science and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Other affiliations were the American Association of University Professors, American Society of Agronomy and American Genetic Association. He was also a member of Gamma Alpha, Phi Kappa Phi, Sigma Xi and Phi Beta Kappa.

But no statement regarding Professor Emerson's achievements would be complete without mention of the fine personal qualities which endeared him to his friends and were known and appreciated by all who were privileged to have contacts with him. It was his wont to give unstintingly of time and helpful interest to all who sought his

advice or other assistance. Just prior to his retirement he suffered a heavy loss in the death of his wife who had long been in frail health and upon whom he lavished the most tender care. He leaves to mourn his loss two sons, two daughters and thirteen grandchildren. To him they were a source of pride and great comfort. With full assurance they can always look upon his life as that of a distinguished seeker after truth, a superb teacher and best of all a truly Christian Gentleman.

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