

Fred Bishop Morris

October 25, 1896 — July 2, 1989

Fred B. Morris, Emeritus Professor of Extension, died in Ithaca, July 2, 1989, at the age of 92. He had served the Cornell Faculty and Ithaca community for sixty years and was known for his expertise in organizational techniques, leadership development, and effective program building. He pursued these areas of expertise with vigor and enthusiasm in both his professional duties and as a participant in the community groups with which he was affiliated.

In 1928 Professor Morris joined the College of Agriculture Faculty at Cornell as an assistant state leader of agricultural agents. In 1943 he became the state leader and in 1958 he retired as an emeritus professor of extension. After retirement he worked part-time hosting foreign visitors to Cornell, and became actively involved as a volunteer in community organizations. He served in key volunteer roles until shortly before his death. He was truly “active to the end”.

Fred Morris was a native of Shelbyville, Indiana. His father and grandfather were merchants. As a high school student he worked in his Uncle Orville’s drugstore. It was here he first became acquainted with farm families, liked them, and decided he would make a career of working with farm people. After graduation from Shelbyville High School he enrolled at Purdue University to study agriculture.

World War I interrupted his studies at Purdue. He served in the Quartermaster Corps in Virginia training pack mules for service. Upon release from the Army he decided to locate in New York State where farm land prices were lower than in Indiana and he was fascinated by the beauty of the countryside.

At Cornell, Professor Walter Tailby hired and trained Morris to be a “milk tester” for the Dairy Herd Improvement Association. He was assigned to Erie County. The milk testers at that time stayed with the farm families where they were testing. Through this experience Fred learned much about farming and family life. After a year and a half he decided to move to Ithaca where he was hired by Dr. G.F. Warren to work on his dairy farm.

In 1920 Fred Morris enrolled in the College of Agriculture at Cornell and in 1922 received a B.S. degree with a major in general agriculture. By working his way through college he had little time for outside activities but did manage to be a member of the dairy cattle judging team and to participate in the Eastman Stage Public Speaking Contest.

Following graduation from Cornell, Morris was employed as a 4-H Club agent in Erie County, a position he held for two years. In 1924 he moved to Oswego County where he became an agricultural agent and served until 1928 when he was invited to become a member of the Cornell faculty.

Agricultural extension was in the early stages of development when Fred Morris started. The work was of an experimental nature. It was a time for creative ideas and courageous leadership. These traits Fred Morris had and used well over the thirty-six years he served the New York State Extension Service. Also during these years there were emergencies to cope with including the great depression, World War II, labor shortages, and the introduction of numerous improved practices. These called for flexibility and changes in extension procedures which the state leader team was helpful in providing.

The concept of an informal educational program that used research to help farmers solve problems and improve their quality of life was relatively new when Professor Morris embarked upon his career in extension. There were many questions about how to organize and conduct this new kind of educational work. Fred Morris was challenged by these questions, was willing to experiment, and soon developed an expertise in these matters. He became a firm believer in the importance of strong leadership and the development of programs by the local people. This led to his lifelong emphasis on leadership development and grassroots program planning as key factors for success. In 1936 while attending the Graduate School in the United States Department of Agriculture, he wrote a bulletin on program planning which was used by agricultural extension agents throughout the United States.

Other points which Fred Morris strongly promoted were the importance of mental stimulation and growth, maintaining a sense of humor, and being flexible. He stressed these in his work with colleagues, agents, farmers, and rural leaders. Continuing education through regular study and in-service training, he believed, were essential in the building of effective programs. In his own career he practiced these points by reading widely, enjoying good humor, and by spending two of his sabbatical leaves studying at the USDA Graduate School and at the University of Chicago.

New knowledge from research and the development of better teaching methods gives rise to the need for changes in extension programs. Professor Morris as an extension administrator was unusually skillful in bringing about needed changes in the agricultural extension programs. Over time, the agents were encouraged to shift from generalists to specialists and to be ever alert for new and better ways of bringing about improvements. Agents were urged to improve themselves as teachers and leaders. To promote this concept, in 1955 Fred Morris provided

a starter gift for establishing a county agricultural agents professional improvement fund which is administered by Cornell University.

Dean W. I. Myers, at the time of Professor Morris' retirement, pointed out the important part that his enthusiastic leadership had played in broadening the scope of the college's extension programs, in the development of effective farm leaders, in the introduction of new and improved farm production and marketing methods, and in bringing about better living conditions for the farm people in New York State.

Professor Morris' professional concerns extended beyond New York State. In 1948 he went to Greece to assist in establishing extension work in that war torn country. From 1959 to 1964 he worked part-time for the University hosting foreign visitors to Cornell. He also was instrumental in developing an orientation program for new international students in the College of Agriculture. The Morris family served as hosts and entertained many foreign students in their home and from these experiences they developed friendships which continued long after the students had returned to their home countries.

The things Fred Morris stressed in his professional work he practiced in his personal life. He was a strong proponent of group action as a way to solve personal and community problems. His interests were broad as was reflected in the range of organizations in which he was an active participant. Among these were: Epsilon Sigma Phi (honorary extension fraternity), County Agricultural Agents Association, Acacia Fraternity, Cornell Westminster Foundation, Rural Church Institute, Tompkins County Horticultural Society, Cayuga Student Lodge, Cornell Federal Credit Union, Ithaca Consumers Society, Tompkins County Senior Citizens Council, Rotary International, Town and Gown Investment Club, Ithacare Board of Directors, and First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca. In all of these he was more than just a passive member, he usually was in a leadership role. In his later years he often assumed the role of a "Constructive Critic" for the organization submitting written comments on their programs.

Family life and home ranked high in Fred's value system. His wife of more than sixty years, Lillian Rafferty Morris, was a teammate and loyal supporter of his work. Whiffle Tree Farm, their home for many years, was not only a place of beauty and charm but also was a place of warmth and hospitality to the many who visited there.

Fred Morris' wife, Lillian, preceded him in death in April 1987. He is survived by two daughters, Mary M. Kelsy and Margaret M. Fletcher, both Cornellians; a son-in-law, George Fletcher; seven grandchildren; seven great grandchildren; and a host of friends. Fred Morris will long be remembered for his meticulous and humorous manner, and as a caring person, dedicated to helping people, and making the world a better place in which to live.