

Orval C French

January 3, 1908 — March 30, 1999

Orval C French was born in Geneseo, Kansas, raised on his father's farm, and attended a one-room school. Orval enrolled in Electrical Engineering at Kansas State University, took leave in 1927 to help on his father's farm, returned to Kansas State University in 1928, switched to Agricultural Engineering and received a B.S. degree in 1930 and an M.S. degree in 1931. Orval then joined the faculty of the Agricultural Engineering Department at the University of California, Davis. In 1932, he married his college sweetheart, Helen Pembleton, from Ness City, Kansas

At Davis, his career was directed toward teaching and research. He quickly became an authority on methods and equipment for weed and pest control, including aerial chemical application. He prepared many widely read publications on pest control, spray equipment and chemical application.

From 1942-45, Orval was "borrowed" as a research engineer on the Manhattan Project at the University of California's Radiation Laboratory in Berkeley. While at the University of California, he was promoted to Assistant Professor in 1943 and to Associate Professor in 1947.

Shortly after that, he was invited to Cornell University to interview for the position of Professor and head of the Agricultural Engineering Department, which he accepted beginning in the fall of 1947. Orval came into a department that was teaching and extension oriented and housed in several buildings. He oversaw the design and construction of the finest Agricultural Engineering building in the country, Riley Robb Hall. Under his tutelage, the already growing department moved into these fine new quarters in February 1956, here he began to develop a strong research program while expanding and strengthening the teaching and extension areas. Building a good research faculty made it possible to develop a graduate faculty and a strong graduate program, which now draws students from all parts of the world.

He made many personal visits to farmers and agribusiness people all over New York State to learn firsthand their needs and problems. He quickly earned the respect of industry for his good judgment, sound advice, frank suggestions, progressive ideas and willingness to work on any project that helped the farmers.

Under Orval's leadership, Agricultural Engineering at Cornell blossomed. He convinced many in the university, the state, and the nation of the importance of agricultural engineering. He attracted funds and assistance for

research activities. Under his guidance, a five-year professional undergraduate degree program was initiated in 1953 and accredited in 1958.

Early phases of research efforts under Professor French included a strong pest control program in cooperation with the Entomology Department. Excellent programs were developed in mechanizing fruit and vegetable production, in agricultural waste management, and in bioengineering. Much of that pioneer research has been translated into commercially available machines and methods.

A great deal of Orval's success at Cornell came from his ability to develop each staff member to his or her full potential. His warm, friendly manner made him easy to meet. He enjoyed talking to students, staff members, farmers, businessmen and women, and government officials. Orval was a sincere, dependable, honest, forthright person with high moral standards. He would gladly counsel with anyone on problems of any sort at any time. He was the kind of man people would choose for a referee, whether for a ball game or a word battle. All knew of his fairness.

From February 1958 to February 1959, Professor French was a Visiting Professor in the Cornell-UP Contract Program at the University of Philippines, College of Agriculture at Los Banos.

Since joining the American Society of Agricultural Engineering in 1932, Orval has been Chairman of the former College Division; Chairman of the North Atlantic Region; and was ASAE national President in 1966-67. During his presidency, a new organizational structure was adopted, the Food Engineering Division was organized, and ASAE became a full member of the Engineering Committee for Professional Development. He served on many committees, programs and special assignments. French was elected an ASAE Fellow in 1964. He received numerous other recognitions and awards, including an Extension Service award in 1970 for meritorious service to 4-H and to the 4-H Tractor Program in New York State. Perhaps the most prestigious award was The Cyrus Hall McCormick Gold Medal for "Exceptional and Meritorious Engineering Achievement in Agriculture" in 1975, the highest honor in ASAE.

In addition, Orval ably represented ASAE in the American Society for Engineering Education and the Engineering Joint Council. He served on several ECPD accreditation teams. He was a longtime member and Fellow in the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Orval served as Elder and held many other church offices in the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca. Here too, he was most anxious that others receive credit, even if the work was entirely his own. In the quarter century that

Orval attended his church, the pastor claims he never once heard a derogatory remark about Orval. He classified Orval as “a leader who developed the finest of leaders.”

When the first fire department was organized at the University of California, Davis about 1938, Orval was Assistant Chief and later served as Chief until 1942. In 1955, when a fire department was organized in his community of Cayuga Heights, Orval was the only member qualified to serve as Chief, which he did for the first year. He continued as an active volunteer fireman until after his retirement from Cornell University.

Following retirement, Orval and Helen moved to Florida, where he continued contact with colleagues and former students. Orval will long be remembered by his many friends and colleagues.

His wife of 66 years, Helen; daughter, Nina L. French Glover; son, Byron; five grandsons; and two great grandsons survive him.

Everett D. Markwardt, William F. Millier, E. Stanley Shepardson