

Leland Spencer

April 25, 1896 — June 12, 1990

Dr. Leland Spencer, professor emeritus of agricultural economics, died June 12, 1990, at the age of 94. He was a dominant figure in the area of milk marketing throughout his career and was instrumental in making this area a recognized specialization for agricultural economists. He was a pioneer in the study of market institutions and the role of government in market regulation for perishable products.

Although there were earlier studies that related to milk markets, during the 1920s he was one of the first to conduct comprehensive, formal research in the field of dairy marketing and the first to develop and teach a course in this specialization. At the time, there was very little statistical material pertaining to the dairy industry. Dr. Spencer's careful and painstaking work was to be a model for later research and gained him the respect of industry leaders. His personal characteristics contributed to that respect. He was meticulous in dress, speech, and personal habits; careful and kindly, but strong in convictions and moral principles. He opened many doors in the dairy industry that helped others, particularly his graduate students, to obtain needed statistical data to carry on research work.

Leland Spencer was born April 25, 1896 on a dairy farm in northern Pennsylvania, the beginning of his lifelong association with milk marketing and the dairy industry. For most of his youth he lived in Elmira, New York, near Ithaca. His long and distinguished research, teaching and public service career began with his graduation from the College of Agriculture, Cornell University, in 1918. He entered military service in February 1918 and served in France and the Meuse-Argonne offensive and in the allied occupation of Germany. Following his discharge in 1919, he taught a course in farm management for two semesters at the Massachusetts Agricultural College. He returned to Cornell for his Ph.D. program in 1920 under the supervision of Dr. George Warren and Dr. William Myers. His dissertation, "The Use of Store Credit by Farmers," completed in 1923, was the first study of this growing practice. Subsequently he was offered a position in the Economics Department at the University of Illinois-Urbana. In recommending Dr. Spencer for the appointment, Dr. James Boyle spoke of him as "the strongest of the younger men now available for accepting a position outside of this department."

Dr. Spencer chose to stay at Cornell. After a year serving concurrently on the research staff of the College of Agriculture at Cornell and as an agent of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he accepted an appointment as an assistant professor of marketing in 1924. He was promoted to professor in 1926 and taught the first milk marketing course in 1928. Despite increasing research and extension responsibilities during the 1930s, Dr. Spencer

supervised the work of a number of graduate students in the department. He took a personal as well as a professional interest in his graduate students. He expected the same painstaking care in their work that characterized his own research. He followed the careers of his graduate students throughout his lifetime, and carried on voluminous correspondence with them as well as with other research workers in the field, and with dairy industry leaders.

Dr. Spencer attended the First International Conference of Agricultural Economists held in Devon, England, in 1929. Already the recognized leader in this area, he presented a paper at that conference entitled, "Method and Results of Research in Dairy Marketing in the United States." The contacts made at that conference and those that followed increased his interest in dairy marketing research and industry problems throughout the Western world. He maintained contact with international colleagues through correspondence and exchange of research results. As a result, he attracted graduate students from many foreign countries, and he continued his contacts with them after they returned to their homes. His own research took on more international dimensions around the time of World War II, and continued thereafter. In 1949, Dr. Spencer served as a U.S. delegate to the World Dairy Congress in Stockholm, Sweden. He was active in international dairy marketing activities during the 1950s, with studies of cooperative dairy marketing in Sweden in 1950 and rationalization of milk marketing and marketing boards in Great Britain in 1953.

Dr. Spencer's work in milk marketing was highly regarded by public policymakers. It became the basis for New York legislation and affected the evolution of U.S. policies. When a joint legislative committee was formed in New York in 1932 to investigate the rapidly-worsening conditions in the dairy industry and to recommend corrective legislative action, Dr. Spencer was appointed its research director. Dairy farmer testimony at the many public hearings held by the so-called Pitcher Committee convinced legislators of the seriousness of the situation and led to the passage of the first state milk price control law in the United States. Dr. Spencer wrote most of the final report of the committee and helped in the drafting of the legislation which, among other things, provided for the government administration of milk prices on a classified pricing basis by the state. The legislation, a drastic departure from existing pricing practices, was conceived as a temporary emergency measure, but the regulation of milk prices by the state and U.S. governments evolved to become an ongoing and dominant feature of milk markets.

Dr. Spencer's interest in public intervention in the pricing of milk continued throughout his career. After the breakdown of state regulation of milk prices in the New York City market, Dr. Spencer assisted in several attempts

to develop a federal milk order, and in the eventual promulgation of a federal-state order in 1938. He presented testimony as a public witness at many New York milk order amendment hearings, and served as a member of several committees that dealt with pricing problems in New York and other markets.

The 1932 New York Milk Control Law also sought to strengthen dairy cooperatives as a countervailing force to the economic power of milk dealers in the milk pricing process, which was the original objective of the Pitcher Committee. Dr. Spencer continued his interest in the role of dairy cooperatives in pricing milk long after his work with the Committee was completed. From 1934 to 1939 he served part-time as a marketing specialist for the U.S. Farm Credit Administration during which time he conducted a study of the surplus milk problem in northeastern milksheds. During the decade of the 1930s, a majority of Dr. Spencer's research dealt with cost analysis at the farm, processor, and retail level.

Dr. Spencer's research interests in the 1940s focused principally on pricing policies and supply and demand analysis. He was particularly interested in effects of the war on milk marketing, including U.S. war-time rationing, the establishment of price ceilings, and the increasing demand for milk and dairy products coupled with a dwindling milk supply. His research activities in the 1950s were not limited to international studies. He began a project that extended through the remainder of his professional career that involved recording the history of distribution and pricing of milk. In the 1960s, he served as a member of the Federal Milk Order Study Committee appointed by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman, and as a member of a New York State Committee on Milk Marketing appointed by Governor Rockefeller.

Dr. Spencer was a lifelong member of the American Farm Economics Association and one of its national officers in 1935. He was also elected to Phi Kappa Phi and Sigma Xi.

Dr. Spencer retired in 1964 after more than 40 years of devoted service to Cornell and the dairy industry. His professional activities, however, did not end with his retirement. Working regularly through 1967, he completed eleven departmental publications after his retirement, and, with the assistance of Dr. Charles Blanford, a former graduate student and a former market administrator of the New York milk order, published five books. Six of the department publications and all of the books were histories of milk marketing in the New York market.

Dr. Spencer is survived by his wife, Ruth; two sons, Gordon and John; two grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. He was an active Rotarian throughout his life in Ithaca and a participant in community affairs. His long-time colleagues in agricultural economics remember him with fondness and great respect as an

unequivocating gentleman, a distinguished scholar, and a true public servant who left an enduring mark on the field he did much to fashion, and sought to serve with compassion and unswerving principle.

Bernard Stanton, Robert Story, Andrew Novakovic