

George Clarence Kent

July 28, 1910 — September 19, 2008

George Kent joined Cornell's Department of Plant Pathology in 1945 as a full Professor. At that time, he was already known as a leading teacher in his field, and was co-author with I.E. Melhus of *Elements of Plant Pathology*, which was arguably the major American textbook then available for that subject. He was specifically recruited to teach the basic courses in plant pathology, because the department intended to maintain the instructional excellence for which it was widely known. Five years later, George became Head of the department, and he served in that role until 1970. For three years in the early 1960s, he served concurrently as Head of Cornell's Department of Botany. He was also the first Coordinator of Planning and Development in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences from 1970 until his retirement in 1975 as Professor Emeritus. After retirement, he served the College's dean by working on special projects.

George undertook a number of outside assignments. From late 1952 to early 1954, he was Visiting Professor of Plant Pathology at the University of the Philippines College of Agriculture in Los Baños. He returned to Los Baños several times for short periods of work at the International Rice Research Institute. He also served as a consultant to the U.S. Department of Agriculture at Beltsville, Maryland, as well as the Department of the Army at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

Although born in New Hampshire, George grew up in college communities in Kansas and New Mexico. Academic orientation came early to him because of his father's career in academia and presidency of New Mexico A&M (now New Mexico State University). George studied there for three years, then earned his B.A. degree at Oxford University in England as a Rhodes Scholar in 1933. He obtained his Ph.D. degree at Iowa State College in Ames, Iowa in 1936 and joined the faculty there in 1937, teaching plant pathology and conducting research on diseases of corn and of orchard, nursery, and forage crops until he was called to Cornell.

George was an independent thinker with a strong work ethic and an unwavering sense of fairness. He strongly encouraged faculty interaction, turning bi-weekly faculty meetings into discussions of departmental programs and policies based on shared decision-making. At those meetings, he required a verbal report from each faculty member usually once a year on teaching, extension and research successes and failures, followed by a question and answer session with those in the audience. Graduate students were invited to listen to those parts of the faculty meetings. He wore the leadership mantle comfortably, remaining always in charge but never overbearing. Under

his guidance, research emphasis in the department changed from the treatment of plant diseases to the search for causes and prevention, while teaching and extension activities were highly respected and supported fully. Graduate and undergraduate instruction and training in international agriculture were added to the departmental program under Kent, providing new opportunities for both domestic and international students.

Kent's teaching was memorable for his framework of concepts and linkage of concepts to facts and for his ability to reveal the pedagogy underlying his classroom work. Excellent as the instructor of a class, he also delighted in informal interactions with students, during which his displays of logic and insistence on critical questions created models that students later tried to emulate. Those who knew of his 1939 textbook were surprised that, during his Cornell years, Kent eschewed teaching "by the book." He and his faculty did, however, produce and duplicate a series of reviews of important plant diseases, which served as instructional references. Many who were taught by George Kent went on to significant teaching careers of their own.

George was a Fellow of the American Phytopathological Society and a member of the Botanical Society of America, the American Association of Rhodes Scholars, Phi Kappa Phi, Sigma Xi, and the Society for Advancement of Science (Philippines). He also served on the Board of Directors of the Alumni Association of New Mexico State University.

George "Shorty" Kent was a devoted family man. In 1938, he married Ruth Olson. They began married life in Ames, Iowa, where their three children were born. When Ruth, the love and joy of his life, became ill in later life, he took care of her. During her residence in nursing facilities, he visited her daily until her death in 1997. George is survived by a daughter, Ann (Allan) Witztum of Beer Sheva, Israel; two sons, Captain George A. (Mary Louise Hoffman) Kent, U.S.N. (Retired) of Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Captain Thomas R. (Carol Anne Ford) Kent, U.S.N. (Retired) of Norfolk, Virginia; one granddaughter, six grandsons, eleven great-grandchildren, and his sister.

We, colleagues who have known him and been influenced by him, treasure our memories of this kind, thoughtful, ever-encouraging leader, a philosopher and a realist who faced the world with wonder and humor, and whose work and personnel choices enhanced the position of Cornell's Department of Plant Pathology as one of the most respected in the nation.

Richard P. Korf, Chairperson; James W. Lorbeer, Wayne A. Sinclair