



## **Stephen B. Hitchner**

February 4, 1916 – January 1, 2011

Stephen Ballinger Hitchner was born in Daretown, New Jersey, where he grew up on a small farm. After high school, Steve helped his father on the farm for three years until 1966, when he enrolled at Rutgers University as a dairy husbandry major. While at Rutgers, he earned part of his keep by looking after a university poultry flock, and he took part-time employment in the laboratory of Dr. F. R. Beaudette, an authority on avian diseases. These were both significant, steering him toward his lifelong career in research on infectious diseases of birds, primarily poultry. Dr. Beaudette encouraged him to enroll in the Veterinary School at the University of Pennsylvania where he earned the VMD degree in 1943.

Graduation coincided with two events: first, he married Mariana White and second, he was inducted in the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps. He served in the military for 3 years, largely on assignment with the Pan American Sanitary Bureau studying animal diseases in Central America and Mexico.

Upon the completion of his tour of duty in the army, he pursued a career in avian pathology. An initial appointment at a new College of Veterinary Medicine in Urbana, IL was short-lived due to the lack of accommodations for his young family (he and Mariana had their first of five children by then), so he accepted an appointment at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, now Virginia Tech, where he made the seminal discovery of the B-1 strain of Newcastle disease virus. This strain was destined to be used world-wide as a vaccine for the control of that disease. What he called a serendipitous discovery opened many doors for his career. He soon was offered an appointment as Full Professor at the University of Massachusetts where he continued to carry out significant research on poultry virus diseases. Then he was recruited to a commercial company, American Scientific Laboratories (ASL), in Madison, WI, where he did full-time research on avian diseases and vaccine development for the next 7 years. During all of this he gained a well-deserved reputation as a “straight shooter,” whose work could be trusted to be first-rate.

In 1960, Steve and two colleagues from ASL helped establish a new start-up poultry vaccine company (L&M Laboratory) on Maryland's eastern shore. This venture was quite successful and within a few years it attracted a purchase by Abbott Laboratories, a large pharmaceutical company.

At the time that Steve moved to Chicago, the Department of Avian Diseases at Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine needed to recruit a new Chairman, resulting from Dr. P. Philip Levine's desire to retire. Given Dr. Hitchner's reputation as one of the most respected members of the field of avian medicine based on his technical expertise, his honest approach to everything he did, and the productivity and excellence associated with his work, it is not surprising that all of the faculty in the Department put him at the top of the list of desirable replacements for Dr. Levine. Unfortunately, Dr. Hitchner felt an obligation to stay with Abbott Laboratories since he and his colleagues at L&M had just sold them their business, and they wanted him to head up a research and development program in Waukegan, IL. Therefore, he declined the offer that was made to him by Dean George Poppensiek, and other candidates were interviewed. None of those seemed to the Dean or to the faculty to be the right "fit" and so those of us on the faculty at that time urged Dr. Poppensiek to try once again to recruit Hitchner. To his enormous credit, he personally went to Chicago and convinced Dr. Hitchner to change his mind and accept the Cornell position. Thus, Steve Hitchner came to Cornell as Department Chairman in 1966. He resigned that position in 1975 but remained a faculty member until his retirement in 1981 when he became an emeritus professor.

Dr. Hitchner led by example. In addition to his administrative duties, he carried out independent research, collaborated with others in their research projects and directed work by various assistants. An example of collaborative work was in studies with Bruce Calnek in which they developed an important technique for isolating and freeze-drying certain herpesvirus vaccine strains, including a Marek's disease virus vaccine for chickens and the human chickenpox vaccine. A patent on this technique resulted in significant royalties to Cornell.

In 1971, he took over responsibility for the core curriculum course on poultry diseases offered to veterinary students, teaching it through 1980. Also, he served as the mentor for three Ph.D. graduate students. He was a wise and steady influence for the faculty and staff in the Department allowing each to do his/her job without being overbearing, and he had the respect of all in the College.

There were several administrative matters that bear noting. He took a strong position in administering the Duck Research Laboratory (DRL) on Long Island, and was responsible for establishing a USDA-licensed biologics production facility at that laboratory. Also, he directed the activities of three Regional Poultry Laboratories, two of which he was forced to close in the early 1970s due to State fiscal problems.

One of Dr. Hitchner's major contributions was to broaden the scope of the Department to include the field of aquatic animal medicine. To gain this responsibility, he argued that the Department was already "species-oriented," that the faculty had considerable experience in dealing with "population medicine," and that it had both facilities and expertise that could deal with this

discipline. The expanded role of the Department required a name change to the Department of Avian and Aquatic Animal Medicine with an interesting acronym – DAAAM.

Yet another major contribution from Dr. Hitchner was the initiation of a program involving pet and exotic bird diseases. After he stepped down as Chairman, he concentrated on a new area which he felt had been largely neglected, *i.e.*, pet bird medicine. Of course, diagnostic accessions in the Department occasionally included species other than domestic poultry, but there was no concerted effort to investigate diseases of pet birds. Canaries, budgerigars, parrots, *etc.* were species Hitchner concentrated on with his new focus, and given his background and his interests in disease prevention, it is not surprising that he undertook research aimed at the viral diseases that afflicted these species. He developed an inactivated herpesvirus vaccine used to immunize birds against Pacheco's disease and a live canary pox virus which he attenuated in chicken embryos. The latter was provided to a commercial vaccine company and has been available for use in canaries for many years. Also, it has served as a vector of genetically-engineered vaccines.

In addition to administrative duties that were specific for the DAAAM, Dr. Hitchner served on several of the more important College committees during his tenure at Cornell. Also, he undertook a number of "extracurricular" activities. These included consultancies to the Pan American Health Bureau in Argentina (1967) and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in Bermuda (1970), serving as an advisor to the USDA (1970, 1972), chairing the editorial committees of the American Association of Avian Pathologists (AAAP) which published two editions of the manual *Isolation and Identification of Avian Pathogens* (1975, 1980), serving on the USDA Technical Advisory Committee on Newcastle Disease (1972), and serving on the editorial committee of *Avian Diseases* (1979, 1983, 1989). He was not one to shirk responsibilities and was quick to offer his services wherever they were needed. He helped establish the AAAP in 1957, and was its President in 1960-61. He enjoyed many other honors during his career, as well.

During his career in avian medicine, he authored or coauthored 55 publications, 31 of which represented work at Cornell.

Steve enjoyed sports, particularly lacrosse. He was named an All-American lacrosse player during his years at Rutgers. At Cornell, he became a skilled handball player, always with the aim of good exercise and fun rather than focusing on the outcome of games (which he won much more often than not). After retirement, he kept in excellent physical condition and enjoyed work in the field of ornithology among other pursuits.

He is survived by Mariana, his wife of 67 years, and his children Roger, Sarabelle, Thomas, and Robert. His eldest son, Stephen, Jr., died of cancer in 1991.

*Bruce W. Calnek, Chairperson; Julius Fabricant, Karel A. Schat*