

Alexis Lawrence Romanoff

May 17, 1892 — January 24, 1980

Alexis Romanoff was born in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) and lived there up to the troublous times of the Russian revolution. He studied chemistry and engineering at St. Petersburg Teachers College and art at the Academy of Fine Arts. Before the Bolsheviki came to power, Alexis had become a lieutenant in the Imperial Russian Army. As such, he was a marked man, but he managed to escape and to make his way across Siberia to Vladivostok. That journey was made slowly, with stops at Kazan and Tomsk for study at the universities there. Many of his harrowing experiences and narrow escapes are recounted in his *Diaries Through War and Peace*, and in *Stormy Days*, the first volume of *A Solemn Promise* (in verse).

From Vladivostok, Alexis reached China, and thence, in 1921, the United States. He came to Cornell as a student in 1923. Here his training and talents were soon recognized and his Bachelor of Science degree was followed by a Master of Science degree and (in 1928) a Doctor of Philosophy degree.

After his appointment as a research assistant in the Department of Poultry Husbandry, Alexis climbed the usual steps on the academic ladder and was appointed professor of chemical embryology in 1948. He retired in 1960 after thirty-six years of distinguished service.

Professor Romanoff was a member of many scientific societies and of the Ithaca Rotary Club. From the Poultry Science Association he received the Borden Award for research in 1950. His interests took him to many laboratories in Europe and in the United States and during sabbatic leaves he held appointments as research associate at Harvard, Yale, and the University of Florida.

Professor Romanoff devoted his scientific career to the study of eggs and avian embryos. That, in turn, necessitated much study to find, not only the optimum conditions for artificial incubation, but also how the embryo kept changing and growing during its twenty-one day transition from egg to chick.

In the early 1930s when many poultry men still operated their own incubators, each year for several years Alexis conducted a one-day school of incubation to help them with their problems. He also perfected a technique whereby chick embryos could be kept alive and observed in opened eggs at all stages of incubation. In the years when Farm and Home Week brought crowds of visitors of all ages to the campus, his chick embryos and hatching chicks were always a stellar attraction. So was his motion-picture film "Where Chick Life Begins," produced in 1937, which

showed in color all the stages of development, as a small circular spot on the yolk was gradually transformed during twenty-one days into a fluffy chick. It won international acclaim as an educational film and brought many visitors to Cornell to see its producer.

To study incubation and embryology one should know all about fresh eggs before they go into the incubator. Years of his own research and study of the pertinent literature resulted in publication by Professor Romanoff (with his wife, Anastasia) of an indispensable book on that subject—*The Avian Egg*. It came out in 1949. Thirty years later it is still a standard reference book and is known throughout the world. Its 918 pages begin with the laying habits of hens and cover everything one could want to know about eggs, their chemical composition, food value, industrial uses, preservation, and even the decorations painted on their shells in different countries. The index alone is 46 pages.

That book was followed eleven years later by *The Avian Embryo* and, after his retirement, *Biochemistry of the Avian Embryo* (1967) and *Pathogenesis of the Avian Embryo* (1972).

While all of us in the department fully appreciated the achievements of Alexis in science, and their applications in practice, few among us realized until after his retirement that he was both a poet and an artist. There then appeared several little books of verse under his name. One of these, *The University Campus*, tells of his affection for the Cornell scene; another, *Ithaca*, does the same for the town, and in *Profiles of American Heritage* he salutes each and every state in the Union with a poem which refers to its distinguishing features as he saw them. The *Artist-Poet's Album* carries a frontispiece showing in color seven of his paintings. Four of these are scenes on the Cornell campus, and one is the very lifelike head of a brown Leghorn hen.

Professor Romanoff's philosophy of life is nicely revealed in his final book, *Encyclopedia of Thoughts* (1975) with its 3,007 aphorisms (all indexed), 187 pages of couplets, and 143 pages of epigrams. They expound his modest, industrious, and cheerful way of life that endeared him to us. One of those epigrams deals with a trait by which he was always distinguished:

*One's courtesy—a pleasant chore—
In daily life can always win;
It is most welcome at each door—
Acquired and held by discipline.*

Alexis died after a long illness. He is survived by his widow and helpmeet, Anastasia (Sayenko) whom he had married in 1928. They had no children.