

# Robert M. Gilmer

*December 10, 1920 — July 17, 1999*

Robert M. Gilmer, 78, Professor Emeritus of Plant Pathology and former chair of the Department of Plant Pathology at Cornell University's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, Geneva, New York, died unexpectedly on Saturday, July 17, 1999, at his home in Brooksville, Florida.

Professor Gilmer was born on December 10, 1920 in Lawrence, Kansas. He attended Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, for two years before going into the service during World War II. Following the war, he received his B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in 1947, 1948, and 1950 respectively from the University of Wisconsin. He joined Cornell as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Plant Pathology at Geneva in 1950. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1954, and to Professor in 1959.

Bob was an outstanding plant pathologist. He established a worldwide reputation for his knowledge of virus diseases of deciduous fruit crops. But, for those who worked closely with him and became his friends, he will be remembered foremost for his intelligence, his great breadth of knowledge of plant diseases, and being a free-thinker who challenged our conventional views. Bob was also known for his broad experiences in different areas, for being a voracious reader, for his photographic memory, and for helping younger members of the Geneva faculty develop their careers. He was an engaging raconteur and conversationalist. Several of his colleagues also appreciated him as an astute bridge and poker player.

In addition to an outstanding career as a researcher, Bob served as acting chair and then chair of the Department of Plant Pathology from 1967 to 1972. He retired from Cornell on December 31, 1975.

Most of his research efforts were concentrated on virus diseases of deciduous fruit trees and grapevine. He found that several leafhopper species were efficient vectors of X-disease of stone fruits. The agent that caused this disease, which was first believed to be a virus, was later demonstrated, using electron microscopy, to be a mycoplasma. This led to the use of chemotherapy to treat the disease.

Bob also investigated the sour cherry yellows disease. This disease was widespread in sour and sweet cherry orchards throughout New York State. The virus involved in the disease complex brought about severe reduction in fruit production. At the time, sour cherry yellows disease was the most important virus disease in cherry. Bob conducted an extensive search for a source of resistance to the disease, but was unable to find any. However, during this research, he was able to identify and separate two commonly occurring cherry viruses — prune dwarf and

necrotic ringspot — and implicate them in the disease. He also demonstrated that healthy cherry trees can become infected by pollen that are carrying these viruses. This discovery helped to explain the rapid spread and common occurrence of sour cherry yellows disease in commercial orchards.

Bob's pioneering research on grapevine virus diseases in eastern North America resulted in significant contributions. A disease caused by the tobacco ringspot virus was initially found in 1967. It had not been previously reported to infect grapes. However, as a result of this research, surveys in vineyards in New York State and Canada revealed widespread occurrence of this disease. In 1974, a program was initiated to identify resistant scion and rootstock varieties and evaluate methods to control the nematode vector. Largely because of Bob's persistence, official rules and regulations were developed in 1973 for a grapevine virus disease certification program. This program provided growers protection against purchasing virus-infected grape plants as well as trueness to variety type. Eventually, the Nursery Inspection Unit of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets took over the program as part of its regulatory and detection duties.

In his 26 years at the Geneva Station, Bob published 90 scientific articles and numerous abstracts of talks presented at scientific meetings. He was a member of the Association of Applied Biologists and the American Phytopathological Society. In the latter, he was Secretary-Treasurer of the Northeastern Division in 1965, Vice President in 1966, and President in 1967. He was conferred the Distinguished Achievement Award of the Northeastern Division in 1976.

In 1957, he spent a six-month sabbatical leave as a Visiting Plant Pathologist at the East Malling Research Station, near Maidstone, Kent, England. In 1972-74, he was a Visiting Professor at the Department of Agricultural Biology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation. Bob was a member of the Alpha Epsilon Upsilon, Alpha Zeta, and Sigma Xi honorary societies.

In retirement, Bob and his wife, Eleanor, lived in Brooksville, Florida. However they returned annually to Geneva, usually coinciding with the annual dinner of the bridge group, when reminiscences were in full flow. It was only days after the bridge dinner in 1999 that Bob succumbed to a heart attack while cutting wood in his yard. We have acutely missed their presence at the last two dinners.

Bob established a special trust fund that will eventually provide funding for support of Cornell graduate students in Plant Pathology at Geneva.

Bob is survived by his wife, Eleanor, and sister, Joanne (Robert) Hammond, both of Fort Walton Beach, Florida.