

# Don Edwin Ellis, 1908–1993

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Dr. Don E. Ellis, professor emeritus and former head of the Department of Plant Pathology, North Carolina State University, died in Raleigh, NC, on 17 December 1993 after several months of declining health.

Dr. Ellis was born in Ames, IA, on 8 April 1908. As a young man, he attended Nebraska Central College, Central City, where he was awarded B.A. and B.S. degrees in 1928 and 1929, respectively. After 2 yr of teaching high school science and coaching basketball, he studied plant

pathology under the late C. W. Edgerton at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, and received a M.S. degree in 1932.

From 1934 to 1940, Dr. Ellis worked as an assistant plant pathologist with the Division of Forest Pathology, U.S. Department of Agriculture, in Arizona and New Mexico. He investigated diseases of conifers and described a fungus pathogen of dwarf mistletoe.

In 1940, he accepted a joint appointment as assistant professor in Research and Extension at North Carolina State College, Raleigh. He was promoted to associate professor in 1944. In 1945, Ellis completed work for a Ph.D. degree at North Carolina State, and his degree was awarded that year by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

During his years on the faculty at North Carolina State College, Dr. Ellis made significant contributions to our knowledge of vegetable diseases in North Carolina and the South in general and was promoted to professor in 1950. He was an early co-operator in the program that led to the release of the first tomato cultivars resistant to the southern bacterial wilt pathogen, *Pseudomonas solanacearum*. His work on the epidemiology and control of downy mildew disease of cucurbits provided the basis for establishing sound control measures for this disease in the Southeast. In this work and other related research areas, he directed a number of outstanding graduate students, including R. S. Cox, R. P. Scheffer, D. F. Crossan, N. N. Winstead, and R. R. Libby. His work is summarized in over 70 publications and includes the definitive *Plant Pathology in North Carolina, 1776–1976* prepared after his retirement in 1973.

Dr. Ellis was appointed head of the Section of Plant Pathology in the Department of Botany at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, in 1954. At that time the group consisted of 17 faculty, eight technicians and secretaries, and six graduate students. Under his leadership, the section soon became the Department of Plant Pathology. During his tenure, he dedicated his efforts to providing in-depth staff support for each scientist, for special ancillary services such as photography, and for the basic equipment needs of research. When he retired, the department was made up of 51 faculty, about 50 technicians and secretaries, and 20 graduate students.

As a department head, Dr. Ellis obtained financial support, facilities, and staff for investigations of the major plant disease problems facing North Carolina growers. His leadership for 19 yr provided an attractive and supportive environment for research,

extension, and teaching activities. As a result, North Carolina State University attained worldwide recognition as a major research and educational center for plant pathology. Particularly strong and innovative programs were developed in diseases of tobacco and forest trees and in problems caused by nematodes. Basic knowledge from tobacco and nematode investigations contributed substantially to the development of other exceptionally broad programs of research, extension, and teaching, involving field, forage, and fruit crops.

Dr. Ellis served the American Phytopathological Society (APS) in a number of capacities: vice president and president of the Southern Division; news editor of *Phytopathology* for the South; member of APS Council for many years; and as a member of numerous committees and study groups. Especially noteworthy was his work as a member and later chairman of a Special Committee on Awards and Honors, established and designated by APS Council to design an awards program that was formally initiated in 1965. He was an early advocate for the establishment of a Caribbean Division, and with F. Wellman, G. Zentmyer, W. C. Snyder, and others, he remained a strong supporter of this organization and a special resource person during its formative years.

After his election to the vice presidency of APS in 1967, Dr. Ellis completed a distinguished term of service as president in 1970. During his years as a member of APS Council, the idea of establishing a headquarters of operations building in St. Paul, MN, was conceived. The culmination of these plans was reached in 1970 although the building was not occupied until 1971. Dr. Ellis played a key role in the development of these plans and in selling the idea to the membership. The proposal to establish a headquarters building was a controversial one, particularly in his own Southern Division. The leadership of Dr. Ellis and his colleagues on APS Council during those critical days had a profound and positive impact on the future performance and productivity of our society.

Ellis' other professional memberships included the American Institute of Biological Sciences, the Mycological Society of America, the Association of Tropical Biology, the North Carolina Academy of Science, Gamma Sigma Delta, and the Society of the Sigma Xi. He served as adviser to the Southern Education Regional Board, Consultant to the U.S. Game and Wildlife Commission and to the North Carolina State University Mission to Peru. He was also a frequent panelist for the Cooperative States Research Service, both for departmental reviews and for the evaluation of research proposals. His distinguished contributions to plant pathology and to agriculture were recognized by Awards of Merit from Gamma Sigma Delta and from the Caribbean Division of APS. His strong, positive influence on our science and profession will continue for many years to come.

Don Ellis married Helen Watkins in 1929. Mrs. Ellis was a gracious hostess and extended warm hospitality to faculty and students during Dr. Ellis' tenure as department head.

Dr. Ellis is survived by Mrs. Ellis, a daughter, Carol Don Ellis Montague, two grandsons, one great grandson, and by his brother, Bayard Ellis.