

# George W. Fischer, 1906 to 1995

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George W. Fischer, professor and plant pathologist, died quietly at his home in Shelton, WA, on 25 July, 1995. He was 89 years old. Born in 1906, he was the son of Edward and Juna Ferguson Fischer of Indianapolis, IN. He earned a B.S. degree from Butler University, Indianapolis, IN; an M.S. degree from Northwestern University, Evanston, IL; and a Ph.D. degree from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, all in botany.

Dr. Fischer's doctoral dissertation, "Comparative Studies of Certain Cultures of *Puccinia tomipara* on Wild Grasses," revealed the relationship between the uredinial-telial states of the leaf rust fungi on Gramineae and the biologically related pycnial-aecial states on Ranunculaceae. In 1934, at age 29, he arrived at the State College of Washington, Pullman, with Geneva Robertson Fischer, his recent bride. His first job was instructor in the Department of Plant Pathology. By 1936, Dr. Fischer, who had developed an abiding interest in the biology of the smut fungi, resigned his instructorship and became an agent in the Division of Forage Crops and Diseases under what was then the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

During his tenure with BPI, Dr. Fischer rose from agent to associate pathologist in 1937 and to pathologist in 1944. He described observations on the comparative morphology and taxonomic relationships of wild grass smuts in western North America. Some synonymous relationships in the graminicolous smut fungi were described in 1943. *The Ustilaginales or "Smut" of the State of Washington* was coauthored with E. Hirschhorn of Argentina in 1945.

After 9 years of full-time research with BPI, Dr. Fischer resigned and became professor and chairman of the Department of Plant Pathology at the State College of Washington. There followed several decades of collaborative smut research with F. D. Heald; C. S. Holton of the USDA and his associates; graduate students pursuing advanced degrees in the department; and plant pathologists at experiment stations in Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Utah, all of whom were conducting research on the biology of smuts parasitizing cereals and wild grasses. Dr. Fischer and R. Sprague collaborated on early manuals of fungal diseases of grasses of the western United States.

Despite his administrative duties as chairman of the department, Dr. Fischer continued to report the results of his research in scores of scientific papers that he authored or coauthored. These included areas of investigation such as taxonomy, spore germination phenomena, complex physiological heterothallism, haplolethal deficiencies, natural and induced hybridization of smut species, and spore longevity.

Dr. Fischer also authored or coauthored several books of note. These were published between 1951 and 1961, all of them definitive references for students of smut fungi, including *The Smut Fungi—A Guide to the Literature, with Bibliography* (1951); *Manual of the North American Smut Fungi* (1953); *Biology and Control of the Smut Fungi* (with C. S. Holton, 1957); and *The Genus Tilletia* (with R. Durán, 1961).

In 1958, Dr. Fischer became acting dean of the College of Agriculture. Shortly thereafter, he became dean, ending his career of smut research. In 1965, Dr. Fischer was made director of resident instruction. He initiated a system of student evaluation of instruction that could serve to identify and reward good teaching commensurately with research and publication and emphasized that doing so in an institution of higher learning was important if the esprit de corps among the teaching staff was to persevere. He also initiated an annual agriculture awards banquet to recognize undergraduate students of high academic achievement. Each year during the ceremonies, an outstanding teacher is awarded a commemorative plaque and a monetary prize. After 3 decades, the "Fischer forms" of teacher evaluation are still used. Thus, Dr. Fischer left a legacy for those who advocate that student evaluation of instruction in a university is a legitimate and ethical way to document teaching proficiency.

Dr. Fischer retired in 1967, and he and Geneva moved to the beautiful Hood Canal area of Union, WA. After he resigned, he organized the 11th International Botanical Congress in Seattle and supervised the publication of its proceedings.

Dr. Fischer's long-time hobby was lapidary work, which he continued for most of his remaining years. No longer content as in earlier years simply to collect, section, and polish gemstones, he embarked on a long-term project to demonstrate that inorganic salts of certain metals could be used to induce color and inclusions in gemstones. In 1990, he published the results of many years of lapidary research in a beautifully illustrated four-color book entitled, *Gemstone & Chemicals—How to Create Color and Inclusions*. The foregoing makes it clear that Dr. Fischer enjoyed rockhounding and lapidary work immensely, having engaged in such for more than 25 years.

In the spring of 1984, Washington State University dedicated the Agricultural Sciences Branch Library and named it in honor of Dr. Fischer. A large portrait of him now hangs in the library and a bronze bust is in place at the entrance. He was president of The American Phytopathological Society (and the Pacific Division); fellow of The American Phytopathological Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Science; councilor-at-large of the Mycological Society of America; and member of the Washington State Horticultural Association, Sigma Xi Scientific Society, Alpha Zeta, and Phi Kappa Phi.

Geneva Robertson Fischer died in 1985. Their survivors include sons William G. Fischer of Wenatchee, WA, and Frederick R. Fischer of Powell River, British Columbia; sister Ethel Barcroft of Lawrenceville, IL; brother Edward of Anderson, IN; six grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren. The death of two grandchildren preceded the deaths of Dr. Fischer and Geneva. Dr. Fischer married Alice Nelson of Shelton, WA, in 1987; she and Jonathon Adams, a stepson, also survive him.

Finally, the personal manner of Dr. Fischer deserves mention. His intellect commanded great respect and his unpretentious manner admiration. Modest despite a certain greatness of mind, he sought not tribute—it sought him. He influenced by example both young and old, especially graduate students, but never with premeditation. Those who knew him well will always be mindful of his contributions to science and his ingrained humanistic propensity.