

Aaron Guy Johnson, 1880-1973

Alice L. Robert and John A. Stevenson



Aaron G. Johnson, plant pathologist and mycologist, died at the Hermitage retirement home in Alexandria, Virginia, January 22, 1973. This man, who had dedicated himself to service to mankind is best known for his work on diseases of the cereal crops. Most of his 42 years of research were in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, from which he retired in 1949.

Dr. Johnson was born of Swedish immigrant parents, Gustav and Albertina Lovis Johnson, on a pioneer farm in the then Dakota Territory near Brookings, September 1, 1880. His boyhood was spent on the home farm, and he attended a one-room country school. After 2 years of preparatory studies at South Dakota Agricultural College (now South Dakota State University), he entered as a regular student and received a B.S. degree in 1907. A period of study at Purdue University followed; where, under the noted uredinologist, J. C. Arthur, he earned a M.S. degree based on studies of the rust genus *Aecidium*. His thesis was published in the Proc. Ind. Acad. Sci. in 1911. For his Ph.D. he went to the University of Wisconsin. It was there that he became interested in research on diseases of cereal crops, to which he dedicated the remainder of his professional life. His doctoral dissertation (1914) was on the three important *Helminthosporium* diseases of barley; here, for the first time, they were studied comparatively. The late L. R. Jones was his major professor and mentor.

While at the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Johnson served as instructor, assistant professor and associate professor, also becoming affiliated with the U.S. Department of Agriculture as an agent. In 1922 he was transferred to the Office of Cereal Investigations, Bureau of Plant Industry at Washington, D.C. as Pathologist, later Principal Pathologist. The Cereal Office was moved to Beltsville, Maryland in 1942. In the Cereal Office he was in charge of cereal disease investigations until 1933, when, following a reorganization, he was assigned to wheat disease studies and in large part to those caused by Ascomycetes and Fungi Imperfecti. In effect this covered most of the wheat disease problems except those due to the rusts and smuts. As might have been expected, he also maintained a strong interest in diseases of corn and other cereals. His more than 60 published papers, both

technical and popular, testify to the breadth of his interest in cereal diseases, and the extent and effectiveness of his research activities with them.

From its inception he was involved for some years in the campaign for barberry eradication as a means of control of the stem rust of wheat. Among the more prominent areas of his studies were rust, stalk and ear rots, and leaf diseases of corn; flag smut, *Fusarium* scab, and rosette diseases of wheat; *Septoria* and bacterial blight of barley; and improvement in seed treatments for control of cereal diseases.

In addition to his phytopathological work, Dr. Johnson was a competent mycologist, carrying out extensive taxonomic studies on cereal and grass fungi. With the late Dr. Roderick Sprague he made worthwhile contributions to knowledge of *Selenophoma* species on North American grasses and to *Ascochyta* leaf spots of the Gramineae. He also collaborated in recording data on the nomenclature of the cereal smuts.

Pathologists who came under his leadership, will remember his patience, the importance he placed on meticulous attention to detail in all phases of research, and his determination to carry out all necessary assigned phases of his research projects.

Not only a competent scientist, he was likewise a natural teacher who unselfishly shared his knowledge with all who came to seek his help. An exceptionally receptive and retentive mind gave him a ready ability to recall information needed for his own research, or that of colleagues and visiting workers.

Although truly a patriotic American, Dr. Johnson was proud of his Swedish heritage and enjoyed greatly his active membership in the Viking Club of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He was a generous and sensitive man, devoted to his family, friends, to his home community, and his church. For many years he was active in amateur photography and enjoyed greatly, as a second hobby, vegetable and flower gardening.

He was a life member of The American Phytopathological Society and an emeritus member of the Mycological Society of America. He had also been a member of the Amer. Assoc. Adv. Sci., the Botanical Society of America, the Botanical Society of Washington (past president), and Sigma Xi. Dr. Johnson was preceded in death by his wife, Ruth Westcott Johnson, in 1969. He is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Donald (Marian W.) Chase, McLean, Virginia; and two sons, Lewis R., Falls Church, Virginia, and Lawrence W., Los Altos Hills, California; and five grandchildren.