

Bascombe Britt Higgins, 1887-1968

E. S. Luttrell



B. B. Higgins, Botanist Emeritus, Georgia Experiment Station, died in Griffin, Georgia, September 21, 1968. His arrival at the Station 55 years earlier as Botanist and Head of the Botany Department, marked the beginning of plant pathology in Georgia. His department staff increased from one to six pathologists, and departments

were added in the College of Agriculture at Athens, the Coastal Plain Station at Tifton, and the Extension Service.

He was born February 7, 1887, in Higgins, North Carolina, obtained the B.S. and M.S. degrees at North Carolina State College and the Ph.D. at Cornell in 1913 under George F. Atkinson, who was the source of his broad botanical perspectives of plant pathology. He maintained a lifelong respect and affection for Atkinson, while admitting that, technically, Atkinson might be considered a poor classroom teacher.

In 1948, when the Experiment Station became part of the University, and his department one of the four in the Division of Plant Pathology, Dr. Higgins retained his Botanist title and he died as Botanist Emeritus.

For 24 years prior to his retirement, Dr. Higgins was immersed in research on peanuts, beginning in peanut breeding in 1931. Others joined the project, including Wallace K. Bailey of the USDA with whom he had a close and productive collaboration, and, later, K. H. Garren and L. W. Boyle. His breeding program resulted in the release of seven cultivars of all three commercial types of peanuts. The most popular, 'Dixie Spanish', at one time was grown on three-fourths of the Spanish acreage in Georgia. Research expanded into all aspects of peanut production from land preparation and planting practices to methods of harvesting and curing, with disease control considered in every production step; and peanuts became Georgia's leading cash crop. In 1952, Dr. Higgins spent four months in Europe and Africa as head of a committee sponsored by the Organization for European Economic Cooperation to recommend improvements in peanut culture in West Africa.

The recognition Dr. Higgins received for his research on peanuts was so great that it obscured the breadth of his contributions to Georgia agriculture and to the sciences of plant pathology and mycology. Responding to the challenges faced by a pioneering plant pathologist, he

published on diseases of such diverse crops as apple, sweet potato, plum, cherry, cotton, tomato, pepper, cantaloupe, wheat, beans, peaches, and turnips. He became, of necessity, the authority on all diseases of all crops in Georgia. His papers on *Sclerotium rolfsii* and on inheritance of seed coat color in peanuts are classic studies in the physiology of parasitism and in the genetics of peanuts. His morphological studies on Ascomycetes published between 1913 and 1936 still appear as examples in textbooks of mycology. The species *Colletotrichum higginsianum* and *Piricularia higginsii* and the genus *Higginsia* honor his mycological accomplishments. The leading bronze cultivar of the muscadine grape in Georgia is named the 'Higgins' in recognition of his contributions to agriculture.

Although for several years Associate Director of the Georgia Experiment Station, he had little liking for administration. He never hired a staff member below the rank of associate because he objected to the connotations of assistant. He did not attempt to direct the work of his associates, but made his vast experience available and had a critical eye for results. His single-minded devotion to research was interrupted only by service as a lieutenant in the U.S. Army during World War I. He was a member of the AAAS, the Botanical Society of America, the Torrey Botanical Club, and The American Phytopathological Society. In later years he never attended meetings, citing the mechanical scheduling of papers and the lack of stimulating discussion that passed with Atkinson and his contemporaries. He was innately shy and gentle; outwardly, he was doggedly uncompromising and often cantankerous. He resigned as Station editor rather than accept the spelling of sweet potato as one word. He was as uncompromising with personal infirmity. After retirement, in addition to writing, he continued field work on peanut seed treatments, at first insisting on mule-drawn equipment for close row spacing and taking over the planter handles himself when it became apparent that both the one relic mule and the tractor drivers had forgotten the old techniques. After a demonstration that a tractor could be rigged to do precisely what he wanted, he continued with the tractor until a stroke left his right side almost completely paralyzed. This did not deter him from gardening at home, or from returning to the Station Library to type out a history of the Georgia Experiment Station with one finger of his left hand.

He is survived by his wife, Katherine Gilliland, whom he married in 1934, his daughter, and three grandchildren. His son was lost on Navy flight duty in the Pacific in 1964.