Otto Herman Elmer, 1891-1973

O. J. Dickerson and L. K. Edmunds

O. H. Elmer, 82, Professor Emeritus at Kansas State University, died December 24, 1973, after surgery in Manhattan. Eldest of six children, he was born on a farm carved from the Douglas fir forest in western Oregon by Swiss immigrant parents.

Professor Elmer's early education was in a one-room school where, after completing the eighth grade, he studied an extra year on subjects assigned by his teacher. He was inspired to seek a higher education by his uncle, Adolph Elmer, a systematic botanist noted for his work on the flora of the Philippines. When 15 years old, Otto went to Corvallis and enrolled at Oregon Agricultural College, majored in horticulture, and received a B.Sc. degree in 1911.

Through part-time work as an undergraduate in the Botany and Plant Pathology Department, he became interested in the science concerning plant diseases. Before pursuing that interest in graduate school, however, he filed and proved up a homestead near Cut Bank, Montana. Then, without promise of financial aid, he returned to Corvallis in 1914 and was assigned to study *Sclerotinia* diseases of clover, first under H. S. Jackson and then under H. P. Barss, successive departmental chairmen. In his first year, he was awarded a $50-a-month fellowship that enabled him and Esther Stout to be married.

After receiving the M.Sc. degree, he and Esther spent 9 months of each year raising crops on the Montana homestead. They returned to Oregon each winter so Otto could work in the Portland shipyards, all specifically to be able to return to graduate school five years later.

In 1921, Otto accepted a research assistantship to study cucumber mosaic under Dr. I. E. Melhus at Iowa State College. After receiving his Ph.D. degree in 1924, he remained on the staff at Ames nearly three years studying fruit and vegetable diseases. During that time he obtained CMV-resistant cucumbers from China and hybridized them with local varieties. From those crosses, he developed and released 'Kenmare', a variety that became a source of CMV resistance later incorporated into many varieties developed elsewhere in the United States.

In 1927, he became a member of the plant pathology faculty at Kansas State College where he remained until his retirement. One of his early discoveries at Kansas State was that ethylene gas emanating from stored apples prevented sprouting in potatoes. Later, he concentrated on developing disease-resistant sweetpotato varieties and released cultivars Nancy Gold, Red Nancy, Orlis, and Kandee. Then he turned to procedures to prevent stem rot and post-harvest decay of sweetpotatoes. One of his last significant accomplishments was the development of a virus-free Mahaleb cherry orchard for seed production. Although Professor Elmer published his scientific findings, his primary medium and philosophy of disseminating results of his work was direct contact with fruit and vegetable growers with whom he cooperated in conducting experiments aimed at developing controls of current plant diseases.

In addition to research on diseases of horticultural crops, Otto taught several courses. Near retirement, he initiated and developed a staff position concerned with nematodes and nematode diseases in Kansas.

Although he became professor emeritus in 1961, he remained active both in that capacity and in growing crops on a small farm near town. Many of his retirement hours were spent accumulating materials and completing autobiographies for Mrs. Elmer and himself. Other retirement activities included numerous woodworking and lapidary projects, travel to Europe, to Hawaii, to visit the Elmer children, and to the Montana homestead.

Surviving are his widow, Esther; a daughter, Marion Boydston, in Minneapolis, MN; and two sons, Harold, in Three Rivers, CA, and Howard, in Richmond, VA.

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