

Merle Tyson Hilborn, 1907-1978

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Merle Tyson Hilborn, Emeritus Professor of Plant Pathology at the University of Maine, died suddenly on October 12, 1978 while visiting friends in California. He was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on July 24, 1907. His lifelong association with the University of Maine began in 1928 as a member of the freshman class. He received a BS degree in Botany in 1932 and an MS in Botany in 1934. In 1935 he was appointed to the Department of Biology at the University of Maine. Subsequently, he received a PhD in

Botany under J. S. Boyce at Yale University in 1940. Merle's association with the University of Maine continued until he retired in 1973.

When Merle first joined the Maine Agricultural Experiment Station, the violent winter of 1932-33, which resulted in serious damage to apple orchards, was fresh in everyone's mind. Consequently, his first task was to search for sources of winter-hardy apple material. In addition, he had responsibility for lowbush blueberry disease research. His early work on the caloric values of Maine hardwoods, the subject of his thesis studies, is still being used today.

During World War II he was part of the University of Maine's research team which developed dehydrated potatoes that could be stored and shipped to the armed forces. Following the war he assumed responsibility for all apple research in Maine. At that time, the apple industry was in transition from the traditional Bordeaux-lime-sulfur treatment to the use of organic pesticides for controlling fungal pathogens. Merle pioneered the application of organic materials for apple disease control and his work earned the respect and confidence of fellow scientists, chemical industry representatives, and growers.

Merle was instrumental in devising control measures for blueberry blossom blight, a sporadically devastating disease of the lowbush blueberry. To conduct field research on blueberries at an experimental site 100 miles east of Orono while maintaining a research program on apple diseases at an experimental site 100

miles southwest of Orono was a taxing experience in the days when travel meant long hours over back country roads. Nevertheless, Merle always seemed to find the time to respond to other problems brought to the experiment station, whether it be a disease damaging the lettuce crop in Cape Elizabeth or the dry bean crop in Central Maine.

Merle's long years of service to the apple industry in Maine took many forms. For example, in 1957 he convinced the Maine Agricultural Experiment Station to create a new plant virologist position specifically to research the virus problems in fruit trees. The stem-pitting virus in apple had resulted in the loss of thousands of bearing trees on hardy stocks in the Northeast region of the United States. He foresaw the need for virus-free apple clones to prevent further serious losses to virus diseases. The Maine Pomological Society recognized his contributions in 1965 by citing him for his 30 years of research in the advancement of the fruit industry in that state and gave him the Outstanding Orchardist Award. In addition to his service to Maine, Merle was active in the affairs of The American Phytopathological Society. He was a charter member of the Northeastern Division and served as its president in 1964.

Merle and his wife Celeste, who died in 1977, had no children but they were very proud of a nephew they raised from boyhood who became a surgeon engaged in heart research. At the time of his death, Merle was planning to meet his nephew who was to present a paper at a medical meeting.

No finer tribute can come from Merle's peers than that which was written by Avery Rich, Assistant Dean of Agriculture at the University of New Hampshire: "I first became acquainted with Merle in 1937 when I started my graduate work at the University of Maine. He was a quiet, unassuming, cooperative, industrious and productive research worker at that time, and he never changed. His enviable publication record and reputation for sound judgment in both basic and applied research have grown over the years. He was a highly valued friend and colleague."

The Hilborn Memorial Research Fund in Plant Pathology has been established at the University of Maine at Orono as a continuing memorial to Merle and his work. Income from the fund will be used to support graduate research in plant pathology at the University of Maine.