

Leon John Tyler, 1902–1988

Carl W. Boothroyd



Leon John Tyler died in Ithaca, New York, on May 27, 1988. He had 34 years of professional association with Cornell University, serving in teaching and research in The New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Leon was born in Belle Plain, Iowa, on September 28, 1902. His family moved to Hadley, Minnesota, in 1904, and he grew up on a farm, attending elementary and secondary schools. After a few years of miscellaneous jobs (e.g., highway crewman, and

roustabout and fireman on a steam-powered drainage dredge), Leon was ready for further schooling. He attended South Dakota State University, receiving the bachelor of science and master of science degrees. As an undergraduate Leon was a member of the Rural Officers Training Corps. He had the highest scholastic rating of the senior cadets and was awarded the Silver Sabre. During July and August of 1927 Leon studied botany at the University of Chicago, and during the summers of 1928–29 he worked for the United States Department of Agriculture, Office of Barberry Eradication, in South Dakota.

In late fall of 1929 Leon enrolled for graduate studies in plant pathology at the University of Minnesota. However, the need arose for a temporary state leader of barberry eradication in Nebraska in 1930, and then for a teacher of general botany at Louisiana State University. Leon accepted both positions and returned to graduate work at Minnesota in 1931. His advisor was Professor E. C. Stakman and he worked closely with him. Leon received his doctorate in 1934, and his Ph.D. thesis “Variation in *Sphacelotheca sorghi* (Link) Clinton” was published later as a Minnesota Technical Bulletin.

Professor Tyler’s professional career began as an employee of the United States Forest Service in July 1934. He made a survey of ribes eradication work in relation to the prevalence of white pine blister rust in the Superior National Forest of Minnesota. This was a temporary job, however, and he accepted a position as research instructor at Cornell University in the fall of 1934. His first assignment was to work with a research team in Yonkers, New York on a Dutch elm disease project. Investigations of this disease continued over a period of five years, and Leon was senior author of five papers published in *Phytopathology*, the most notable of these being the report of the existence of differences in virulence of races of the Dutch elm disease fungus.

In 1939 he was appointed assistant professor of plant pathology and returned to the Ithaca campus. He assumed responsibility for the teaching of the control of plant diseases to undergraduates and graduates, a core course in the curriculum of the many students who received advanced degrees from Cornell University over the period of 1939–1968. Students during the early years of this period remember the smell of rotten eggs in the halls as they prepared lime-sulfur in his laboratory. Students of later years recall the studies of antibiotics and the deemphasis of chemical protectants as cure-alls for plant diseases during the 1950s. All students will remember Dr. Tyler’s meticulous attention to detail in lectures and laboratories and his insistence that his students master the principles of plant disease control and learn to think with the facts that they had accumulated. Candidates for advanced degrees under his direction were particularly appreciative of the friendly and patient guidance that he gave them.

Professor Tyler’s research activities were concentrated in the etiology and control of diseases of small grains and forage crops. He cooperated very closely with the Department of Plant Breeding, particularly in the development of oat and wheat cultivars with resistance to loose and covered smut pathogens. These varieties were grown extensively all over New York and bordering states. In addition he discovered three new diseases of wheat in New York State, dwarf bunt, *Cercospora* foot rot, and *Cephalosporium* stripe, and worked out practical control for those diseases. His many mission-oriented publications, most of them in refereed journals, attest to his vigorous approach to “practicing what you preach.”

Professor Tyler spent a sabbatical year in 1960 visiting scientists in England, Germany, and Greece, exchanging information on the causes and control of diseases of small grains. He participated in many resident activities on the Cornell campus and was a member of many state and national honor societies. After retirement in 1968 he maintained an office in the plant pathology department and became the coordinator of news of the department via a departmental newsletter, *Phytopathology*, and local news media. Many alumni wrote to him regularly, and graduates were obviously pleased with the tremendous job that he did in keeping them up to date with Cornell and the Department of Plant Pathology.

Dr. Tyler is survived by his wife, Iphigenia J. Tyler of Ithaca; a son, Dennis H. Tyler, of New Jersey; two stepchildren, James Atsedes, of Freeville, NY, and Sandra DiGiacomo of Ohio; a sister, Mrs. Willam Lind of Sarasota, Florida; and nine grandchildren.