

## Herbert Hice Whetzel, 1877–1944

Coffee! Coffee! Those words—the first spoken with a gradual rise in tone, the second in descent and both *very* loudly—evoke our most persistent memory of Herbert Hice Whetzel. Whetzel's call to coffee was not just a call. It was an order for the department to assemble, for the vegetable pathologists to talk to the fruit pathologists, for the mycologist to talk to the bacteriologist, and most importantly, for the students to talk to the faculty with nothing but a cup of coffee between them.

Born in 1877 and raised on a small farm in Indiana, H. H. Whetzel was soon pegged by his teachers as a young man with an extraordinary passion for natural history. As a youngster, he was frequently waylaid on his daily 5-mile walks to school by the flowers, bugs, and mushrooms that crowded his path.

Whetzel moved to Cornell in 1904 as a graduate student after earning a B.A. degree in botany at Wabash College. Two years later, he was “promoted” to assistant professor and a year after that, to

Professor and Head of the Department of Plant Pathology. The latter promotion was made together with Whetzel's obviously successful argument to change the name of the then Botany Department to better reflect what most scientists in the department were actually doing. He remained head until 1922, opting then to leave administration and return to a career of



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teaching and research. By the time of his death in 1944, he had authored over 300 publications, had played major roles in organizing two scientific societies, and had developed a worldwide reputation for his energetic research and teaching.

Two of Whetzel's many virtues of particular note in the writings of his colleagues were (1) his persistent drive to learn more through experimentation and careful observation, and (2) his dedication for sharing his knowledge in classrooms and farm fields and through mentoring of graduate students. With respect to the former, Whetzel was a true "phytomycologist," dedicating his research to learning enough about the identities and life histories of pathogenic fungi to devise effective management strategies. His successful demonstrations revolutionized agricultural production, especially in the northeast United States.

Insofar as contributions to the education of students and farmers are concerned, Whetzel's methods were the stuff that legends are made of. He was convinced that the best way to teach students how to solve problems was to create environments where they decided what the important problems were and then proceeded to solve them. He taught that success could be achieved only by combining thorough background knowledge with appropriate questions, creative experimental design, and proper collection and analysis of data. He was constantly revising his own teaching style, forsaking the traditional lecture hall for all but the introductory classes, in hopes that a closer personal connection with his students would provide the catalyst needed to launch them on their own paths of scientific inquiry and personal growth.

H. H. Whetzel was one of several pioneers that together put plant pathology on center stage with other specialties in the biological sciences. It has held that place with honor ever since.

*Prepared by George Hudler*