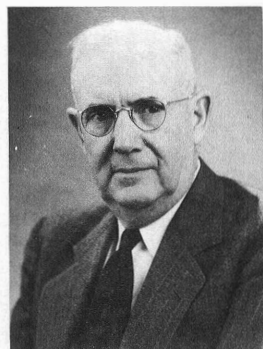


George Herbert Coons, 1885–1980

Dewey Stewart and Martha Kotila Roane



George Herbert Coons, son of George and Susan Erwin Coons, was born November 2, 1885, in Bloomington, Illinois, and died April 8, 1980, at the home of his daughter in Temecula, California. He was a Life Member of the American Phytopathological Society, served as Councilor-at-Large in 1920 and 1921, as Vice President in 1921, and as President in 1936. He was among the first group of members to be honored as Fellows of the Society and was a member of the Cosmos Club, the

Washington Botanical Society, and the American Society of Sugar Beet Technologists. He retired as Leader, Sugar Beet Investigations, U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 1955.

He earned an A.B. degree from the University of Illinois in 1908, an A.M. from the University of Nebraska in 1911, and a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1915. He began his professional career in 1908 as teacher of science and coach of football, Hancock High School, Hancock, Michigan, and became adjunct professor of Agricultural Botany, University of Nebraska, 1909–1910. From 1910 to 1929, he was a member of the faculty, Department of Botany and Plant Pathology, Michigan State University. The senior author was fortunate to have been among the many graduate students who studied under his tutelage. The junior author's father, the late J. E. Kotila, was more fortunate—he was a science student and football player when Dr. Coons taught and coached at Hancock High School and he also entered college and trained as a plant pathologist under Dr. Coons.

Beginning in 1925, Dr. Coons was granted periods of leave from Michigan State University to plan an enlarged program of research on sugar beet production for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He had a background of experience with the crop. As a lad of 13, he grew a test plot as part of a program to evaluate the Bloomington area as a contributor of beets to the sugar factory under construction at Pekin, Illinois. Young Herbert's plot was judged to be among the best. He expected the prize to be a small red wagon but when he went to get it, none was available. He had to settle for a prize of equal monetary value—a rocking chair! As plant pathologist, Michigan State Agricultural Experiment Station, he investigated sugar beet diseases in that state. In 1929, Dr. Coons accepted full-time appointment as Principal Pathologist-In-Charge, Sugar Beet Investigations, USDA, and moved to Washington, D.C. He continued under this appointment until 1955 when he reached the mandatory age of retirement. For a period of about 30 years, Dr. Coons planned and directed a very successful national program of research to increase yield, enhance quality and control diseases, especially by development of resistant cultivars, of the sugar beet.

Before 1933, our beet sugar industry had depended almost entirely on European cultivars and imported seed. That year the development of US#1, a cultivar resistant to curly top, an important virus disease of sugar beet in the Intermountain and Pacific Coast regions, was reported. Contrary to the wishes of those in the management of our beet sugar industry who wanted to send the foundation seed of US#1 to Europe for increase, Dr. Coons

insisted that the seed increase must be made in the USA and that its purity must be guarded carefully. This firm stand taken by Dr. Coons for seed production of US#1 in the USA initiated commercial beet seed production in this country by the winter-annual method, a cropping schedule similar to that used for winter wheat. Areas in the United States with favorable soil and climate for beet seed production by the new method were located. Production increased and the seed industry prospered. For many years sugar beet seed has been an export commodity of this country.

The Sugar Beet Investigations group as a unit has twice received the USDA Superior Service Award for research accomplishments. The awards were given for research projects that were either completed or initiated during Dr. Coons' tenure as leader. In addition to the unit awards, Dr. Coons and five other scientists have received Superior Service awards for research accomplishments. This recognition of outstanding research accomplishments of the Sugar Beet Investigations group attests to the excellence of the project planning by Dr. Coons and to his motivation of the scientists on his staff.

After retiring at the mandatory retirement age of 70, Dr. Coons continued for over two decades under collaborator appointment and pursued a long-standing interest in the taxonomy of the genus *Beta*. In all, about 40 beet species had been reported in literature, but not more than a third of the approximately 40 species reported in literature were thought to be valid. Dr. Coons visited selected herbaria in Europe to examine accessions of type species and then, the locales where type collections had been made. Thus, he had examined the material from which the original descriptions were drawn and also studied ecotypes in the field. From this thorough study, he recognized only 12 species as valid and relegated the others to synonymy. His publication, "The Wild Species of Beet," based on these studies made during his post retirement years, is an important contribution to the botanical literature. He had an added interest in the wild *Beta* species as a source of germplasm for sugar beet improvement.

For over 50 years, Dr. Coons was widely acquainted with and highly regarded by sugar beet technologists and scientists of America and Europe. He was an inspiration to his colleagues and to the then junior scientists in the various disciplines at the USDA station at Beltsville, MD. He had great personal charm, mental alertness, and a ready wit that never changed with age. Everyone enjoyed knowing Dr. Coons; to one and all, he was noted for his ever-youthful enthusiasm. He never grew old! On one occasion as he was approaching 90, a friend commented on his youthful appearance. Dr. Coons remarked that he could not take credit for his good health and longevity—rather he had to give thanks to his rugged New England ancestors who survived in a harsh land when others did not. Then with a smile he said, "You may have noticed, however, that my ancestors did not do a very good job on the hair!"

In 1908, Dr. Coons married Myrta Vogel who died in 1967. He is survived by two daughters, Dr. Susan C. Dees, Durham, North Carolina, and Mrs. Betty W. West, Temecula, California, and several grandchildren. For members of his family, his friends, former students, and his colleagues, there is a deep sense of loss in separation from so fine a person and yet we are thankful for the impact the character and kindness of George Herbert Coons made on our lives.