Wilson Levering Smith, Jr., 1915–1981

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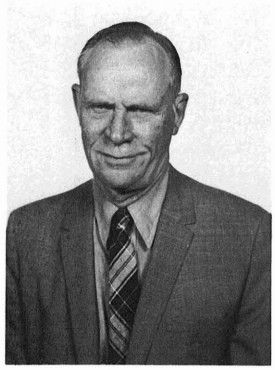

Wilson Levering Smith, Jr., died September 21, 1981, at Bluffton, South Carolina, after an extended illness. Wilson was born March 4, 1915, in Stevenson (rural Baltimore County), Maryland. He attended Baltimore County public schools, graduated from the Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia, and did three years of undergraduate study at the University of Virginia before transferring to the University of Maryland, where he earned the B.S. degree in horticulture in 1939 and the M.S. degree in plant pathology in 1941.

From 1942 to 1944, Wilson worked as a Junior Plant Pathologist with the USDA Rubber Plant Investigations group at Savannah, Georgia, where he met and later married Dorothy Fawcett. In 1944, he entered Cornell University and studied with W. H. Burkholder. His Ph.D. thesis was on the bacterial soft rot pathogens of potato and other horticultural crops. He also served as a member of the potato variety development and disease control project directed by F. M. Blodgett. After completion of the Ph.D. degree in 1948, Wilson accepted a position as Plant Pathologist with the Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils and Agricultural Engineering at Beltsville, Maryland, where he remained until retirement in 1979.

In his new job he was responsible for research on the devastating effects of bacterial soft rot of potatoes. Those who worked with him remember the powerful odors that emanated from his experiments and how he enjoyed telling about potatoes literally flowing from some of the bulging boxcars that he was called to inspect at terminal markets. His early studies on the factors governing suberization and cork formation in potato tubers after wounding have been used by the industry to devise transit and storage conditions that promote rapid wound healing and reduce bacterial decay. His research also aided the development of the precut potato seed industry and the breeding of cultivars that rapidly form wound barriers. Although his interest in potato disease control continued to occupy a good deal of his time, as evidenced by the 1978 publication of the USDA Handbook "Market Diseases of Potato," Wilson also devoted an increasing effort to the study of postharvest deterioration of stone fruits and small fruits. This work is exemplified by his coauthorship of the handbook "Market Diseases of Stone Fruits." His more than 100 publications cover the spectrum of control measures—sanitation, hydrocooling, heat treatments, preharvest and postharvest fungicide applications, intermittent warming to alleviate chilling injury, and modified storage atmospheres to extend market life of produce. He was among the first to demonstrate the effectiveness of heat as a nonchemical method for controlling postharvest decays of temperate fruits and showed that a brief hot water dip would control postharvest decays of peaches. This led to the commercial use of hot water and hot air treatments both in the U.S. and abroad. He was awarded the USDA Certificate of Merit in 1965 for contributions in this area. His publications have stimulated additional research throughout the world on the use of heat treatments to control postharvest decay of citrus, pome fruits, semitropical fruits, and various vegetables.

In addition, he authored or coauthored USDA bulletins and handbooks that are used extensively by plant pathologists, regulatory agencies, and industry. Annually, from 1952 until retirement, he taught USDA terminal market inspectors to recognize market diseases of fruits and vegetables at Agricultural Marketing Service training classes. He also worked directly with growers and packinghouse operators to reduce marketing losses and extended his influence abroad through cooperation on PL-480 projects.

He served as the American Phytopathological Society representative on the Food Protection Committee of the National Academy of Sciences and as a representative of the USDA National Program Staff on the National Academy of Science's program dealing with postharvest pathology in developing countries. He served as an associate editor of PHYTOPATHOLOGY and the PLANT DISEASE REPORTER. His untiring efforts on behalf of postharvest pathology within the society led to the establishment of the APS standing committee on Postharvest Pathology and Mycotoxicology. He was the organizing chairman of this committee and served as program chairman for the Postharvest Pathology Area at the Second International Congress of Plant Pathology in 1973. He was elected a fellow of the society in 1979.

Wilson and Dorothy left Beltsville shortly after his retirement to enjoy the southern hospitality of the Savannah area, where they had met and fallen in love 35 years earlier, and built their retirement home at Bluffton, 20 miles north of Savannah. Here Wilson practiced the art of being a southern gentleman and enjoyed gardening, fishing, and many other hobbies. His illness and death brought an abrupt and untimely end to these pursuits. He is survived by his wife, four children and five grandchildren, three brothers, and a sister.

We will long remember Wilson; in his passing we have lost a true friend. His honesty, forthrightness, and unceasing humor disarmed his few adversaries and earned many friends. It has been a rewarding privilege for all of us who have known him.