

Robert Gordon Henderson, 1903–1989

Curtis W. Roane



Robert Gordon Henderson, professor emeritus of plant pathology at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, died at the home of his daughter in Roxboro, NC, on August 18, 1989.

Dr. "Bob" Henderson was born in Monroe County Tennessee on October 28, 1903, and attended public school in the Madisonville area. He earned a B.S. degree from the University of Tennessee in 1927, an M.S. degree from North Carolina State University in 1928, and a Ph.D.

degree from Iowa State University in 1944. He served as assistant plant pathologist for the Georgia State Board of Entomology in 1928 and in a similar capacity for the Mississippi State Plant Board in 1929. That same year he was appointed assistant plant pathologist for the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station. In 1937 he was promoted to associate plant pathologist and in 1949 became professor of plant pathology. He served as acting head of the Department of Plant Pathology and Physiology in 1964, retiring in 1973.

Bob devoted most of his career to the study of tobacco diseases and the development of tobacco cultivars and germ plasm resistant to tobacco mosaic virus, black root rot (*Thielaviopsis basicola*), black shank (*Phytophthora parasitica* var. *nicotianae*), and root knot (*Meloidogyne* spp.). Several multiple-disease-resistant cultivars were released as a result of his efforts and cooperation with agronomists and other pathologists. Although few of these cultivars are grown today, they have served as valuable germ plasm sources in present tobacco improvement programs.

During World War II, Bob's effort in food production was devoted to tomato disease control, and he maintained this work into the 1960s. In the late 1940s he generated cooperative work with the forage crop agronomist and conducted the preliminary work on the stem nematode of alfalfa in this region. He was relieved of this work when a forage crop pathologist was hired.

When the Department of Plant Pathology was formed in 1949, Bob assumed responsibility for teaching forest pathology. Although he had no prior teaching experience, he showed much ingenuity in developing an interesting, practical course that was very popular with forestry students.

In addition to teaching and research, Bob was the first secretary of the Tobacco Workers Conference, which he helped organize in 1935. He was secretary until 1947. The 1970 volume of "Tobacco Science" was dedicated to Dr. Henderson in recognition of his contributions in research, teaching, and extension and for his leadership in "promotion of cooperation involving the state experiment stations and industry personnel."

He was a member of the Burley Tobacco Workers Conference, Virginia Academy of Science, and American Institute of Biological Sciences, and a life member of The American Phytopathological Society. The J. Shelton Horsley Award of the Virginia Academy of Science was presented to him in 1937 for his outstanding research paper entitled "Studies on tobacco downy mildew in Virginia." He had been honored by membership in Phi Kappa Phi, Alpha Zeta, and Sigma Xi. He was secretary from 1945 to 1947 and councilor from 1950 to 1955 of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute chapter of Sigma Xi. The department has honored Bob by naming the department award for outstanding faculty achievement "The Henderson Award."

Dr. Henderson served his church faithfully, serving as faculty advisor to the Baptist Student Union and as deacon, for several terms, in the Blacksburg Baptist Church. He was also a moderator and trustee of the Highlands Baptist Association. Bob was a member and worshipful master and past master of Hunters Lodge No. 156, A.F. and A.M., and a member of Blacksburg Royal Arch Chapter No. 65. Bob enjoyed fishing and growing roses and rhododendrons.

At the time of his death, Dr. Henderson was survived by his wife, Lida Pennington Henderson, and a daughter, Lida Faye Henderson McKinny, both of Roxboro, NC; a brother, Dr. Herbert B. Henderson, of Athens, GA; and a sister, Mrs. Reba H. Scruggs, of Cleveland, TN. Mrs. Henderson, who outlived her husband by only four months, died December 13, 1989.