

## Raymon E. Webb, 1919–1989

Robert W. Goth



Dr. Raymon Ellis Webb died of a heart attack on July 20, 1989, at his home in Beltsville, Maryland.

Ray, born November 19, 1919, near Truxno, Louisiana, spent his early years on the family farm. Following graduation from high school in Farmerville, Louisiana, he attended Louisiana State University, where he met Mary Virginia O'Brien of Bunkie, Louisiana. In 1942 he earned his B.S. degree in Horticulture, and entered the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant. In 1943, before going overseas, he and

Mary Virginia were married. Their first child, Mary Ann, was born in November while Ray was overseas (the telegram read "Junior is a lady"). As an artilleryman with the 5th Division, Third Army, under General George S. Patton, Jr., Ray earned five campaign ribbons, the Bronze Star for meritorious service, and the Air Medal for part-time "flying coffin" duty as an aerial artillery observer. He was discharged in 1945 as a captain.

After his discharge, Ray became an assistant horticulturist at the Louisiana State University (LSU) North Louisiana Experiment Station, Calhoun. In September 1947 he returned to the Department of Horticulture at Baton Rouge for graduate studies to participate in the Irish Potato Breeding Program. After earning his M.S. degree in 1948, he joined the department as an assistant horticulturist to do full-time research breeding improved potato varieties under the supervision of the department head, Julian C. Miller. In 1950 Ray took a leave of absence from LSU to pursue graduate studies with Drs. Russell Larson and J. C. Walker of the Department of Plant Pathology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. While at Madison, he continued the South Dakota (Cooperator Dr. James Fontenot) and Tennessee (Cooperator Dr. T. P. Dykstra) phases of LSU's seed production and clonal selection potato breeding program. Upon earning his Ph.D. degree in April 1952, Ray returned to LSU as an associate horticulturist to continue the potato breeding program. He and Dr. Miller subsequently released the popular potato variety Red La Soda.

In 1953 Dr. Henry A. Jones, principal horticulturist, Vegetable Branch, Crops Research Division, ARS, USDA, Plant Industry Station, Beltsville, Maryland, invited Ray to join the Vegetable Branch as potato plant pathologist to succeed Dr. E. S. Schultz.

In 1959 Dr. V. R. Boswell, chief, Vegetable Branch, invited Ray to lead the cooperative research on tomato, eggplant, spinach, and cucurbits for the Crops Research Division, ARS, USDA. During his 10 years as leader, Ray expanded two research programs, established three new programs, and added new staff at five of the six (state) research locations. Ray's personal research included the breeding of pest-resistant, high quality tomato varieties and hybrids for resistance to major diseases, and the development of cantaloupe germ plasm with resistance to western "crown blight" disease. Ray released five improved tomato varieties suitable for mechanized harvest in the eastern United States, several disease resistant spinach varieties and hybrids (including the first ones resistant to the blue mold-white rust disease complex), and virus-mildew resistant cantaloupe germ plasm. In recognition of service as leader of this investigation,

Ray received the Crops Research Division Director's Award for Research Accomplishments, the USDA's Superior Service Award for Research Leadership, and two citations for Service to Agriculture from the New Jersey Vegetable Growers Association.

In 1969 Dr. Rex Thomas, branch chief, asked Ray to become leader of the National Potato Breeding Program, Crop Research Division, ARS, USDA. In 1972, Ray was appointed chief (later designated as leader) of the Vegetable Laboratory, Horticultural Sciences Institute. The laboratory included 10 professionals representing five disciplines, 13 support personnel, and a reasonably adequate budget and was responsible for developing high quality, pest resistant, widely adapted germ plasm of major vegetables through classical and novel techniques, including protoplast and tissue culture technology. Ray's personal research concentrated on developing improved round white and russet potato germ plasm and varieties adapted to the eastern United States and suited to both processing and fresh market.

This effort resulted in the release of six round white and four russet tuber-type varieties to date. Atlantic (chips) and BelRus (fresh market) are the most notable among those released.

Ray was also an active participant in U.S. AID-sponsored foreign research and related activities. In 1965 he organized a team of researchers in El Salvador and developed a national program on vegetable and cucurbit production. In 1970, he developed a total of 21 foreign research projects (PL-480 program) in India, Pakistan, and Yugoslavia on melon, tomato, and pepper improvement and on certain vegetable and potato diseases. A nationally coordinated potato improvement program (six projects) was developed in Pakistan (1974 through 1987), largely utilizing laboratory-derived materials. Ray presented the inaugural addresses at the first "All India Cucurbit Research Workshop," at Udaipur University and at the first South India Vegetable Breeding Seminar at Anamalia University. Ray also made trips for U.S. AID to the Dominican Republic, Algeria, and Thailand.

During his career, Ray published over 170 scientific research articles. During the 1970s he was elected to membership to the Cosmos Club, Washington, DC. Ray was elected to Honorary Life Membership in the Potato Association of America in 1980. In 1982 he received the USDA Science and Education Director's Award for Research Accomplishments. He received his second USDA Superior Service Award for Research Leadership in 1983. In 1984, Ray received an award for "Excellence in Research for 1983" from *The Vegetable Grower*, a national agricultural publication. In 1988 he received the Distinguished Service Award from the Potomac Division of the American Phytopathological Society. Ray was a member of Alpha Zeta, Phi Kappa Phi, and Sigma Xi honor societies and a long-standing member of six professional societies. He served as secretary, vice president, and president of the Potomac Division of the American Phytopathological Society for two years.

Dr. Webb retired from the USDA in December 1987 but continued to work as a collaborator until his death. He is survived by Mary Virginia in Beltsville; his daughter Mary Ann Fried in Reisterstown, Maryland; his two sons Raymon Ellis, Jr., in Warner Robbins, Georgia, and John Marshall, in graduate school at Harvard University; and five grandchildren.