

In Memoriam William F. Mai 1916–2007

Dr. Bill Mai, Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor Emeritus in the Department of Plant Pathology at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, died on 15 August 2007. Bill was a true gentleman, generous, courteous and most helpful to all people. He was an exemplary ambassador for the scientific community and brought recognition and honors to the Department, the College and Cornell. Bill loved and was proud of his family. He is survived by his two daughters, a son and their extended families; his wife, Barbara, predeceased him in 2005.

Bill Mai was born 23 July 1916 on a farm near Greenwood, DE, and attended high school in Lewes, DE, where he played soccer, basketball and baseball. He obtained his B.Sc. in Agriculture from the University of Delaware in 1939 and started graduate studies in Plant Pathology at Cornell three months later, working with Dr. F. W. Blodgett on diseases of potatoes. While in graduate school at Cornell, Bill married Barbara Lee Morrell in 1941 and had three children: Virginia Austin, William Howard and Elizabeth Hardy. In 1945, he received his Ph.D. with a major in Plant Pathology and minors in Plant Physiology, Plant Breeding and Entomology. In 1946, after a brief time in the Navy, he was appointed an Assistant Professor of Plant Pathology at Cornell to work on plant diseases caused by plant-parasitic nematodes, particularly the potato cyst nematode. He was promoted to Associate and full Professor in 1949 and 1952, respectively, and officially retired in 1984.

Bill was recognized as one of the pioneering leaders of nematology in the US. During his long, illustrious career at Cornell, he developed outstanding and productive research, teaching and outreach programs. When the potato pathogen known as the “golden” nematode was inadvertently introduced to Long Island in the mid-1900s, his classical research efforts on the biology and management of the potato cyst nematode provided the needed basic and applied information upon which an effective quarantine program was based. That program not only contributed to the continued viability of potato production on Long Island and throughout New York State, but also most effectively limited the spread of this devastating nematode to other production regions in the US. His numerous research projects dealt with the etiology and management of the replant disease complex of fruit trees, the ecology and damage of several plant-parasitic nematodes on vegetables, various interactions between nematodes, soilborne pathogens and general soil microflora, and the integrated management of plant-parasitic nematodes and root diseases of agronomic

crops. He was a firm believer that research is not complete unless it is delivered to the appropriate audiences through publication and outreach activities. Bill always enjoyed his collaborations with extension educators and growers in formal and informal settings. He was truly a tireless worker with an enviable record of over 300 publications in academic journals and extension bulletins. In addition, he co-edited the two-volume treatise “Plant Parasitic Nematodes” in 1971, co-edited “Nematology Laboratory Manual” in 1990, chaired a committee for the National Academy of Sciences that produced “Control of Plant-Parasitic Nematodes” in 1968 and most importantly co-authored a unique nematode taxonomy aid book “Pictorial Key to Genera of Plant-Parasitic Nematodes” in 1960 (revised in 1962, 1964, 1968, 1975 and 1996). The latter teaching and diagnostic aid has been translated into several languages and is used all over the world as a reference in nematology teaching and research.

Bill Mai was an excellent teacher and mentor. His success was due to his ability to convey his enthusiasm for plant nematology, plant pathology and for scholarly research in general to hundreds of students in both formal courses and informal contacts. He developed and taught the first nematology course at Cornell in 1955 and then taught “Introductory Nematology,” “Advanced Nematology” and a “Current Topic Course in Plant Nematology” continuously until his retirement. He was always available to listen to a student discuss any problem, whether it pertained to research or a personal situation. Bill trained over 45 graduate students who went on to become leaders in research, teaching and industry, in both the US and many foreign countries. He not only inspired and supported all the students who came to work for and know him, but he also embraced them as his friends and as part of the extended Mai family while in Ithaca and beyond.

Bill was always an active participant in departmental and university affairs. He was recognized campus-wide for his participation in the Faculty Council of Representatives for CALS and membership in the Campus Council, CALS Library Committee and others. He was a member of 10 professional scientific societies and organizations and served on various editorial, administrative or subject matter committees, especially in the So-



ciety of Nematologists (SON) and the American Phytopathological Society (APS). He received numerous awards and honors as a measure of the high regard in which he was held by his colleagues, including being named Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor, elected President and later Lifetime Honorary Member of the Society of Nematologists, Fellow of the American Phytopathological Society (APS), Award of Merit from the NE-Division

of APS, Venture in Research award from the IX International Congress of Plant Protection and many others.

Memorials can be sent to: Graduate School, c/o Sarah Hale (Associate Dean for Student Services), Emergency Loan Fund, Cornell University, 350 Caldwell Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853-2602.

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