

## Nathan Augustus Cobb (1859–1932), a Tribute

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It is most appropriate that this first issue of the *Journal of Nematology* be dedicated to the Father of American Plant-Nematology, Nathan Augustus Cobb. My reminiscences will largely cover the period of my association with him between 1921 and 1932 for I cannot add much to the previously published necrologies that have so well covered the many fields of activity in which Dr. Cobb excelled during his lifetime (2, 4, 5). The most complete and intimate of these accounts was written by his daughter and forms a fascinating story (1). It would be presumptuous for me to attempt any significant additions to that delightful article.

It was my privilege to work with Dr. Cobb during some of his most active years in plant-nematology in the U. S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D. C. An integral part of those years was spent in Woods Hole, Mass., from the early summer to fall seasons, when about half of the laboratory personnel and much equipment were moved to that hive of activity on Cape Cod that has become world-famous for its programs on marine life, basic biological research, oceanography, and related subjects. It was during those months each year at Woods Hole that we not only worked harder and kept busier but had the opportunity to enjoy the more informal and warm, fatherly association with this remarkable man. Not every colleague or co-worker of Dr. Cobb's had the pleasure of enjoying his whimsical sense of humor that shone forth in the relaxed atmosphere of the Woods Hole laboratories where we were located. The very dignified New En-

gland austerity that at times appeared to place him aloof disappeared during those summer months.

In these days of over-specialization, it is difficult to realize that Dr. Cobb combined a sound knowledge of chemistry, physics, botany, zoology, pathology, techniques in both mechanics and art, and parasitology of both animals and plants.<sup>2</sup> His broad field of knowledge stemmed from an innate intelligence, imagination, and keen sense of observation; he was a perfectionist, with limitless patience to achieve his goals, great or small. Add now to these fundamental characteristics his graduation from Worcester Polytechnic Institute, in Massachusetts, in 1881, and the teaching of sciences that preceded and followed, and a Ph.D. degree from the University of Jena, Germany. In 1887, his decision to attend this University, taking with him his growing family, was not only a wish for higher formal education but also the desire to study under the influence of Haeckel, Hertwig, Lang, and Stahl.

Next came the pioneering years in Australia (1889–1898 and 1901–1905) which led to his appointment as Plant Pathologist to the New South Wales Dept. of Agriculture. From Australia Dr. Cobb went to Hawaii for a period of two years to establish and direct the Division of Physiology and Pathology of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Experiment Station. His researches there dealt with nematode, bacterial, and fungus diseases of sugar cane. Finally, he returned to the United States and the U. S. Department of Agriculture in Washington in 1907. Of the perhaps 50 years of Dr. Cobb's pro-

Received for publication 25 August 1968.

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<sup>2</sup> The wide scope of Dr. Cobb's nearly 250 published contributions can be explored in the Index-Catalogue of Medical and Veterinary Zoology, U. S. Department of Agriculture 1939 and Supplements.

fessional life, half were spent in the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture where his interests centered more and more on free-living, marine, insect-parasitic, and plant-parasitic nematodes. Officially he was titled Principal Nematologist, but to all workers in this field of research he will always and justifiably be known as the Father of American Plant-Nematology.

Dr. Cobb's keen interest and regular attendance at the monthly meetings of the Helminthological Society of Washington began with the second meeting of that Society held in 1910, and continued until his death. He brought to those meetings not only his vast store of knowledge in diversified fields but also an enthusiasm and great personal charm. To illustrate, I should like to quote Dr. Eloise Cram's recounting of one of those meetings (3).

"Many persons recall Dr. Cobb's crescent-shaped lens which he wore as a pince-nez on only one eye which needed aid for reading or other close work. Similarly he had a variety of delightful mannerisms which were uniquely his. All who heard his dissertation on 'Holes,' given at a Helminthological Society banquet, were treated to an example of histrionic ability and imaginative genius. Unfortunately no record was made but the following series of events is agreed upon. Dr. Cobb arrived at the specified hotel at the last moment by taxi and came into the hotel carrying a suitcase—some say up to four suitcases—under the weight of which he staggered in, refusing help from taxi driver, doorman or any of his fellow diners.

When Cobb's turn came to contribute to the program, he cleared a big space on the table, put the suitcase on it. He then explained that he had a hobby of which few people knew, and so far as he knew no one else had this hobby. *He collected holes!* And because of his travels to many parts of the earth he had had opportunities to make a very varied collection. At this he opened the suitcase, spread it out and with great satisfaction and pride he proceeded to lift from it (clearly seen by the imaginative) one after another of his 'holes,' as he described each one. Highly prized was a *fence-post hole* from Australia. Since there were so few fences in Australia the finding of a fence-post hole was a great piece of good luck. Choicest of all was his *fossil hole*, the oldest one extant."

An adequate description of this extraordinary, many-faceted, and brilliant scientist is next to impossible. One can only offer him tribute for his influence upon generations to come.

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