William J. (Bill) Zaumeyer, 1903 to 1995

Richard E. Ford

William J. (Bill) Zaumeyer died in Potomac, MD, on May 11, 1995, at age 91. Known nationally and internationally for his leadership in bean improvement pathology and breeding, Bill was a founder of the U.S. Bean Improvement Cooperative in 1957. Bill pioneered as an innovative researcher on a broad spectrum of bean disease problems. He developed or directly helped improve many snap and dry bean cultivars for nearly four decades. He strongly promoted

seed production in the arid west, which enabled disease control by escape from seedborne diseases.

Bill retired from the USDA in January 1969 and then held a post-retirement research appointment in Ireland. He visited Beltsville, MD, frequently after his return, maintained an intense interest in bean improvement, and delighted in recalling his many friends in the bean community. His sense of humor and his interest in research and his professional societies continued until his death.

Bill was born in Milwaukee, WI, on December 10, 1903. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he earned his B.S. degree in agriculture (1925), M.S. degree in entomology/botany (1927), and Ph.D. degree in plant pathology (1928). Appointed as a USDA plant pathologist in 1928, Bill began research with L. L. Harter, leader of the bean research project in Washington, DC. He began breeding beans for disease resistance in 1930 and soon relocated to Beltsville, MD.

Bill succeeded L. L. Harter in the mid-1940s as the nation-wide investigations leader for improvement of beans and peas. He and H. R. Thomas enlarged *A Monographic Study of Bean Diseases and Methods for Their Control* in 1957 as USDA Technical Bulletin No. 868 from the shorter 1944 edition by Harter and Zaumeyer. In addition, Bill authored over 150 technical papers on bean pathology, breeding, and genetics. He was the first recipient of the Meritorious Service Award by the Bean Improvement Cooperative, and was a founder and first president (1944) of the Potomac Division of The American Phytopathological Society (APS). Bill received many other awards and honors including the Gold Medal Award, All-American Selections (1950), USDA Superior Service Award (1957), Award of the Royal Horticultural Society of England (1959), Fellow of APS (1965), Special Consultant-Rockefeller Foundation (1967), and Distinguished Service Awards from both the USDA (1969) and the APS Potomac Division (1988). When congratulated upon his election as president of APS in 1965, Bill's modesty was humorously revealed when he quipped "People made a mistake when they voted for me; I'm sure they believed I was the famous Zentmeyer from California." He did not favor the perennially debated APS name change.

L. Bos, an international legume virus authority, says of Bill, "He was one of the forerunners in pathological virology interested in viral causes of diseases in crops, how to alleviate their damaging effects, and how to identify and distinguish between viruses. Back when little was known directly about viruses, Zaumeyer was keenly aware of the causal relationships between virus diseases in legume crops. Valuable papers illustrating the spirit of that time and demonstrating the continuing increase in information on viruses of legumes are those of Zaumeyer and Wade (1935) on 'the relationships of certain mosaics to bean...'" Bill was particularly reputed for his authoritative research on viruses as well as other diseases of *Phase-*

olus beans and peas. He and others laid the foundation for the world-encompassing program of Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT) in Cali, Colombia. He was one of the first in the world to evaluate foliar applications of antibiotics (especially streptomycin) for controlling the halo blight disease caused by the bacterium *Pseudomonas phaseolicola*.

The Beltsville Experiment Station at mid-century was known as the U.S. Center for Crops Experts, and many referred to Bill as 'Mr. Bean'. Being close to the nation's political information, Bill was never at a loss to express his approval or disapproval of politics and religion. With great glee, he loved all kinds of humor and especially liked to tell jokes. One of the most notable loves of his life was the inviting, vast, and fertile agricultural lands of the west. Bill first established bean research plots at Greeley, CO, and then research programs at Prosser, WA; Corvallis, OR; and Kimberly, ID. He was happiest during his annual summer travels west to evaluate research progress in breeding 'new, improved bean varieties.' His major varietal contributions were 'Great Northern 1140' dry bean and the snap beans 'TopCrop' and 'Tendercrop'. 'Tendercrop' was the first real prototype, high-yield bush bean for mechanical harvesting and was acclaimed as one of the best bean varieties ever developed; it is still the standard of the processing industry. The 'Tendercrop' germ plasm, a major factor in conversion from the indeterminate to bush plant habit, exists in the pedigree of most currently grown bush snap beans. Zaumeyer and Thomas devoted great effort in finding curly top virus resistance, which they incorporated into all bean varieties developed for production in the west. The first curly top virus-resistant red kidney bean and bean yellow mosaic virus-resistant red Mexican bean were both derived from the thousands of crosses they made.

The common reaction and statement of most who first learned of his death was 'Bill was a gentleman and friend.' Always greeting you with his big smile, Bill was most kind, helpful, cooperative, empathetic, and genuinely understanding of his colleagues, especially those whom he had hired and for whom he felt a deep obligation. For example, upon hiring me he said, with a twinkle in his eye yet with dead serious lips, "I'll give you lots of rope and you can either climb it or hang yourself with it!" He liberally offered unique compliments and suggested ways to improve our research. Bill's strong feelings never interfered with his fair and honest evaluations of his employees. A very stimulating conversationalist, we always had many new ideas after Bill departed. In retrospect, most were ideas he had subtly slipped into our heads. He was a true administrator and boss. Bill was the glue that held a large and important cooperative program together.

University administrators and research directors of many bean and pea seed and processing companies would always roll out the red carpet and share information freely with Bill, because they had implicit trust in his confidentiality, valued his wisdom and advice, and admired his strong research program.

Scientists whom he hired and who worked with him included D. Burke, B. F. Dana, R. E. Ford, R. W. Goth, R. O. Hampton, W. J. Kaiser, J. M. Kraft, F. P. McWhorter, M. J. Silbernagel, R. W. Toler, P. Van Schaik, R. E. Wester, F. J. Williams, and V. Wilson. Many of us saw him last in 1983 at the 75th Anniversary celebration of APS at the APS annual meeting, which emphasized a special recognition of member Emeriti.

In 1930, Bill married Ivy Rabbit. She survived him to die on September 8, 1996. They are survived by daughters Margaret (Mrs. Paul) Flood and Carol (Mrs. Bernard) McCarthy and seven grandchildren.