Robert Sidney Cox, 1918 to 1999

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Robert Sidney Cox, a pioneer among agricultural consultants, died at his home in Tallahassee, FL, on 17 September 1999. Dr. Cox, early in his career and almost alone among plant pathologists at the time, dared to forsake the protective umbrella of a steady salary, faculty tenure, and fringe benefits to become one of the leading private agricultural consultants in the United States. His work, which originally began in Florida, later included clients in the Bahamas, Puerto Rico,

Mexico, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Costa Rica. Dr. Cox was the author of more than 90 technical papers and circulars on diseases of vegetables and floral and ornamental plants.

In addition to his professional publications, Dr. Cox authored two books, both of which are partly autobiographical. The first, *The Private Practitioner*, is in many ways a helpful manual for those who wish to enter the consulting field. It describes his own transition from the academic world into the insecure field of agricultural advising, with emphasis upon the problems to be faced. This volume stressed his concept that a fair business relationship functions first around knowledge of subject matter, followed by integrity, sincerity, dependability, and, very importantly, the *willingness to work*.

His second book, *The Agricultural Consultant*, written toward the close of his professional career, begins with a highly interesting and graphic description of his youth in depression-ridden Oklahoma. Dr. Cox describes a way of life and a struggle for economic survival with which few can identify today. Later chapters chronicle challenges, successes, and some failures encountered in a vigorous life of service to commercial agriculture. Interspersed among these discussions, a strong case is made for the important role of the agricultural consultant. Attempts are also made to analyze critically some of the deficiencies of the land grant system in meeting fully its responsibility to the agricultural public in today's world.

Dr. Cox attributed his sense of responsibility, his dedication to hard work, and the forthrightness and objectivity that characterized his pursuit of personal goals to the stringent demands and economic hardships experienced during his early years of farm life. Vigorous in defense of his principles and ideas, he was willing to "stand his ground" against the establishment, to use a phrase that he often employed in admonishing the professional neophyte in the consulting or scientific field.

The publication of *The Private Practitioner* in 1971 led to his recognition nationwide as an authority on agricultural consulting. A steady stream of invitations to discuss his experiences came from land grant universities coast to coast. Another outgrowth of the publication was the invitation to write a biweekly column, Plant Talk, for *Florist's Review*. At the suggestion of his graduate adviser, Dr. Don E. Ellis, Dr. Cox instituted a visitation program whereby graduate students could spend 2 or 3 weeks with him during the growing season, a program that was highly successful for several years.

Robert was born on 25 November 1918 near Kinta, OK, in the eastcentral part of the state, adjacent to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. He joined the family labor force at the age of four and endured

with his family the hard times of the Great Depression, working from dawn to dusk on a small cattle and cotton farm. After high school, Robert attended Connors State Agricultural Junior College at Warner, OK, and later Oklahoma A&M, Stillwater, milking cows and doing other jobs to pay his way. There, he was inspired by the teaching of K. Starr Chester, then head of the Department of Plant Pathology.

After graduation and a summer intern program with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, Robert accepted an assistantship for graduate study in plant pathology at North Carolina State College, Raleigh. His adviser was Dr. Ellis, whose counsel and guidance he revered and praised all of his long life. His graduate education was interrupted by service in World War II, during which he taught electronics and radar to air corps personnel. His graduate studies were resumed at North Carolina State College in 1946.

During his stay in North Carolina, Robert was recognized for his courage in a deeply personal way. He was awarded The Carnegie Medal for Heroism for rescuing a young man from drowning in the Northeast Cape Fear River—a young man who later became his brother-in-law.

In 1949 (together with the authors of this article), Robert was awarded a Ph.D. degree in plant pathology. These were the first Ph.D. degrees in plant pathology bestowed at North Carolina State College, all previous ones were granted administratively at UNC-Chapel Hill, although, in fact, the classwork and research was completed at Raleigh.

After graduation, Dr. Cox had a brief appointment with E. I. DuPont Chemical Company at Wilmington, DE, before joining the University of Delaware, Newark, where he engaged in research, extension, and teaching on vegetable and ornamental diseases for 4 years. In 1954, Dr. Cox accepted an appointment to a research position on diseases of vegetables at the University of Florida Everglades Agricultural Experiment Station at Belle Glade. Here, he became familiar with the challenges of a multitude of disease problems in Florida. After 3 years, Dr. Cox entered the uncharted field of private consulting, or "took the plunge," as he described it. His consulting work was initially oriented toward tomato problems, but later involved chrysanthemum and other vegetable and ornamental crops. His clients eventually included growers not only in Florida, but in Central America and the Caribbean region as well.

Dr. Cox was a leading force in the establishment of The National Alliance of Independent Crop Consultants and in the development of a licensing procedure and code of ethics for the consulting profession. In addition to his consulting practice, Dr. Cox organized and taught, in cooperation with the Palm Beach County Education System, a layman's course in plant pathology. Subsequently, the course was expanded and transferred to Palm Beach Junior College. Dr. Cox found it rewarding and challenging to teach this course to students with limited backgrounds. It also gave him an opportunity to utilize fully the practical experiences gained as a consultant.

During his graduate student days, Robert married Annie B. Farrior of Willard, NC, who survives him. Her love, support, and understanding sustained him throughout 58 years of marriage. Also surviving are son Robert S. Cox, Jr. and wife Mary, son David Cox and wife Jo Ann, daughter Linda Cox Ives, and seven grandchildren.

They inherit the legacy of a devoted, loyal father whose life was characterized by courage, independence, integrity, and zeal, positive traits that led to his success as a pioneer in a unique and demanding profession.