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A Pioneer Oat Agronomist Passes Away

By W. H. Chapman

J. D. Warner, Vice Director in Charge of the North Florida Experiment Station, passed away on November 17, 1951 at the age of 52 years. A brief statement concerning his achievements in oat breeding should be of interest to those who will receive the Newsletter. Mr. Warner was transferred from the Main Station to Quincy in August 1933 and conducted field crop investigations until he was placed in charge of the Station in 1939. During his tenure of service as Agronomist he organized and supervised the oat breeding project as well as early work on the establishment and maintenance of improved pastures.

During the early years crown rust was the limiting factor in the production of oats in the Gulf Coast region. However, Mr. Warner felt that through a scientific breeding program these diseases could be overcome and the farmers of Northwest Florida could grow oats profitably. His enthusiasm for oat breeding was at its highest at the time the red oat selections from Victoria crosses were in early tests. These crosses gave rise to Quincy Red, Quincy Gray, and Florilee. As a result of the release of these varieties, oat acreage increased rapidly and the importance of this crop as a source of grain and winter grazing to meet the needs of increased livestock production was realized. The sudden and severe outbreak of Victoria blight and crown rust in 1948 did not lessen his belief that a sound breeding program would furnish new and more disease resistant varieties.

Although Mr. Warner was best known for his contributions to Southern Agriculture through his early work with field crops and pastures, he will be remembered as a man who could render a practical application of research findings to the farmers' need. By adhering to the principles of hard work, sound judgment, and close observation he acquired a vast knowledge of agricultural findings which were paramount in the betterment of Southern Agriculture. Under his direction the North Florida Experiment Station became one of the outstanding units of the Florida Agricultural System.

The qualities he exemplified will influence the policies of the Southern farmer for many years and those who were closely associated with him will always remember his wise and friendly counsel.

(The following paragraphs regarding Mr. J. D. Warner's work as an oat breeder have been appended to Mr. Chapman's statement by T. R. Stanton):

During the period Mr. Warner was engaged in actual oat breeding at the North Florida Experiment Station, Quincy, he showed marked ability and judgment in selecting and testing disease-resistant breeding lines and other oats, several of which gave rise to the then promising new varieties, Quincy Red, Quincy Gray and Florilee, mentioned by Mr. Chapman as Mr. Warner's principal productions.

He was one of a small group of Southern agronomists who believed that if varieties could be introduced or developed with protective resistance to crown rust, oat production could be made fairly successful in the lower South where severe epidemics of the oat rusts, especially crown rust, occur nearly every year. This belief became a reality by the distribution and excellent performance on North Florida farms of the new varieties developed by Mr. Warner, at least until their usefulness was greatly impaired by Victoria blight.

It was the writer's good fortune to occasionally visit Mr. Warner officially at Quincy during the period he was rather intensively engaged in oat breeding. He used modern nursery designs and subjected his data to statistical analysis. As previously indicated he was able to make much progress in breeding for resistance to the then prevalent races of crown rust as heavy natural epidemics of this disease occurred nearly every year, and consequently a very rapid elimination of the susceptible lines was possible. At that time the Victoria type of crown rust resistance afforded a protection to oats not hitherto available in the Gulf Coast area and its discovery marked the beginning of a new era in oat breeding. Hence, it was definitely demonstrated beyond doubt that crown rust infection was truly the decisive limiting factor in oat production in this area. Bond derivatives distributed later gave protection against Victoria blight, but in turn succumbed to races 45, 57 and similar races of crown rust. These again in turn were followed by Camellia and Southland, varieties with some resistance to the new crown rust races.

If oat breeding in the South is continued in the hands of men with the ideals, abilities, and enthusiasms of Mr. Warner, Dr. Wilds and others the writer believes that new varieties will be developed and distributed to meet each and every threat of new diseases, or new races of old diseases that may arise.

Mr. Warner was a native of South Carolina and a graduate of Clemson College. He was a man of high ideals, excellent personality and greatly admired by his coworkers and friends. He was truly a friend of man and a benefactor to Southern agriculture.