

ITHACA, NEW YORK  
Cornell University

### Centennial Celebration: Cornell's Department of Plant Breeding, 1907-2006

--Kass, LB; Murphy, RP

The Department of Plant Breeding and Genetics, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, celebrated its centennial on July 26-28, 2007. Many students who studied the genetics and breeding of maize, small grains, perennial forages and vegetable crops, reunited at Cornell with their former student colleagues and professors to present or attend talks at the day and a half symposium in honor of the Department's 100th anniversary (Mark Sorrells, Chair, Department of Plant Breeding and Genetics, presiding).

The program featured a historical perspective on the "Evolution of Plant Breeding at Cornell" by R. P. Murphy, former Chair of the Department (1953-1964), in addition to talks by graduate student alumnae and alumni. The symposium was videotaped and soon will be edited and available for viewing.

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Norman Borlaug, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize (1970), unfortunately could not present the keynote address, scheduled for the first day of the symposium. Still, we were all proud that earlier this month, on July 17, 2007, Borlaug, in his 93rd year, was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. Murphy, the second speaker on the program and Borlaug's University of Minnesota graduate school colleague of the same age, filled the gap with his first PowerPoint presentation, after which the audience of more than 250 strong gave him a standing ovation.

Murphy and reunion participants fondly recalled the speakers for the Department's 75th anniversary symposium on the "Golden Age of Corn Genetics" (Figure 1). All had been trained at Cornell in maize genetics or cytogenetics (see Rhoades, *Annu. Rev. Genet.* 18:1-29, 1984).



Figure 1. 1982, Synopsis, 75th Plant Breeding Department reunion, speakers for the "Golden Age of Corn Genetics Symposium". Left to Right: Marcus M. Rhoades, Charles R. Burnham, Barbara McClintock, Harriet B. Creighton, George F. Sprague, Harold S. Perry. (Courtesy Department of Plant Breeding, Cornell University)

The afternoon of July 27 featured lab and field tours of the Department's facilities. One of the highlights was a field trip to the Emerson Garden, where Margaret Smith, Denise Costich and Owen Hoekenga had planted a Living Map of Mutants of Maize (Figure 2). This was an updated reproduction of the living chromosome map, which had been planted by Marcus Rhoades for the 1932, 6th International Congress of Genetics held in Ithaca, the year of the Department's 25th anniversary celebration.



Figure 2. Plant Breeding Centennial reunion attendees visit the Living Map of Mutants of Maize, July 27, 2007, Cornell University, Emerson Garden, Cornell Plantations. (Photo by Denise Costich.) (For full color, see p. 32.)

Many participants attended the Department picnic at Stewart Park, the evening of July 27, where they made their own ice cream sundaes, a treat invented in Ithaca, and gave recollections of times past at the "Open Mic." Tours of the Geneva Experiment Station and other local attractions were scheduled for the following day, Saturday, July 28.

All attendees received the recently published *Evolution of Plant Breeding at Cornell University, A Centennial History, 1907-2006*, by Royse P. Murphy in cooperation with Lee B. Kass (Figure 3). The story begins at the turn of the 20th century with the exciting applications of the new science of genetics to plant breeding and continues with R. A. Emerson and students' contributions to the field. Chairs of the Department also contributed memoirs to the centennial history volume. The book includes a photo section of over 65 photographs and snap shots of the Department and the Synapsis Club, beginning in 1907 through 2006. A copy of the centennial history can be ordered from the Department of Plant Breeding and Genetics office (Cynda Farnham, [clf4@cornell.edu](mailto:clf4@cornell.edu), phone: 607-255-2180) at \$15 per copy.

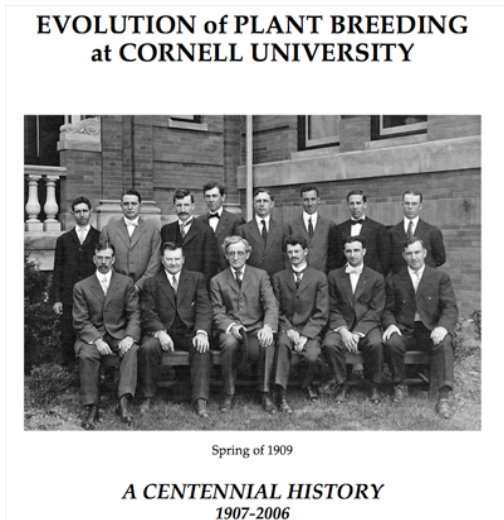


Figure 3. Evolution of Plant Breeding at Cornell University: A Centennial History, 1907-2006 (Murphy & Kass 2007).