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George J. Wilds, Jr. Noted Southern Oat Breeder Dies

By T. R. Stanton

George James Wilds, Jr., born at Longtown, S. C., Sept. 19, 1889, was stricken while attending the Clemson College-South Carolina University football game at Columbia, S. C., on Oct. 25, 1951 and died the next day in a Columbia hospital. He had been in ill health for two years, but for several months prior to his untimely and rather sudden passing his condition had greatly improved.

He received his A. B. degree from the University of South Carolina in 1913; the A. M. degree from Cornell University in 1917; the honorary degree of D. Sc. from Clemson College in 1937; and the honorary degree of L.L.D. from the University of South Carolina in 1946. In 1932, Dr. Wilds was awarded a testimonial for distinguished service to the agricultural development of South Carolina by Clemson College; in 1947 he was presented a Medallion of honor by the Association of Southern Agricultural Workers for outstanding service to Southern agriculture; in 1947 he also was proclaimed as "The Man of the Year" in South Carolina agriculture by the Progressive Farmer, a leading Southern farm journal; and in 1948 he was given the South Carolina American Legion Distinguished Service Award.

Dr. Wilds was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Society of Agronomy, The American Phytopathological Society, The Association of Southern Agricultural Workers, the South Carolina Academy of Science, and the Darlington County Agricultural Society of which he served as president for two years. He was a member of the Sigma Xi and Phi Beta Kappa honor fraternities and the Omicron Delta Kappa social fraternity. He was a Rotarian, a Mason and a Presbyterian Elder.

Dr. Wilds is survived by his widow, Mrs. Ruth Lawton Wilds, a son, Jimmy Wilds and his step mother, Mrs. George J. Wilds, Sr. Dr. Wilds became an employee of the Coker's Pedigreed Seed Company in 1908 with whom he later served as Assistant Plant Breeder, Plant Breeder, and Director of Plant Breeding. He succeeded the late David R. Coker as president of the Company in 1939. He also was treasurer and managing director of the Company at the time of his death.

However, this story is concerned primarily with regard to Dr. Wilds as an oat breeder, although he was equally distinguished as a cotton breeder, originating several varieties that are widely grown throughout the Cotton Belt. These have contributed millions of dollars to the agricultural economy of the South. He also was a wheat breeder and did some improvement work with barley, corn, soybeans and other crops.

As an oat breeder he was one of the most intelligent, efficient, and enthusiastic workers the writer has known. Dr. Wilds early turned to hybridization to produce new strains and varieties, especially to develop smut-and crown rust-resistant winter oats for the South.

The following story will give the reader some indication of his intense interest and enthusiasm regarding the possibilities of plant breeding.

In the fall of 1921, after serving the Coker Company several years, he decided to return to Cornell University and take up studies leading toward the Ph. D. degree. While on his way to Ithaca, N. Y. to arrange for his graduate work he stopped over in Washington, D. C. and visited the writer in the Division of Cereal Crops and Diseases, U. S. Department of Agriculture to discuss oat breeding, varieties and potential thesis problems. In the course of our discussion the writer incidentally mentioned Navarro, then a new and distinct morphological type of red oats with high resistance to the oat smuts that had been collected a few years previously in Texas. At the time it was believed that this oat probably would offer an ideal parent for breeding smut-resistant red oats. It also was suggested by the writer that crosses on Navarro might offer excellent genetic material for a Ph. D. thesis.

Young Wilds at once became so enthusiastic regarding the potentialities for breeding smut-resistant oats that his plans for graduate work at Cornell were abandoned; in fact, after being presented with a package of Navarro oats he returned to Hartsville and started to breed smut-resistant red oats, and later rust-resistant red oats with a zeal and enthusiasm that never abated until the day of his death.

His principal oat productions include the original smut-resistant Fulgrain, a new type of red oats that resulted from a cross between Norton 20-93 (Big Boy) and Navarro. Later by crossing Fulgrain on Victoria oats he evolved the now well-known smut- and crown rust-resistant Fulgrain strains, and a new varietal type with the same disease reactions; namely Victorgrain, of which several strains have been distributed. Of these, Victorgrain 48-93 (C. I. 5355) first placed on the market in the fall of 1950 gives every indication of being one of the best varieties ever distributed by the Coker Company. He also selected the Stanton oat from mass seed of the Lee-Victoria hybrid, made by the writer.

The early-maturing, stiff-strawed, disease-resistant red oat strains of the Fulgrain and Victorgrain types have been widely distributed in the South and thus have been among the leading red-oat types grown for a decade. The Stanton type oat has been less popular owing primarily to high susceptibility to Victoria blight and late maturity.

Space forbids further discussion of other oat varieties developed by Dr. Wilds and associates by crossing on Bond. It should be stated here, however, that the widespread occurrence of the destructive Victoria blight in Victoria-related oats, and the appearance of new races of crown rust such as races 45 and 57 on Bond-derived varieties were a great source of worry to Dr. Wilds during the last few years of his life.

Dr. Wilds was a believer in testing very large plant populations of the crosses being exploited. Hence, the growing of 40,000 to 50,000 nursery rows of oats annually was not uncommon at Hartsville. His method of testing strains of oats for resistance to smut is of special interest. The hulls were removed from the groats by running the seed through a small thresher and then floating the hulls off in water. The dry smut spores

were applied to the seed, which usually was sown in 15-foot rows at about normal rates of seeding. As a rule, heavy infections with a consequent efficient evaluation of the relative smut resistance of the various breeding strains and check varieties were obtained.

In conclusion, a word should be said regarding Dr. Wilds, the man. He was of Scotch ancestry and possessed many of the fine attributes of that hardy clan. He was truly the friend of man; his inspired civic leadership, genial personality, wide sympathy, broad outlook, great executive ability and outstanding achievement in the field of agriculture made him one of the best known and most beloved men of the South.