PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS

Howard Scott Gentry, farmer, famed plant hunter, agave specialist, author, and CSSA Fellow

Howard Scott Gentry, famed plant researcher and botanist, was the world's leading authority on agaves and was an agricultural explorer who collected and mapped the plants of northwest Mexico by burro in the 1930s. Later, he traveled to many lands and braved perils—political unrest, opium runners, flooding rivers, and malaria attacks—to bring to the U.S. exotic and useful plants. He also collected an incredibly large number of agaves.

Gentry was born in Temecula, California, 10 December 1903. He received his B. S. degree in vertebrate zoology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1931. Two years after graduation, at the age of 30, he began his initial trip to Mexico. With his wife, a rifle, and a shotgun, he left for the Warihio Indian country. The Gentrys lived with the Warihio Indians, a little known people, who inhabited the valleys and barrancas of the Rio Mayo country in the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua. Gentry did a thorough study of the Rio Mayo, including plants, reptiles, mammals, birds, and humans. He stayed three years and later made repeated forays to Mexico throughout the 1930s—eight trips in all. This period in their lives eventually led to publication of *Rio Mayo Plants* in 1942 and *The Warihio Indians of Sonora Chihuahua*, an ethnographic study of the Warihio, released in 1963.

During his early zoological work in Mexico, he became well known in paleontological history when two fossils he discovered were named for him. But Gentry's interest in botany grew stronger the longer he worked in the field.

In 1940, Gentry returned to the U.S. to begin work on a graduate degree in botany at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. However, his studies were interrupted with the beginning of World War II. The USDA's Rubber Office took advantage of his knowledge of Mexico and sent him there to search for a source of rubber closer to home than Indonesia and less subject to the unpredictability of a global war. He worked on guayule and *Cryptostegia* (rubber vine).

After his work in Mexico, he became patriarch of the Gentry Experimental Farm in rural eastern Murrieta, California, in the 1940s. He wanted a place where he could test his ability to grow plants in arid climates. In addition to plants that used little water, the farm also supplied unusual cut flowers to customers worldwide. During this time, the Gentrys had two daughters.

He received his Ph.D. degree in botany from the University of Michigan in 1947 and worked at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, as a research botanist from 1946 to 1950.

Gentry received his authentic plant explorer title in 1951, when he became principal plant collector for USDA's New Crops Research Branch, Beltsville, Maryland. From 1951 to 1970, he made 15 expeditions through the southwestern U.S. into Mexico and as far south as Guatemala. He became famous as an explorer, bringing to the U.S. exotic materials. For some 50 years, he gathered more than 15,000 germ plasm specimens in 24 countries, counting food crops, forages, ornamentals, and oilseed sources.

He made two trips annually to Baja California during the 1950s in search of steroid-producing plants, his main concern. He found two sources in Mexico—certain

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members of the Agave family and the genus Dioscorea of the yam family. His investigations yielded precursors of cortisone compounds; an agave alkaloid was subsequently named gentrojenin in his honor. It is used in treating heart disease. The forage plants, grasses, and legumes he found comprise about 40% of these species in today's plant breeding programs. Ultimately, he donated all of the plant specimens to the University of Arizona, Tucson, herbarium.

For his work, he received USDA's Superior Service Award. Other awards included a Sustained Outstanding Performance Award from USDA in 1962, and the Meyer Medal for distinguished service in plant introductions in 1966.

He was named a CSSA Fellow on 12 May 1975. The certificate citation read, "Thorough scholar of the Sonoran Desert flora; precise researcher and author on the genus Agave."

Gentry is the author of 70 publications, including three books and articles on the research and development of plants for arid regions—jojoba, guayule, oregano, chia, hyptis, and gum tragacanth.

In the early 1970s, he retired from the USDA to finish his research on Agave, a study that he had begun in the 1930s. The Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix provided an office and herbarium space; funding came from the National Science Foundation in the form of grants.

Gentry's work for the next 10 years centered on Agave in the southwestern U.S., Mexico, and Central America. When no one could identify the Agave specimens he sent from Mexico, he found that he had to identify and classify the specimens himself. The research resulted in the publications of Agaves of Baja California in 1978, and Agaves of Continental North America, which he worked on for most of his life, in 1982. The latter, comprising 670 pages, is considered the definitive work on agaves.

In 1998 several authors revised Gentry's landmark study, Rio Mayo Plants, publishing it as Gentry's Rio Mayo Plants. The Agaves of Continental North America was reprinted in 1998.

Dr. Howard Scott Gentry received an honorary Ph.D. degree from the University of Arizona, Tucson, on 12 May 1990.

At age 89, he died of chronic lung disease at Tucson, Arizona, on 1 April 1993. His wife Maria; two daughters, Rita of Murrieta and Linnea Gentry Sheehan of Tucson; and two grandsons survive him. Gentry was buried at the family farm in Murrieta.