

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

GEORGE JAMES PEIRCE (1868 – 1954)

George James Peirce, Professor Emeritus of Botany, died on October 15, 1954, seven months past his eighty-sixth birthday and fifty-seven years after his arrival at Stanford as assistant professor of botany and plant physiology. He devoted nearly three score years to the service of the University, to the city of Palo Alto, to the Red Cross, and to his family and host of friends.

Professor Peirce was born in Manila, P. I., went to Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his widowed mother when he was only six years of age, and completed his undergraduate education at Harvard, where he received the Bachelor of Science degree in 1890. He spent 1892-1894 studying plant physiology and anatomy at Bonn, Munich, and Leipzig, and received both the A.M. and Ph. D. degrees at Leipzig. He served as assistant professor of botany at Indiana University from 1895 to 1897 and arrived at Stanford with his bride in the fall of 1897. In 1900 he became associate professor and in 1910 professor of botany. He served as acting head of the Department of Botany on numerous occasions while the late Professor Douglas Houghton Campbell was away on extended field trips, and became executive head of the department in 1925, holding that position until his retirement in 1933.

Shortly after his arrival in Palo Alto, George Peirce became active in the affairs of the village. A serious outbreak of typhoid fever was curbed after the young botanist demonstrated that the source of the infections was contaminated drinking water and milk. His interest in the health of the Palo Altans soon lead him to accept membership in the Board of Health, and he served as chairman of that body for a number of years. In 1914 he was chosen chairman of the Palo Alto Chapter of the American Red Cross, and he served continuously in that office until 1941. During the first World War he was a member of the Fuel Administration in California, and from time to time was on various commissions, committees, and investigative bodies concerned with conservation, abatement of smoke and smelter-fumes damaging to native vegetation and to crop plants, the problems of agriculturists in irrigated districts, and others.

His interests in various phases of botany were broad, and he contributed a number of significant papers to a dozen or more journals. These papers dealt with plant physiology, plant anatomy, host-parasite relationships, morphology of some of the lower plants, and with several phases of conservation. He wrote three textbooks on plant physiology between 1903 and 1931 and was coauthor with three other Stanford faculty members of a textbook in general biology.

Important as his scientific contributions were, many of his friends remember him equally as well for his interest in music and in fine literature and art. Not only did he love good music, he constantly wished to share his enjoyment with others, and often provided younger colleagues and graduate students with tickets to concerts. He was especially interested in the summer concerts in Hillsboro and for years rarely missed one of the Sunday afternoon performances. His general philosophy of life was built around the central theme that to get the most out of life one must

serve the University, the community, and one's fellow citizens with humility and a cheerful kindness. He lived his philosophy consistently and with a constant twinkle in his eyes. His kindness was to him no effort-- it was his way of life. He once said that he had spent a great deal of his life in spoiling three elderly women; his mother, Madam Mitchell, and his wife--but that he had enjoyed every bit of it.

Professor Peirce joined comparatively few organizations, but his support of those to which he did belong was loyal. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Die Deutsche Botanische Gesellschaft, and the California Botanical Society. He was a charter member of the American Association of University Professors, and served as President of the Botanical Society of America in 1932, and for at least two terms as President of the California Botanical Society. He belonged to the Commonwealth Club and the Harvard Club of San Francisco.

His departure leaves those who have been accustomed to chat with him daily as he came to his office to read his mail with a keen sense of loss. The sadness is tempered, however, with the awareness that all who ever met and talked with him benefited from his keen humor, his great kindness, and his high regard for his fellow men. His human greatness lives on in our memories.

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