Rollins Adams Emerson Biography

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Contents

Rollins Adams Emerson Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

Rollins Emerson led American research on maize (corn) **genetics** from the rediscovery of Mendel's laws in 1900, until his death in 1947. Emerson's studies of the **inheritance** of quantitative characteristics, such as ear row number, and qualitative characteristics, such as plant color and variegation, were important elements in establishing maize as one of the central **experimental organisms** in twentieth century genetics. Perhaps more important than his individual research, Emerson's laboratory at Cornell University became the professional center for maize genetics. Besides fostering the careers of such influential geneticists as Americans Marcus Rhoades (1903-1991) and **Barbara McClintock** (1902-1992), Emerson established a maize research cooperation that maintained and distributed seed stock. Together, Emerson's Maize Genetics Cooperation, the Maize News Letter, and the informal connections of former graduate students and postdoctoral fellows created a research network comparable to American geneticist T. H. Morgan's (1866-1945)*Drosophilae* network at Columbia University.

Emerson was both a product of and a major contributor to the success of the American agricultural experiment station. Born on a farm in upstate New York, Emerson moved with his family at the age of seven to the prairies of Nebraska. Attending that state's land grant university, Emerson received a B. S. from the College of Agriculture of the University of Nebraska in 1897. Before eventually arriving at the Cornell University Department of Plant Breeding in 1914, Emerson briefly held posts at the Office of Experiment Stations of the United States Department of Agriculture and the Nebraska Agriculture Experiment Station. Like many professional researchers at American land grant institutions, Emerson conducted practical as well as theoretical research. Emerson's contributions to plant breeding include a the development of a disease-resistant pea bean strain and improved strains of celery and melons.

Although Emerson tutored many graduate students, his position at Cornell allowed him to forego formal teaching responsibilities. Emerson was known instead as an adept administrator, loyal mentor, and an honored national figure. Emerson was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and served brief terms as president of both the American Society of Naturalists and the Genetics Society of America.