

Thad H. Pittenger, 1921-2003

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Abstract

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The field of *Neurospora* genetics has lost one of its most devoted and colorful pioneers: Thad Pittenger. "Ted," as he was called by his family and friends, died on March 31, 2003 in Manhattan, Kansas after a long illness.

After returning from World War II with the rank of lieutenant, a Purple Heart and a life-long limp, Ted and his wife, Arlene (Hadan), headed for the University of Nebraska where he earned a B.S. degree in Botany in 1947, and a Ph.D. degree in Genetics in 1951 under the guidance of E. F. Frolik. Having dealt with the then uncertain concept of the inheritance of pollen viability, and hindered by his injury from doing field work on plants, he looked for an organism that was amenable to genetic manipulation in the laboratory. He decided that *Neurospora* was a good prospect, and joined Mary Mitchell's group at the California Institute of Technology as an AEC Postdoctoral Fellow. There he worked on pseudo wild-type strains and became interested in maternal inheritance as he witnessed the characterization of the first extra-chromosomal mutants, *poky* and *mi-3*. While Mary converted Ted into a firm believer in the power of *Neurospora* genetics, it was the work of her chemist husband Herschel that awakened in him the instinct that the pot of gold at the end of the genetics rainbow was "molecular" in nature. From 1953 to 1957, he was a Research Associate at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory for Biology in the group assembled by K. C. Atwood. Those years undoubtedly were some of the best in Ted's career, and it was there that he became part of a group of *Neurospora*ologists who not only became close friends, but also were part of a group of dedicated supporters of the *Neurospora* Culture Collection, the *Neurospora* Newsletter and the *Neurospora* Information Conference, all of which emerged in the early 1960s.

Ted served on the Editorial Board of the *Neurospora* Newsletter from 1964-1968, and as a member of the Planning Committee for the Third *Neurospora* Information Conference held in 1966 at Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Following a short stint on the faculty of Marquette University, Ted was recruited as an Associate Professor to Kansas State University in 1959. There he continued research on phenomena that he often called "the oddballs of *Neurospora* genetics": somatic cell variation and recombination in pseudo-wild-type strains, sources of instability of nuclear ratios in growing mycelia (ranging from heterokaryon incompatibility to a host of other yet to be explained forces of intracellular selection), and cytoplasmic mutants. He invented the continuous-growth tube and, aided by the efforts of willing graduate students, demonstrated that selection for nuclei and mitochondria harboring deleterious mutations can occur in hyphae of *Neurospora* cultures grown by continuous hyphal elongation over distances greater than 100 meters. He was the source of many of the respiratory mutants that were subsequently used by several prominent groups for the development of landmark insights into the biogenesis and function of mitochondrial complexes and processes. During the last decade of his career, and when it became possible to do genetics in the laboratory with cell cultures, he reverted to research on plants, still driven by his fascination for the sources of the phenotypic/genetic diversity that is manifested in clones of somatic cells.

Ted was an extraordinary mentor, demanding but also very gracious. He never missed an opportunity to inspire a graduate student, and his talent to do so was exercised richly through his appointments at Kansas State University as the administrator of several training grants and director of the Interdepartmental Genetics Program. The memories of his infectious enthusiasm for science, sense of humor, intolerance of sloppy work, personal integrity, altruism and zest for life will be cherished by all his students, posdocs and colleagues.

Helmut Bertrand