

## *Herbert Ian Behrmann (1918–2006)*

Professor Herbert Ian Behrmann, a founding member of the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Natal, died at the age of 88, after being hit by a bus on the last Friday afternoon of 2006. A resident of Rosewood Estate retirement centre in Jabu Ndlovu (Loop) Street, he had spent the day writing letters and was on his way to post them when the accident happened.

Behrmann's death severs one of the last remaining personal links with the early days of the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Natal. When he joined as a lecturer in Agricultural Economics in 1948, the faculty was housed in the old Oribi Military Hospital. Its library consisted of 20 volumes on one shelf, with not a single book on agricultural economics among them.



*Herbert Ian Behrmann*

Born in Johannesburg, the son of a magistrate, Behrmann was educated at Maritzburg College, matriculating in 1935. He completed his B.Sc. (Agric) at the University of Pretoria in 1939 and his Master's degree two years later. Three of the presidents of the SRC in his undergraduate years became prominent South Africans: Hilgard Muller, Anton Rupert and Albert Geysler.

For his Master's thesis he did a survey of dairy farms near Johannesburg. He drafted a questionnaire and his supervisor, Professor F.R. Tomlinson, suggested that he start with an English-speaking farmer. Wilkinson and Craig, two farmers in partnership, seemed a good bet. He was dropped off at Wilkinson's home. However, Wilkinson proved to sport a long beard and speak not a word of English, so the interview had to be conducted and the questionnaire filled in entirely in Afrikaans. The session ended with Wilkinson asking, 'Is jy a lid van die Ossewa Brandwag?' Tomlinson was delighted that his student had passed this test of bilingualism.

When in 1942 Behrmann volunteered for military service he was refused permission by the Department of Agriculture, for which he then worked as a marketing officer, an assistant professional officer and a lecturer in agricultural economics and farm accounting at Potchefstroom, Boschetto and Cedara Colleges of Agriculture successively.

Behrmann was to spend 35 years at the University of Natal: as lecturer in Agricultural Economics from 1948 to 1956, as senior lecturer from 1956 to 1960 and as professor from 1960 until his retirement at the end of 1983. His particular fields of interest were agricultural development, farm management and production economics, the history of agriculture and farm appraisal, but at one time or another he lectured in most courses offered by the department.

Behrmann's Ph.D. thesis (1960), 'The Economics of Sugar Cane Production', was recognised by the award of its Founders' Medal and Prize by the Economic Society of South Africa. It was, said the society, 'noteworthy for the application of economic principles and ingenious statistical sampling methods to one of South Africa's major industries'. Behrmann concluded that there was an over-abundance of labour on the

average sugar cane farm and a sad lack of expenditure on the three fundamentals: machinery, fertiliser and management. Up to the time of his retirement 23 years later, he was one of only three agricultural economists to have won that award.

Behrmann served as vice-chairman and then chairman of the Economic Society of South Africa, as president of the Agricultural Economics Association of South Africa and president of the Agricultural Scientific Association of Natal. He was chosen four times to represent South Africa at the conferences of the International Association of Agricultural Economists. The first was in the USSR in 1970, which he was unable to attend due to visa difficulties. In 1973 he got to the conference at São Paulo in Brazil and chaired a special group session. In 1979 he was able to attend at Banff, Canada, but in 1982 when the conference was held in Indonesia, visa problems again kept him at home and his paper was read in his absence.

Behrmann represented the universities of Pretoria and Natal at hockey, was active in the administration of swimming and remained an active tennis player until the age of 84. He was a member of the Genealogical Society and traced the history of his family back into the 19th century. He was a regular participant in the activities of Birdlife KZN Midlands and a faithful churchman, a member of St Alphege's Church at which his memorial service took place. His wife René predeceased him by some years. He was survived by his three children, four grandsons and a granddaughter.

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