

## *Susarah Johanna Truter (1910 – 2007)*

In the field of Agriculture it is rare that a woman achieves prominence as an academic. Yet it is probably true to say that Professor Truter who, at the age of 97, passed away in Pietermaritzburg, herself, and through the graduates she trained, produced more plant pathologists and mycologists than any other in South Africa. With her passing, an era in this field in South Africa comes to an end.

She was born on a farm in Aliwal North, and her love for nature that characterised her life, clearly had its roots there. In 1931 she obtained her B.Sc. degree, majoring in Botany and Zoology from Grey University College in Bloemfontein and was awarded the Junior Captain Scott Medal for achieving the top marks in Zoology. She then acquired a Diploma in Education and for five years taught Biology at Durban Girls' College to repay, as she later said, her considerable student loan. In 1939 she again demonstrated her academic prowess by being awarded a Master's degree in Mycology, *cum laude*, by the University of Stellenbosch.

She then applied for an overseas scholarship under the auspices of the cultural agreement between South Africa and Holland and became the first woman student to gain admission to this programme. So in 1939 Susarah Truter went to Het Willie Commelin



*Professor Truter*

Scholten Phytopathologisch Instituut in Baarn, in the Netherlands, and registered for a Ph.D. degree with, as her supervisor, Professor Johanna Westerdijk (the first woman professor in the Netherlands). The outbreak of World War 2 compelled her to remain in Holland for a total of eight years and, as a South African, she was even interned by the Nazis for four months. She always considered herself very fortunate that she was released the day before the internees were transported to Germany.

On 10 July 1947 she was awarded her Ph.D. degree by the University of Utrecht after defending her thesis on the die-back of a European tree, the alder, and then was able to return to her beloved South Africa on the Dutch liner, *Oranjefontein*. She always retained close contact with her mentor, Professor Westerdijk, who later, in 1953, visited South Africa for an extended holiday.

On her return to South Africa in 1947, Dr Truter was appointed as plant pathologist at the Western Province Fruit Research Laboratories at Stellenbosch and it was there that, in 1949, she was persuaded by the Secretary for Agriculture to take up the post of Senior Lecturer in Plant Pathology in the brand-new Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Natal. When she arrived in Pietermaritzburg that faculty was housed in Oribi village, so she was offered the old war hospital dispensary from which she proceeded to fabricate her sterile student practical laboratory!

In 1956 she was promoted to the new chair of Plant Pathology and Microbiology at the University of Natal, her elevation being approved by the Minister of Agriculture, as happened in those days.

During 1961–62 her male colleagues elected her to the position of Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and in doing so made her the first female Dean in a faculty of agriculture in the world. This led to an entry in the *Guinness Book of Records*.

On 30 June 1976 Professor Truter retired, leaving behind her a department that had grown to five academic staff members and a number of technicians and laboratory assistants.

What was she like to those who knew her? She was a formidable, no-nonsense woman, even at 97, yet behind the tough facade there was kindness and considerateness: a little bouquet would arrive on a birthday, or a sympathetic telephone call came when life had dealt a blow. She was meticulous in all she did and exacted that from those who worked with, or studied under, her. She was a superb organiser, a very efficient administrator, and unstintingly gave of her time, devoting many of her evenings and weekends to assisting those she supervised with thesis drafts or with the writing of articles.

She remained unmarried and during her working life devoted all her time and tireless energy to 'her department', 'her staff' and 'her students'. Thereafter, her retirement was devoted to her family, her many friends, the children of her friends, her garden, her pets and the droves of birds of various types that descended on the feeding place in her garden at the appropriate time every day.

She leaves a great void, but clearly her legacy lives on especially through the many students she has produced, many of whom now find themselves in senior positions throughout the world. She was a very important and well-loved person in our lives, certainly in mine. *Requiescat in pace!*

FRITS H.J. RIJKENBERG