Ralph Palmer Agnew

December 29, 1900 — October 16, 1986

Ralph Palmer Agnew was born in Poland, Ohio, on December 29, 1900. He was the eldest of five brothers in a farming family. Throughout his life his absorbing interests were farming (later in the watered-down form of gardening) and mathematics. He obtained an A.B. degree in mathematics and engineering at Allegheny College and a master's degree in the same subject at Iowa State College. In 1925 he came to Cornell as a graduate student and became a Doctor of Philosophy in 1930. From 1930 to 1932 he was a National Research Fellow and worked at the University of Cincinnati, at Brown University, and at Princeton University.

Agnew's outstanding ability had greatly impressed the Cornell faculty while he was still a graduate student. They were determined to hire him, and he was appointed to an assistant professorship in 1931, while still a National Research Fellow. From then on Agnew was at Cornell (he became a professor in 1938 and emeritus in 1968) except for accepting a variety of short, prestigious, visiting appointments at other institutions.

Agnew was the chairman of the Department of Mathematics from 1940 to 1950. We can do no better than to quote the following description from Mark Kac's *Enigmas of Chance*:

> "During his ten years as chairman, Ag, as he is called by his friends, brought about at times, at considerable personal sacrifice, changes in outlook and attitude which prepared the way for the mathematics department to become one of the leading departments in the country. Ag was a very good mathematician and a superb administrator. By the latter I do not mean that he was universally popular. Quite to the contrary, he was at times severely criticized, but he stayed with his convictions, and in the end most of his controversial decisions were vindicated. Ag avoided emergencies by anticipating them and acting before they had a chance to arise. After our entry into the war he foresaw that sooner or later large numbers of soldiers and sailors would be sent to the universities for some kind of technical training, and that there was bound to be a tremendous demand for elementary mathematics courses. So, very early in the game he began to collect information about faculty members throughout the university who remembered enough of their high school and college mathematics to be able to teach high school algebra, plane geometry, and possibly a little trigonometry.

> "Sure enough, six hundred army recruits arrived in June 1943, to be followed by more than sixteen hundred navy V-12s, including three hundred marines. The army contingent came, if I remember correctly, on

Friday, and the following Monday twenty or so as yet unscheduled sections had to be met. They all were, after Ag spent the weekend telephoning his 'reserves.' Because of his genius for organization and his foresight, that Monday proceeded in a reasonably well-ordered way instead of being the chaos that one might have expected."

During Agnew's term as chairman Cornell became a world center in the field of probability because his skill and foresight enabled him to bring Will Feller and Mark Kac to the university.

After the war, when the rapid expansion of universities created an acute shortage of teachers, Agnew cast his net wide. One of us (W. H. J. F.) gratefully records that he owes his association with Cornell to Agnew's invitation.

Agnew had a sharp, clear, incisive, and original mind. He abhorred prevarication and always went straight to the heart of the matter both in his thinking and in his conversation. He was a tremendous teacher and a prolific and successful research mathematician, a world authority in the field of summability of series. He published two excellent text books, one on calculus and one on differential equations. These books clearly display the qualities that made him such an outstanding teacher: The central part of an argument is stated with crystal clarity and without fussy detail. Interesting applications are exhibited and motivated, often with a dash of quick humor.

In 1927 Agnew married Anne Wright, who survives him. They had one son, Palmer Wright Agnew, who is a successful engineer at IBM. Agnew died on October 16, 1986.

G. Roger Livesay, Anil Nerode, Wolfgang H. Fuchs