Richard A. Ledford

June 30, 1931 – October 9, 2021

Richard Allison Ledford, professor emeritus of Food Science and chair of the department for a total of 17 years, died in Flat Rock, North Carolina on October 9, 2021 at the age of 90.

A native of Charlotte, North Carolina, Richard grew up on dairy farms in the Charlotte area. He served as an officer in the U.S. Army and received a B.S. in Food Science, an M.S. in Food Microbiology from North Carolina State University and a Ph.D. in Food Microbiology from Cornell University. He served a three-year term as Director of the New York State Food Laboratory in Albany (the lab analyzes samples of foods taken during inspections of food facilities throughout New York) before rejoining Cornell as an assistant professor in the Department of Food Science in 1964. Richard rose through the professorial ranks and twice served as Department chair. He retired in 1996 to his native North Carolina (to a life of Golf).

Growing up during the Great Depression, Richard came from a family of very modest means. The only reason he ended up studying at North Carolina State University was because a local farmer took a
special interest in him and encouraged him to pursue his dreams. Professor Ledford was a wonderful mentor and his love and support of graduate students was the result of that special farmer’s believing in him and that was his way of paying it forward! He successfully mentored 32 graduate students who went on to make their contributions to a better world.

Dick Ledford was a very thoughtful, mild-mannered, soft-spoken individual who possessed a kind and gentle demeanor. He was an excellent microbiologist who always paid attention to detail. He sincerely cared for people and treated everyone he encountered with dignity and respect. Richard was an effective leader, who lead our department through a significant period of growth.

Dr. Michael Dunn, one of Richard’s former doctoral students and currently Professor and Food Science Coordinator in the Department of Nutrition, Dietetics, and Food Science at Brigham Young University, remembers Richard as follows: “I remember Dr. Ledford as a very kind and understanding advisor. He was patient and encouraging and his gentle, soft-spoken manner always made me feel better and more hopeful about my potential for success. Without his kind assistance and wisdom, I would not be where I am today.”

Professor Ledford’s field of specialization was the study of dairy and food microbiology and its application to cultured dairy products. His “effort distribution” was 50% Research, 45% Teaching and 5% Extension. Over the years he taught a variety of courses including Food Microbiology and Food Microbiology laboratory (FS 394-395), Food Analysis (FS XXX), Food Fermentations (FS 406), as well as Senior Seminar (FS 400) and Contemporary Perspectives in Food Science (FS 102), an orientation for incoming freshmen. The Senior Seminar was a required course where every senior would have the experience of presenting a proper scientific seminar. It also included vital advice on preparing a resume and an accompanying cover letter for students seeking employment after graduation.

Richard had a very active presence in the Department’s Extension program, even though his effort distribution was only five percent.
He provided assistance to laboratories associated with the New York State food industry and was always available to lend his expertise to solve industry problems whenever they occurred. He was a valued member of the New York State Association for Food Protection (formerly NYS Association of Milk & food Sanitarians). He served for many years on the Laboratory Practices committee, was elected president of the Association for 1989-90 and received the Association's highest honor, the Emmett R. Gauhn Memorial Award in 1995. On his retirement from Cornell in 1996, he was made an Honorary Life member of the Association.

During his second tenure as department chair, he made another outstanding contribution to the extension/outreach effort. When the 31,600 square-foot Food Processing and Development Laboratory was completed in 1988, he supported the conversion of the old Stocking Hall cheese lab into a 72-seat extension conference center. This provided a dedicated space for on-campus extension programming and department meetings and social events. It proved so successful, that it became a model for the design of Extension conference space when Stocking Hall was renovated in 2015.

Dick’s research activities focused on dairy and food microbiology and especially its application to cultured dairy products like yogurt, cottage cheese and sour cream. His work included the study of the Lactococci, projects to improve milk quality issues, survival of coliform bacteria, and the influence of proteolytic enzymes in food fermentations. He concentrated on improvements in the production of fermented dairy foods by upgrading the technology associated with starter cultures and he and his graduate students published widely in this area. In addition, he also conducted research to indirectly improve the microbial quality of foods by developing and/or refining rapid microbial enumeration methods. Some of his work in this area included the growth inhibition of Staphylococcus aureus in Cheddar cheese whey.

In recognition of his significant work in the area of cultured dairy products, Professor Ledford received the 1987 American Cultured Dairy Products Institute Research Award for excellence in research
at the Institute’s annual Meeting in Nashville, Tennessee. It consisted of a recognition plaque and a $1,000 prize.

He was active in the following Professional Societies including the Institute of Food Technologists, American Dairy Science Association, American Society for Microbiology, International Association of Milk, Food and Environmental Sanitarians, New York State Association of Milk and Food Sanitarians (president 1989-90) and Cornell Chapters of Sigma Xi and Phi Kappa Phi. Dr. Ledford served on a number of Cornell Committees and also generously gave his time to serve on several important committees of the professional societies in which he was a member.

In addition to his academic achievements, Professor Ledford started his administrative career as acting head of the Department during Dr. Holland’s final sabbatical leave (February 1 to September 30, 1972). On October 1st, Richard was appointed department chair for a five-year term. He was called again to chair the department from 1985 until his retirement in 1996 – a total of 17 years and eight months at the helm.

Upon retirement, he and Martha moved to Lake Lure, North Carolina. Along with golf, another of Richard’s hobbies was wood carving, a passion he shared with his long-time Food Science colleague John Sherbon. Richard and John created beautiful life-like carvings of waterfowl which they often entered in competition at the New York State Fair and also gave as gifts to family and friends.

Richard Ledford was a devoted husband and father. He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Martha Worley Ledford, his daughters Ann Boberg (Roger), Jeanne Christman (Greg), sons Roeby Ledford (Beth) and Robert Ledford (Shannon). (Their oldest son, Rick Ledford (Brenda) passed away in 1994). He is also survived by nine grandchildren and five great-grandchildren as well as his sister Patti Sandford. Richard was preceded in death by his parents Travis and Sarah Moon Ledford, his brother Ronald (Carolyn) and sister Beverly Huneycutt (Newton).
Professor Ledford was a kind and gentle man, with effective leadership skills. He served our department and Cornell University with distinction!

Written by David Bandler, Robert Gravani, and Dennis Miller