

PROFESSOR NORMAN R. FARNSWORTH

by R.O.B. Wijesekera

Within the past couple of years the world has lost three of the foremost scientists in the specialized area concerning medicinal plants. The first to leave us was the great Hungarian taxonomist and longtime Director of the Institute for Medicinal Plants Research, at Budakalasz, Peter Tetenyi. (Vide Link Natural Digest. Vol:3 (1)) Then it was the "Flying Finn" Sandberg of Sweden (Vide Digest: Vol 7.(2)), and as briefly noted in the same issue, - we record the sad departure of yet another great, the inimitable Norman Farnsworth.

What feature characterized these three great men? It was not just their interest in the subject area of their research, but their concern for the development of the related scientific capability in the countries of the third world, and this reason endeared them to the community of scientists globally.

The author first met Norman in 1975, when he came to Sri Lanka as a member of the US Team of scientists sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences under the leadership of Professor Carl Djerassi. The man with the cigar in his mouth was easily recognized as he cleared the airport immigration. The US-NAS team also included such stalwarts as Ernst Theimer an expert in essential oils from the company IFF, Richard Schultes - famed botanist of Harvard University, the Ghanian-born botanist Eddie Ayensu, William Dauben, the Geunther -Award winning essential oils chemist from the University of California, and Paul Schauer of Hawaii, a pioneering expert on marine natural products. They were accompanied by Noel Vietmeyer of the NAS, and they compiled a report on: Natural Products for Sri Lanka's future. (1975). Norman was responsible for the area of medicinal plants.

Since that time the author kept in touch with him and worked with him, during 1978-80, in the capacity of the Task Force manager for the WHO Programme on Plants for fertility regulation. Norman was a stalwart member of the



Norman Farnsworth sporting his characteristic cigar

WHO steering committee for that programme. Stationed then in Geneva at WHO Headquarters as Task Force Manager, the author travelled widely with him during that period, visiting the several centres that were part of the WHO programme, ranging from South Korea, Hongkong, London, Leeds, Recife, and Peradeniya. A decade later, as it so happened we spent time together in Chicago, writing some of the history and literature relating to this trail blazing WHO initiative.

In all of these places, and all the time, his trade mark - a Marsh Wheeling cigar, stuck in his mouth, unlit, but often chewed only, became the feature with which he was recognized, besides his genial exuberant nature, and his colossal knowledge of the multidisciplinary aspects of the subject of medicinal plants and natural products.

Norman was a colorful personality in almost every respect; a raconteur supreme who would hold an audience spellbound for hours with his stories related with a flavor, gusto and a passion that only he could command. Much has been written about his many activities and the world's researchers on medicinal plants owe a deep debt of gratitude to him, if only for the unique contribution to the world of pioneering the NAPALERT database.

Endless stories too about him can be told and retold, but two episodes that this author fancies are the following.



Norm and the Author in the Lab at Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1979

The first took place during the visit to Sri Lanka of the team from the National Academy of Sciences led by Carl Djerassi in 1975. The team decided to visit the CISIR, -Ceylon Institute for Scientific and Industrial Research, in Colombo, and they were accompanied by the US Ambassador to Sri Lanka who was Christopher van Hollen. When the team entered my Natural Products Laboratory at CISIR, they witnessed from the windows and directly on the opposite side of the road, the newly completed imposing building of the BMICH - or the Bandaranaike Memorial Conference Hall, which had been gifted to Sri Lanka by the Chinese government. Everybody just took a look at this, but Norm dared to ask the US ambassador what he was doing while this was being put up? Ambassador van Hollen smiled diplomatically and let it pass. Norm then quipped that the US should have put up a similarly imposing building for research at the CISIR just opposite. When I politely told him that the Ambassador might have felt the question was impertinent Norm remarked loudly that he had a right to ask that, as he was a taxpayer.

On a much later occasion when we were both working for the WHO we were on a mission to Peradeniya to review the WHO project performance there. We were returning from Kandy to Colombo by train, and had not reserved our seats; hence we were in a community compartment which although in the first class, was somewhat crowded with holidaying families. Norm in characteristic fashion soon got friendly with a little boy, and offered him one of

his ball point pens. The boy gleefully grabbed the pen and was seen showing it to his mates in the compartment. Soon there was a queue of small boys expectantly awaiting the great man's response to their inquiring looks. Norm was more than equal to the situation, as he carried in his now familiar fawn leather "Pilot Bag style brief case", sufficient pens to open a small shop. He handed one each to the several little passengers who had by then assembled around this queer "Santa Klaus". Ultimately he was left with only his valuable pen, and a little girl, who had missed out. He made a sign of "no-hope," and as the little girl was about to leave in disappointment he promptly gifted this pen too to the girl, and told me to explain in Sinhala to her parents accompanying her, that it was not a cheap one and that they should look after it for the little girl.

Norman was a generous soul and large hearted in every way. He was an authority on every aspect of the subject of medicinal plants and wrote profusely within the subject area.

In his lifetime he had mentored more than a hundred doctoral students and many graduate students, and they had come not only from the US but from many parts of the globe. He was also the founder together with Professor Hildebert Wagner, of the Journal of Phytomedicine, and remained to the end at the helm of his department of Pharmacy and Pharmacognosy, at the University of Illinois Medical Centre.

His many colleagues throughout the wide world will mourn his passing, and record it as a deep loss to the entire community of scientists engaged in research in the area he adorned.

The Link Natural Products Digest sends the condolences of all our colleagues to Mrs Priscilla Farnsworth, and his longtime colleague Professor Harry Fong. His place in the annals of scientific inquiry is well assured far and wide.

We shall not cease from exploring,
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)