James F. Crow
Photo courtesy of Hilde Adler

In Memoriam James F. Crow (1916–2012) A Remarkable Geneticist, a Remarkable Man

JAMES F. Crow, professor emeritus of genetics, died peacefully in his sleep of congestive heart failure in Madison, Wisconsin, on January 4, 2012, 2 weeks before his 96th birthday. A leading figure in 20th century genetics whose career spanned 72 years, Crow was renowned as teacher, mentor, colleague, research scientist, textbook author, academic administrator, scientific leader, genetics historian, editor, and community supporter. He was born in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, 2 years before his family moved to Wichita, Kansas, where he attended public school. He received a bachelor of science degree from Friends University in Wichita (1937) and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin (1941). For 7 years, he was on the faculty of Dartmouth College and then moved to the University of Wisconsin at Madison where he spent the rest of his career. His wife of 60 years, Ann Crockett Crow, died in 2001, and he leaves three surviving children, six grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

“Gladly would he learn,” writes long-time colleague Oliver Smithies quoting Chaucer, “and gladly teach.” Crow’s undergraduate genetics course, Genetics 560, was legendary, and he mentored many graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who went on to make successful careers of their own. His textbook *Genetics Notes* was published in eight editions, and his *Introduction to Population Genetics Theory*, written with Motoo Kimura, continues to be a classic reference text. “He spoke and wrote in a straightforward and folksy voice,” remembers Joe Felsenstein, a former undergraduate in his laboratory. Crow published more than 250 papers dealing with diverse subjects such as reproductive isolation, hybrid vigor, insecticide resistance, effects of inbreeding, effective population size, opportunity for selection, fundamental theorem of natural selection, mutation rates, radiation effects, genetic load, heterozygous effects

of recessive mutations, meiotic drive, hybrid dysgenesis, and group selection. He served as chairman of the Department of Genetics and Medical Genetics as well as acting dean of the medical school, and he played a key role in various committees of the National Institutes of Health, the National Institute of Justice, the Department of Energy, and the National Research Council. Among his pastimes was playing the viola in chamber groups and with the Madison Symphony Orchestra, and he served as president of the Madison Symphony Orchestra and the Madison Civic Music Association.

Throughout his career, Crow was active in the Genetics Society of America. His birth and the first issue of the journal *Genetics* were both scheduled for January 1916; only he arrived on time. He served the society as its elected vice president (1959) and president (1960), and he was awarded its Thomas Hunt Morgan medal in 1987. For 5 years he served as associate editor of *Genetics*, and he and William F. Dove founded the feature called Perspectives and edited it for more than 10 years. Many of these pieces Crow wrote himself, some in only a few hurried days when a promised manuscript did not materialize.

Crow’s teaching expertise was recognized with many awards including a Bascom Professorship for Distinguished Service and Teaching, a College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Teaching Award, and a University of Wisconsin at Madison Distinguished Teaching Award. His scientific and leadership contributions were honored with memberships in the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Medicine, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the Japan Academy, and the Royal Society of London, as well as honorary degrees from the University of Chicago and the University of Edinburgh.

In 2011, the editors of *Genetics* commissioned a series of Perspectives and Review articles to spotlight Crow’s excellence in teaching and research and his many other accomplishments. Some of these articles have already appeared; more will be published over the coming months. Originally conceived as a celebration of his 95th birthday,

these Perspectives and Reviews now serve to honor his memory.

James F. Crow was one of the most cheerful people I've ever known. His joy in life was infectious, his wit quick and sharp. He could tell a story or make a joke about almost anything. Jan Drake, former editor of *Genetics*, recalls his "apparently limitless store of anecdotes." He displayed his characteristic self-effacing humor a few years ago when he was informed that the University of Wisconsin had decided to establish the James F. Crow Institute for the Study of Evolution, an affiliation of more than 70 faculty members scattered across campus. He said, "I am honored. Usually these things are named after a person who has died. But I

am not going to take the hint." During his long life he had disappointments, sorrows, regrets, and tragedies like everyone else, but he bore them stoically and with an unusual degree of grace.

Crow was exceptionally personable. I never heard anyone speak ill of him. His ability to empathize, communicate ideas, and resolve problems made him an ideal committee chair. He could argue a point without giving or taking offense, and he could separate opinion from personality in a way that led people with divergent views to find consensus. He was genial, smart, witty, erudite, kind, sympathetic, helpful, and generous. The life of James F. Crow is a model for a life well lived.

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