

Chronica Botanica, Volume 9, Number 5/6

WALTER L. HOWARD, Ph.D.

*Emeritus Professor of Pomology, University of California; late
Director, College of Agriculture of the University of California, at Davis, Calif.*

LUTHER BURBANK

A Victim of Hero Worship

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• Chronica Botanica, Volume 9, Number 5-6 •

LUTHER
BURBANK

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LUTHER BURBANK

A Victim of Hero Worship

by

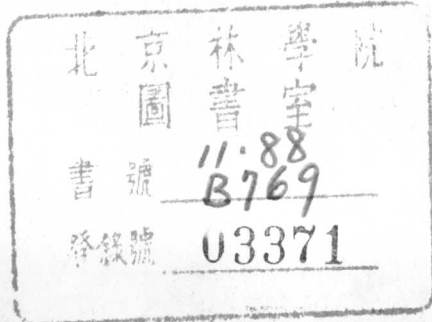
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*Emeritus Professor of Pomology, University of California; late
Director, College of Agriculture of the University of California, at Davis, Calif.*



"Extravagant estimates of my work have been the bane of my existence. There has been much written about me by sensational writers who know nothing either of me or my work. I am not responsible for all these things and anyone with any knowledge of horticulture could discern at once that much of the stuff sent out is nothing but the space-writer's chaff . . ." (LUTHER BURBANK).

A unique, great genius . . . (HUGO DE VRIES).



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The vignette on the title page shows the sandy, rolling land of Luther Burbank's experimental farm where all his fruits were tested before offering them for sale. The countryside here is lovely.

PROLOGUE

The character sketches which make up this book have been prepared in a spirit of fair play to enable the reader to understand and appreciate LUTHER BURBANK. Circumstances over which he had little control clothed him in glittering tinsel, but a veil of darker hue was superposed when he became the tool of schemers. Temperament, eccentricities, and unwise talk — all nonessentials and unimportant — added to the confusion and helped to warp the judgment of observers. This was particularly true of those who had to reach conclusions at second hand.

With none too gentle hands I have endeavored to tear away these hindering habiliments to see what the real BURBANK looked like. And behold, a pristine figure emerges that is every inch a man of worth, a man of original ideas; a man with a definite mission in life, fully capable of standing on his own feet as a lone worker in the field of science.

It is impossible to evaluate BURBANK's accomplishments with finality, but they were many and diverse, some direct, some indirect. Delving into details, the historian is amazed at the multiplicity of things that one man could do. With prejudice excluded, there still will be honest differences of opinion regarding the scientific value of his work. Liberals will concede much, the punctilious may equivocate.

I have to thank the following libraries for the loan of rare BURBANK publications — his catalogs and price lists: United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.; the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, Boston; the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, Geneva; the New York State College, Department of Pomology, Ithaca; and the Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis. Professor W. L. JEPSON of Berkeley, California, contributed duplicates from his personal library. Other memorabilia — letters, pamphlets, clippings, photographs — were loaned or contributed by H. E. V. PICKSTONE AND BROTHER, Simondium, Cape of Good Hope, South Africa (complete file of correspondence with BURBANK for 29 years); VILMORIN-ANDRIEUX ET CIE., Paris, France; the firm of METTE, Quedlinburg (oldest of German seedsmen, still handle BURBANK products), and ERNST BENARY of Erfurt, Germany; J. J. H. GREGORY AND SON, Marblehead, Massachusetts, and MILLARD SHARPE of Vacaville, California. Mrs. BURBANK kindly permitted me to examine in detail the 17-volume scrap book kept by BURBANK for fifty years, for which I am grateful. Finally, I am greatly indebted to the following persons for personal and professional information about BURBANK: Dr. D. P. ANDERSON, Mr. FRANK DOYLE and Miss PAULINE OLSON of Santa Rosa, California; Prof. J. E. CHENOWETH of Bakersfield, Mr. WILL HENDERSON of Fresno, and Mr. W. I. BEESON of Sebastopol, California; and especially to Dr. GEORGE H. SHULL of Princeton, New Jersey. I regret that it is not feasible to mention the scores of others from California and elsewhere who contributed bits of information. The old Scottish Lowland proverb was right, "many littles [do indeed] make a much".

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT seventy years ago an ambitious young devotee of the gentle art of horticulture was beginning a career that was to lift him to heights of fame undreamed of in his most sanguine moments. During this career he was destined to taste the heady sweets of popular acclaim, as well as the ashes of disillusion. His critics were relentless, but to a host of admirers he was a benefactor, a knight in shining armor. This man was LUTHER BURBANK, erstwhile gardener from Massachusetts, who chose the new land of California as the locale for making his fortune, not in the mines but in the strange vocation of plant breeding. Had he given a name to his calling, which he did not, he doubtless would have termed it plant improvement or plant betterment.

As a dealer in plants — a nurseryman if you please — he was unorthodox, did unusual things: experimented with plants, built up a profitable business, and attained a nation-wide reputation, all without the expenditure of a dollar for publicity purposes. He claimed to be a humanitarian, engaged in the promotion of human welfare, not interested in money. Whether he was a success in advancing the art and science of his craft, as loudly proclaimed by his supporters, or contributed valuable plants to the world were subjects of endless and often bitter controversy. He was both praised and condemned, even accused of hoodwinking a credulous public.

Proponents and opponents had their say but no one attempted to study his career objectively. Mostly, one simply believed in BURBANK or did not. To argue was to be branded as a partisan. The situation was further complicated when exploiters brought his name into their schemes; his religious views were the subject of vitriolic debate. A national Foundation made a try at garnering the scientific results of his work but did not make known its findings. So nothing was settled.

My interest in BURBANK began in 1932 when I undertook to compile a list of his plant productions — that is, new varieties — which he had at one time or another offered for sale. The task grew and grew, until it developed into a full-fledged study of his life. Instead of being concluded in a few weeks or months, the research extended over a period of ten years. New material was encountered concerning the man himself, things that people had asked me about, and which had intrigued my own curiosity. I found the explanation to so many things not before understood that I am impelled to pass the knowledge along to others who, no doubt, will appreciate factual information about BURBANK.

Sources of my information were BURBANK's writings and what others had to say about him over a period of forty years. Added to this I had the testimony of dozens of persons who knew BURBANK, who had served him in one capacity or another, had had business dealings with him, or merely were spectators on the sidelines. These last often were only casual acquaintances of BURBANK — met him in church, lodge meetings, or greeted him on the street — but they knew much about his business and household affairs, for it must be remembered that Santa Rosa, forty years ago, was but a small country town. Helpful interpreters of things that had appeared in print, they were able to restore the original flavor to incidents which had dimmed through lapse of time.

Having accumulated too much indispensable material for a single volume, I lopped off the technical part, which has been lately published by the University of California Agricultural Experiment Station, as a public document, with the title: *Luther Burbank's Plant Contributions*. This will be of interest to gardeners and plant lovers. A summary occurs here — in Chapter XIX.

In relating my human interest story of BURBANK no attempt has been made to write a conventional biography. That has been done several times already, and in one instance — *Harvest of the Years* by HALL — very successfully. My aim has been to explain and clarify some of the principal episodes of his life. To this end, a number of seemingly unrelated topics or episodes were selected for discussion. These encompass the main events of his life, most of them controversial. Some may appear like opéra bouffe, yet they were seriously — and furiously — debated at the time. For purposes of driving home important points, repetition seemed unavoidable. More than one episode might be employed to emphasize the same point; for example, the subject's egotism.

I have been disturbed by the attitude of some of my valued correspondents. They assumed that my object in writing this story was to debunk BURBANK. This was not my purpose at all, any more than it was to debunk his critics; but if telling what appears to be the truth tends to bring him down to earth at times, all I can say is that other characters in the story will be exposed to the same hazard.

Despite all that has been written about BURBANK, the average citizen still yearns for the truth. Friend and foe alike have expressed this thought. The inference is clear. This lays a heavy responsibility upon the reporter who would record with fidelity the major occurrences in the life of a stormy petrel like LUTHER BURBANK. For who is wise enough to discern the truth under all circumstances? Certainly it is not always a simple question of veracity. In the BURBANK case, with its maze of conflicting versions of this or that incident, conclusions had to be arrived at through judgment and interpretation of motives. Even ethics had to be taken into account.

Custom has its weight and plays its part. Truth appears to be elastic: in moments of enthusiasm we are sometimes said to

stretch the truth. Of course, this is an euphemistic way of saying that we are exceeding the truth. Exaggeration, although a perversion of the truth, is widely tolerated. We employ exaggeration in our social conversation. We have our daily portion of it in the newspapers. We read it in the advertisements, and the ether waves quiver with it. Deplore it, yes, but accept it we must.

Logically, truth should be factual; but facts as applied to a situation or occurrence that took place thirty to forty years ago are as elusive as fleas. They are not only hard to capture but are difficult to evaluate. Fiction creeps in. To change the metaphor, tares become mixed with the grain, and there is the chaff to contend with. In the course of this inquiry there has been much sifting and winnowing and fumigating.

An effort has been made to take into consideration and make proper allowance for individual viewpoint, personal prejudice, envy and professional jealousy; for all these conditions have been encountered in the course of the BURBANK studies. A colorful character like BURBANK stirred many people, aroused diverse emotions. They reacted according to their viewpoint and training. First, there were the men of science in our schools and research institutions. Broadly, these may be divided into two groups: the older, general scientists, and the younger specialists who have grown up since 1900. The first, in the main, are tolerant, kindly disposed toward BURBANK and concede that he really accomplished much both directly and indirectly. The younger men are apt to judge him by the criterions they apply to themselves, their colleagues and contemporaries, and, consequently, reach the conclusion that he did not measure up as a scientist because he did not use the tools and standards which they employ: in short, that he does not rate at all, and is not worth considering. This group includes most of the geneticists now in active life.

Then there are the thousands of teachers in our American grade schools who have the training of our children during their most impressionable years. These have always idealized BURBANK and have often portrayed him as a sort of superman. I have contacted hundreds of these teachers all over the United States, and almost without exception they give him credit for possessing all the virtues and not a single fault. Many have supplied me, in great detail, with the kind of information they are giving. Their information is based on what they have read about BURBANK in the newspapers, magazines, Sunday supplements, and especially HARWOOD's magazine articles¹ and book². Many of BURBANK's best friends have told me that it was unfortunate the book ever

¹ HARWOOD, W. S., A maker of new plants and fruits. *Scribner's Magazine*, New York, July, 1904. — A wonder worker of science. *Century Magazine*, New York, 69: 656, 672, 821, 837. 1905. — LUTHER BURBANK's achievements. *Country Calendar*, Harrisburg, Pa., 1, 3: 244, July, 1905. — How LUTHER BURBANK creates new flowers. *Ladies Home Journal*, Philadelphia, Pa., May, 1907.

² HARWOOD, W. S., *New creations in plant life; an authoritative account of the life and work of LUTHER BURBANK*. 2nd ed. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1907.

was published. Under the treatment of this author, everything that BURBANK had done was played up as a marvel of accomplishment, often bordering on the supernatural. A discriminating reader, it is true, could pick out the grains of truth, smile at the exaggerations. The sentimental and the uninformed, however, are apt to accept the intemperate statements as facts, as the author doubtless intended they should do. If the book had come under the provisions of the National Pure Food Law it would have been necessary to entitle it "New Creations in Plant Life — A Fairy Story". HARWOOD delighted in making astonishing statements: "BURBANK has disproved MENDEL's work on peas, and also disproved DE VRIES' theory of mutants. . . . Here, as in hundreds of cases all through his career, the 'laws' have been shown not to apply, save in rare instances, by the evidence accumulating in the tests carried on upon so colossal a scale. . . . He would welcome, with the eagerness of any lover of truth, any confirmation of law, for his whole life is pledged to law. He had no ulterior purpose in disproving Mendelian laws: in point of fact, he had disproved their universal applicability years before he knew they existed. Mr. BURBANK, in another instance, has brought to light the absurdity of reasoning from inadequate data. Leading scientists have maintained, and their followers have added the weight of their evidence, that 'acquired characteristics are never transmitted.' In the limitless fields of operation before him, Mr. BURBANK has not only disproven this over and over again, but has established the opposite, that acquired characteristics are the only ones that are transmitted."

I do not mean to deny that the book related many of the actual happenings in BURBANK's professional life. It did. But most of these happenings were served up in a decidedly misleading manner. I cannot exactly say that they were falsehoods, because they were all based on facts; but they leave a false impression. The harm done by HARWOOD's writings about BURBANK has therefore been of an insidious nature, such as a tricky lawyer likes to defend in a court of law because it is difficult to prove the absolute falsity of the statements. For example, in speaking of the Paradox walnut produced from crossing the cultivated English walnut with the native Northern California Black walnut, which did grow much more rapidly than other walnuts, he says:

"At the end of 12 years each tree will be worth approximately \$80. The acre yield would be \$2880. For an average farm of 160 acres the revenue for the 12 years with no outlay, save the cost of planting (not over 25 cents per tree), taxes upon the land, and interest on money invested, would be a little over \$460,000. This does not take into fact the value of the branches and the refuse slabs of mill sawing which would amount to at least four cords per tree — about \$24,000 for the total trees or a grand total for the 160 acres for lumber and fuel amounting to \$485,000."

Sounds like a page out of Gulliver's travels, does it not? But who could disprove it? We might think that no one in his right

LUTHER BURBANK
SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA
U. S. A.

January
Twenty-four
1920

Mr. M. Sharpe,
Vacaville, Calif.

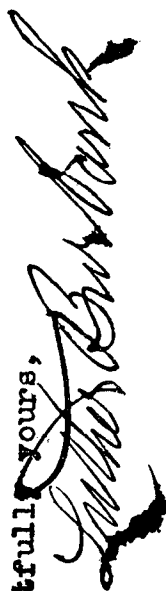
Dear Sir:

The "Gigantic" plum and the "Discovery" are wholly and absolutely different, the "Discovery" being the best plum of the two by all means, though "Gigantic" is immense. If the wood is not too far along, I will get you some next time I go to Sebastopol, and will send you an "Elephant" Quince, though I have only two or three left.

The "Cazique" is the best growing plum of the hybrids, even grown in my nursery. I have no "Epoch" plum wood.

The wood and trees will be sent you as soon as possible.

Respectfully yours,



TEXTFIGURE 1.—TYPICAL BUSINESS LETTER AND AUTOGRAPH OF BURBANK.—
MILLARD SHARPE, nurseryman, fruit grower, amateur breeder of fruits and an authority on plum and cherry varieties, was acquainted with Mr. BURBANK for twenty years; often visited his experimental gardens, and made a point of testing his new fruits as they were announced. An expert himself, SHARPE greatly admired BURBANK's skill and acumen, both as a propagator and a breeder.

mind would accept such an absurd statement, but unfortunately there were plenty of people who would accept it. For the most part, people with no experience whatever in agriculture thought they saw a chance to make a fortune overnight. But this was not the worst harm that was done: it was in the way BURBANK's experiments were described, which resulted in the production of hybrid plants. Whether or not they possessed intrinsic value was of less importance than the alleged mysterious way in which the experiments were performed: for there is no mystery about the crossing of two plants, the hybridizer is no magician, and it is a shame that a legend should grow up around an individual that could make him a magical figure. Scientists and other informed people were disgusted and immediately branded BURBANK as a faker because they said we are not living in an age of miracles, meaning that anyone claiming to be in league with the supernatural lays himself open to grave charges.

On top of this BURBANK was portrayed by various writers as a man of sweet disposition, a sort of little Lord Fauntleroy grown-up, that took him completely out of the ranks of work-a-day men. As a matter of fact, BURBANK had enough faults along with his virtues to make him human, but HARWOOD set the pace in portraying him as a man of mystery with his head in the clouds so that others felt that they must trail along and not spoil the picture.

Teachers of children have ever sought noble characters to hold up as heroes for them to emulate, and BURBANK's life supplied material in abundance for this purpose. No harm would have been done by depicting him as a noble character, but coloring was added that eventuated into his becoming a cult. Elementary teachers everywhere found his life and works to be just about perfect for their purposes.

When I first began my BURBANK studies, I experimented with my college students by asking them about BURBANK. I soon discovered that all had approximately the same information, and their views of BURBANK fitted into a certain pattern. Upon closer inquiry it was found that most of them had obtained such information as they had from instruction received when they were 11 or 12 years old. Having traced most of their information to the grammar school teacher, I then made a wide survey of elementary teachers and found that the BURBANK fictions began to be disseminated along about 1905 and that a whole generation of men and women have grown up with their grammar school instruction as the only information they have about the man. Here and there a boy would confess that when he got into high school and started to study science, he began to doubt some of the ideas he had acquired in grammar school. In college, these boys came into contact with instructors who belonged to the ranks of modern geneticists, where they were given an entirely new picture of BURBANK, which in most cases was as far wrong as their first one.

There are literally tens of thousands of children who are indoctrinated with the BURBANK fairy story every year, and I can

see no end to it. Rightly guided there is nothing serious about this, but it is unfortunate that a whole population should be allowed to grow up with false notions about a man who was really useful in his generation. Many of these people in later life hear the other side of the story, and the effect upon them is that of a boy who loses his childhood faith in religion — that is, he is apt to become a cynic.

I originally embraced the fond hope that I could bridge the chasm between the extreme admirers of BURBANK and those who deprecated him. But the trouble, I found, was that when we worship a hero, we do not care to have our idol shattered; and if we have heard a man condemned often enough to bring belief, we do not relish having proof thrust in our faces that we are all wrong. Fortunately, there appears to be a host of people who have no violent feeling about BURBANK one way or the other and who merely want the honest facts about the man and his life work, his value to human society as a whole, not alone to the science of plant breeding.

It has been my purpose to try to supply this information, but in so doing, I am surely aware of the fact that what I shall say will not please either faction. However, I console myself with the thought that hereafter trained readers at least will follow the scientific plan of studying all sides of a man before making up their minds about him. If I shall have supplied information not heretofore obtainable about BURBANK that will help students to arrive at their own conclusion after all evidence is in, then I shall feel that I have not labored in vain.

THE BACKGROUND

FEW MEN in private life have become so widely known as was LUTHER BURBANK of Santa Rosa, California. Through the printed page and by word of mouth the name has been disseminated the world around. The name is always associated with plant improvement or the production of new varieties of fruits and flowers. Legends have grown up about him and his ability to do marvelous, if not impossible, things with plants. Careless writers and speakers have woven so many fairy tales around the name and fed them so widely to innocent children, as well as to ignorant and uninformed adults, that the present generation is faced with the dilemma of swallowing the stories whole or rejecting everything it has heard about the man. By and large, the thinking members of the public are kindly disposed toward BURBANK, but incredulous. Sometimes they are downright suspicious. But the great majority would like to have the facts because they are frankly curious. They want to know what the man was like, about his home life, his daily work, his relations with other people, and whether he was human or a freak. Special groups want to know about his horticultural attainments and techniques. Still others want to know what percentage of his output has made good. The final question — and it is clear that it was often uppermost in the minds of all — was whether he was an honest man or a trickster.

When I first came to California, eleven years before BURBANK's death, I received numerous letters from friends in the Eastern and Middle States asking me for information about the man. At that time I had a rather wide acquaintance in horticultural circles throughout the regions mentioned and these friends believed or hoped that I was in a position to give them the low-down about BURBANK. I went to see him and also talked with my associates. They were not very informative. Their smiles were misleading. Without background of the BURBANK situation, I now realize that they were smiling at my ignorance and seeming naïveté. The main era of BURBANK's exploitation was then at its peak. A newcomer couldn't be expected to understand — and didn't.

Unfortunately I did not make use of my opportunities by starting my studies of BURBANK and his horticultural accomplishments while he was still alive, for much salient information is now lost, particularly leads that might have enabled me to trace many of his hybrid plant productions that were sold unannounced and without names. Also I might now have a better picture of the man himself. On the other hand, I might have fallen into the rut

that other interpreters had followed which has not proven to be very helpful to a world that is still befuddled. The objective view is often best, so I console myself with the thought that perhaps a truer evaluation of the man can be made now, nearly two decades after his death, even with some data missing, than would have been possible while he was still here to give information, but with the greater danger of having my judgment warped by personalities. A shrewd man who had successfully battled his way to high places in political life once warned me never to undertake to judge a baby show while the infants were being held in their mother's arms!

After all, BURBANK's output of improved plant forms was so extensive that I feel the few score, or possibly few hundreds, of forms that I have not been able to find records of would not materially change his rating. But just what he produced or how many of this, that, or the other he turned out is not the big question in the minds of the multitude of people who want to know about BURBANK. No, indeed. For example, in 1931 a controversy about BURBANK arose in the public schools of a large city on the Atlantic seaboard. A science teacher happened to pass a room where a primary teacher was telling her class of little folk about LUTHER BURBANK. The first words that reached him arrested his attention and he stopped to listen. The things he heard rooted him to the spot in amazement. When the class was dismissed he took the lady to task, telling her that although he did not claim to know anything about BURBANK — in fact, was only barely familiar with the name — he was quite sure the things she had been telling her children could not possibly be true, that we were not now living in an age of magic and fairy tales, etc., etc. The lady was very indignant, claimed that she was right, and advised the man to study up on BURBANK and inform himself on the marvelous things that he had done. Other teachers took sides in the argument and the battle was on. For the most part it was the men *versus* the women teachers. The arguments of the former were based upon rationalism while the latter defended their position on sentimental grounds. The controversy was finally referred to the principal who, in bewilderment, pronounced that both sides could not be right and referred the question to Professor L. H. BAILEY of Cornell University; he promptly passed it on to me with the helpful suggestion that I was located in California and quite near BURBANK's home, and therefore should be in a position to obtain the facts about the man and his accomplishments!

I sent a letter to the principal in which I sketched the highlights of the controversy about BURBANK that had prevailed throughout the United States and a few foreign countries many years earlier and pointed out that neither the admirers nor the disparagers of BURBANK were entirely right, that the truth lay somewhere between the two extremes. My reply evidently checked this particular controversy (as I heard no more about it) but I dare say no one was convinced. The incident, however, served to crystallize a thought that had been forming in my mind for some time, namely,

that it was high time that some one obtained the facts and made a fair and impartial evaluation of BURBANK and his accomplishments. What a job this would have been for the master hand of Professor BAILEY! But he was not available and I reluctantly undertook the task. This was in 1932. For five years I did what I could, working part time; then in 1937, having been relieved of some of my official duties I took up the work in earnest.

My personal acquaintance with Mr. BURBANK was limited to a one-half day visit with him in the summer of 1915. Although for thirty years I have resided near the BURBANK place (86 miles distant), I do not believe anyone can successfully accuse me of personal bias because of my relative proximity to the man and his establishment. Also I can affirm that my mind has always been free of prejudice. As a student at the University of Missouri I was chiefly under the influence of the late Professor WHITTEN of beloved memory, who never uttered an unkind word about anyone because in his great soul there was no room for malice or envy. Even when the country was flooded with the literature of the so-called Luther Burbank Society about 1912 or 1913, which was misleading and quite evidently insincere, he remained calm and allowed all of us to draw our own conclusions, if any.

When I came to California in January, 1915, I cannot recall that I held any definite opinion of BURBANK, but I was mildly curious. The one time I called upon him satisfied much of my curiosity. He frequently announced that he did not want visitors unless they came by appointment and then they would not be admitted to his experimental grounds at Sebastopol. I did not seek an appointment because of the possible use he might make of my connection in his advertising literature; not that I was a notable, but the institution I served was.

While I knew in a general way that the high-powered promoters and exploiters of BURBANK — the Luther Burbank Company and the Luther Burbank Press — were then in process of defaulting, with a train of disillusioned stockholders mourning their losses, I did not know how the BURBANK business was being conducted; and as it was more or less in disrepute, I thought the safe thing was to keep away.

Perhaps, as I now look backward, I was unduly alarmed, but I was particularly sensitive at the time as I had just passed through the experience of being tricked by a conscienceless promoter into a seeming endorsement of a shady land selling scheme. I visited the place in a private — and as I thought, anonymous — capacity, but he accidentally discovered my identity and used me, or rather the University, accordingly. Also I had been imposed upon a few years earlier by a large nursery that was rated as respectable, but which was given to making unduly extravagant claims for its wares.

Then there was the case of Professor E. J. WICKSON, who was head of the Department of Horticulture in the University of California and for many years Dean of the College of Agriculture