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Lyman J. Briggs

Lyman James Briggs, born in Assyria, Mich., in 1874, celebrates his 80th birthday on May 7. The AAAS is honoring him by devoting the May issue of *The Scientific Monthly* to a series of articles by his colleagues and associates. A committee, established by the Washington Academy of Sciences, has planned a testimonial luncheon on his birthday. Universally loved and respected, Dr. Briggs has had a full and important career as an outstanding public servant in the National Bureau of Standards, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. These and other activities, such as his chairmanship of the National Geographic Society's Research Committee, have brought him into influential contact with scientists on an international basis.

Dr. Briggs received his Bachelor of Science degree from Michigan State College just after reaching his 19th birthday. Two years later the University of Michigan awarded him a Master of Science in physics. In the fall of 1895, he entered The Johns Hopkins University to study under Rowland. He then joined the staff of the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a physicist but continued working part time at Hopkins for the doctorate, which he received in 1901. In 1906, he organized the Biophysical Laboratory in what was later known as the Bureau of Plant Industry. In 1917, he was assigned, through Executive Order, to work on war problems at the National Bureau of Standards. This was a happy event for NBS, for he stayed on and became a member of the Bureau staff in 1920 and chief of its Mechanics and Sound Division.

Upon the sudden death of Director George K. Burgess in 1932, Dr. Briggs was placed in charge of the Bureau, but it was not until the following June that he became officially the director. He had the unique distinction of being nominated for the directorship by both President Hoover and President Roosevelt. This situation developed through the Senate's failure to confirm the nomination made by Hoover.

Dr. Briggs was immediately confronted with a severe crisis when the Bureau's available operating funds were cut by approximately 50 percent, necessitating a loss of about one-third of the staff. Dr. Briggs' skill and courage in guiding the bureau through this trying period and in slowly rebuilding the organization later won him the profound respect of all who watched him handle his difficult assignment.

With the start of World War II, Dr. Briggs directed that virtually all the staff be reassigned to work on problems urgent to national defense. Probably the most important of the new activities was his assignment in 1939 as chairman of the Uranium Committee, the predecessor of the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb. Among other important military activities that he fostered at the Bureau were projects on the radio proximity fuze, on guided missiles, on radio propagation, and on optical glass. At the urging of the Secretary of Commerce, Dr. Briggs postponed his retirement until Oct. 1945, a year and a half beyond the customary mandatory age. Upon his retirement he was named director emeritus and immediately resumed his researches.

Dr. Briggs' honors and achievements are many, including the Medal of Merit, membership in the National Academy of Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, and honorary degrees from six institutions. Attesting to the esteem his colleagues hold for him, he has served as president of various societies. Although Dr. Briggs has made many valuable contributions in soil physics, navigation, mechanics, and aerodynamics, he is probably most admired as a leader, counselor, and friend. As a leader, he was always both gentle and firm. As a counselor and friend, he showed great wisdom along with great human understanding. Scientist, scholar, and gentleman, Lyman J. Briggs has reached an important milestone in his life, and his many friends wish to pay him tribute.

ALLEN V. ASTIN

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