Presidential Address—Agronomy as a Profession

Howard B. Sprague

Our Society is well past the half-century mark in age. The first volume of our Proceedings which later became Agronomy Journal was published in 1908. Membership has grown from the small group that chose M. A. Carleton as its first president, to the very healthy present enrollment of about 5,300. During this half century, there have been great advances in all phases of soil science and of crop science and in programs of resident and extension education. Agronomy has become important in many, if not most, agricultural industries. Successive new classes of agronomists have been graduated from our colleges for 50 years, and a greater and greater percentage have entered their careers with M.S. and Ph.D. degrees. Many contemporary advances in the physical and life sciences have been adopted; and in turn, the new basic knowledge acquired by our plant and soil scientists have made important contributions to the same physical and life sciences.

The matter I wish to discuss here, is the professional aspect of this multifaceted field. There is no question as to the scientific aspects of our chosen fields. But does Agronomy qualify as a profession? And are we professional men and women, with all the connotations of ethics and standards of conduct, and of public responsibility?

I repeat, there is no suggestion that our members are not scientists. They have developed specific and unique areas of science in the several branches of soil science and in the several crop sciences; and we have developed the unique field called agronomy with its interrelationships of plants, soils, climate, and other ecological factors under the management of man. However, our members rarely devote their energies solely to science in the strict sense, and it is in these other related activities that the matter of professionalism becomes important. Over the years, agronomists have consciously or unconsciously established certain concepts of professional conduct, aims, and qualities in which science is but a part. This review is an attempt to outline some of the aspects of agronomy as a profession.

The most ancient professions are those of medicine, law, and theology. Other fields of learning have developed, particularly during the recent centuries, and each of these has tended to become professional, within the ethical con-