Dr. Marbut: The Geographer

Milton D. Rafferty

Dr. Curtis Fletcher Marbut, geologist, geographer, and pedologist, was born in Lawrence County, MO on July 19, 1863, when Missouri was experiencing the ravages of the Civil War. With encouragement from his family, he rose from a humble rural Ozark background to become America's foremost soil scientist. His untimely death in Harbin, China on Aug. 25, 1935 prevented him from returning to the Ozark retirement house he had built in his home community.

Professor Marbut's work pertained especially to regions, their physical characteristics and interrelationships, and the significance of regional characteristics to humankind. These themes are at the heart of geography. While Professor Marbut was unquestionably a leader in soil research and an authority on the soils of North America, his conclusions regarding the whole problem of land utilization and his interpretations of the systems of agriculture in the various regions of the United States also were major contributions.

Dr. Marbut's lectures at Clark University, which extended over 15 years, were important in disseminating his work in the classification and nomenclature of soils among geographers. His students included all the students of the graduate school of geography. Many of these students became distinguished teachers and researchers in their own right and carried Dr. Marbut's teaching and his examples of research and industry into college and university classrooms throughout the United States.

In his teaching and writing, Dr. Marbut gave particular attention to the need to discover and substantiate the essential facts through field work and direct observation. His travels to nearly every county in the 48 states and to Canada, Western Europe, Russia, the Balkans, interior Brazil, Argentina, and the West Indies provided an unparalleled background in direct observation of soils. Those geographers who were fortunate enough to accompany him on field trips were impressed by his keen observations.