

## TRIBUTE TO ELMER SWENSON

BY TOM PLOKER

Elmer Swenson passed away in December, 2004 at age 91. Elmer's Swedish immigrant grandfather, Grandpa Larson, grew grapes at the family farm in Osceola, Wisconsin. As a child, Elmer helped his grandfather in the vineyard, a vineyard that remains in cultivation today at the Swenson homestead. Grandpa Larson had a copy of T.V. Munson's classic book. Elmer read it at an early age. This kindled his lifelong interest in grapegrowing, which included 50 years as an iconoclastic grape breeder. He became known as the father of modern cold climate viticulture.

Elmer's accomplishments as a grape breeder are well-known to Northern grapegrowers. His named varieties include Swenson Red, Edelweiss, St. Croix, Kay Gray, St. Pepin, LaCrosse, Esprit, Summersweet, Kandeohyi, Lorelei, Sabrevois, Louise, Prairie Star, Brianna, Aldemina, Somerset Seedless, Petit Jewel Seedless, Trollhaugen Seedless. They are growing on three continents-North America, Europe, and Asia.

Elmer Swenson also left behind a treasure trove of grape selections that will influence cold climate grape breeding for generations. His selections St. Pepin and E.S. 6-5-23 were crossed by the University of Minnesota to produce the new white wine variety Lacrescent. His selection ES 4-7-26 was the pollen parent of Tom Plocher's new red wine variety Petite Pearl. Fifty of his numbered selections are now safely archived at the United States Department of Agriculture National Clonal Germplasm Repository at Geneva, New York where they will remain available as pollen and cuttings to grape breeders in perpetuity.

Elmer Swenson was a grapegrowing father to those of us who live and grow grapes in northern climates. We will miss his incredible patience, his kindness, his generosity, his genius, and his dedication to family. We will miss the ease with which he connected with people from other cultures... the Chinese, the Baltic people, the Quebecois, all of whom paid him a visit in his later years. He read the Danish Grape Growers Association quarterly magazine in Danish as easily as he read the Notes From the North, from the Minnesota Grape Growers Association. With his passing there comes a calling to us. Elmer's vision was international... that everyone, no matter where he or she lived in the far north, should be able to grow grapes and make wine. Îles-de-la-Madeleine in Quebec, the Lake Superior Shore in Minnesota, the North Dakota prairie, Latvia, Estonia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Siberia, Harbin in China. Eventually, all of these people will have grapes and wine. He was a true believer in that vision. He never for a moment doubted that this would eventually happen.

As Elmer would say, "it just takes patience and a lot of hard work." Every grape cutting, every packet of pollen, and every idea he shared was a step toward realizing that vision. During his lifetime, Elmer made enormous progress toward this goal. It is now our's to carry on.

**READ BY GILLES BENOÎT**

