

GEORGE SNEDECOR

*“The work of his students alone has given him a reputation as one of the foremost teachers of statistics,”—from the Statistical Laboratory Annual Report, 1950*

George Waddel Snedecor, the oldest of eight children, was born in October of 1881 and grew up in Tennessee. He was the son of a lawyer turned minister and lived primarily in small rural towns. He eventually earned two degrees, one in mathematics and the other in physics. He received his education at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, the University of Alabama, and the University of Michigan. In 1913 he came to Iowa State College (now called Iowa University, ISU) where he was quickly promoted and began teaching the first formal statistics course. He taught at Iowa for 45 years.

In 1924, Snedecor and his colleague Henry A. Wallace set up Saturday seminars to instruct people with problems in statistical applications. These weekly seminars led to the ISU bulletin, *Correlation and Machine Calculations*, by Snedecor and Wallace (1925). Snedecor’s enthusiasm for statistics and his commitment to research helped establish the Mathematics Statistical Service in the Department of Mathematics. He and Dr. A.E. Brandt provided this service to give campus-wide statistical consultation and professional help in statistics. This service eventually became the Statistical Laboratory, organized in 1933 with Snedecor as the first director. The professional statistical service was rare among universities and consequently attracted prominent statisticians to lecture or just visit. Some of those statisticians were R.A. Fisher, C.P. Winsor, and W.G. Cochran.

While Snedecor taught at ISU, courses in statistics were taught in several departments, but degree programs were only available in mathematics. Snedecor’s statistical laboratory played a role in changing all that, and in 1931 the first degree in statistics at ISU, a master’s, was awarded to one of Snedecor’s most famous students, Gertrude M. Cox.



1947: Statistical Laboratory area-sampling operations in a temporary building at Iowa State College



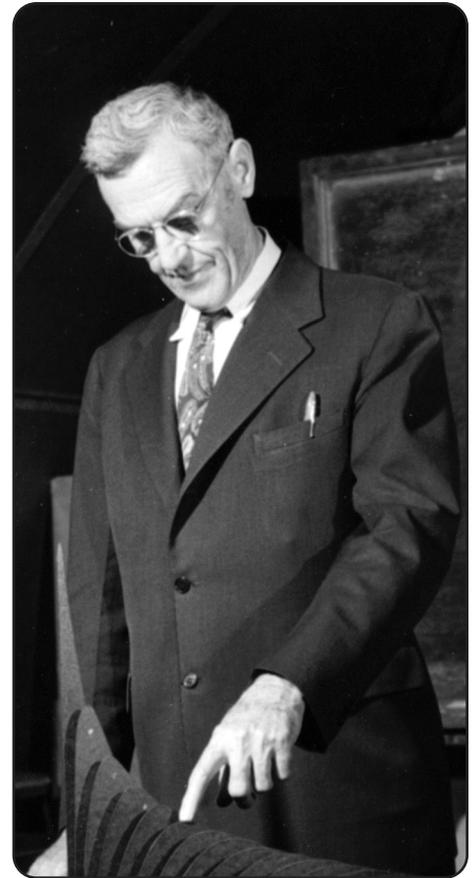
1941: Statistical Laboratory group at Iowa State. Snedecor is in the last row, fourth from the left.

Snedecor's enthusiasm for the profession encouraged its development. He believed that a basic introductory course in statistics for students with a major in natural and social sciences was essential. The course would provide training as part of the general education and foster an interest in statistics as a profession for young students. In 1947 he spoke at a meeting of the American Statistical Association, advocating a general statistics course. In 1939 he was named a Fellow of the ASA, and in 1948 he served as ASA President.

Another of Snedecor's greatest contributions to the profession was his research in statistical methods in the

field of biological and agricultural experimentation. Snedecor's book, *Statistical Methods*, first published in 1937 has had at least seven editions and has been translated into several languages.

In recognition of the importance of his contributions, he was given many honors and awards by ISU, other universities (U.S. and foreign), and the statistical societies. ISU established the Snedecor PhD Student Award, and in 1969 the service building housing the ISU Department of Statistics was renamed Snedecor Hall. He was awarded the Samuel S. Wilks memorial medal in 1970, and the book *Statistical Papers in Honor of George W. Snedecor* was pub-



Snedecor teaching a course.

lished by Iowa State Press in 1972. He was given honorary membership in the Royal Statistical Society, and an award honoring Snedecor is given by the ASA and Iowa State University for the best publication in biometrics.

Snedecor also wrote numerous papers, on data analysis, statistical methods, design of experiments, sampling, analysis of variance and covariance, biometry, and scientific method. He retired as director of the Statistical Laboratory in 1947. After 1958 Snedecor spent another five years as consultant at the U.S. Naval Electronics Laboratory in San Diego.

The statement of W.G. Cochran encapsulates the life of G.W. Snedecor:

*Our profession owes Snedecor a great debt for his vision in foreseeing the contributions that statistical methods can make in quantitative studies, for his book made these methods available to workers with little mathematical training, and his administrative skill in building a major training center and in attracting leaders like Fisher, Yates, Mahalanobis, Kendall, and Neyman to Ames as visitors.* ■