Barbara McClintock's Long Postdoc Years

THE STORY THAT BARBARA MCCLINTOCK "didn't find a permanent job until she was 40" (NetWatch, "Mother of the jumping gene," 23 Nov., p. 1623) is a laboratory legend that, although intended to buoy the spirits of long-term postdocs, might dampen those of junior faculty.

McClintock in her early days at Cold Spring Harbor.

In 1935, at the age of 33, McClintock became an assistant professor in botany at the University of Missouri. By 1940, she had become rather wary about academic politics; she seems to have believed she was about to be fired, so she took a leave of absence with no intention of returning. But in early 1941, Lewis Stadler, who had gotten her the job, wrote to Marcus Rhoades, McClintock's closest friend, that McClintock was "definitely slated for a promotion this spring, and Tucker (botany department chairman) has told her so." Stadler continued, "God knows no one can guarantee permanence in times like these, though I think the job here is pretty permanent as jobs go." When McClintock had been hired, the university "gave official assurance that the research jobs would be just as permanent as teaching appointments. Presumably her promotion this year would make her an associate professor, which is the grade here at which permanent tenure becomes automatic" (*1*, p. 64–65). Instead, McClintock got, through Rhoades, a visiting professorship at Columbia University, spent the summer of 1941 at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, and was offered a stopgap position while Milislav Demerec, the director of Cold Spring Harbor, pushed through a permanent appointment, which took effect on 1 April 1942.

Cold Spring Harbor was ideal for McClintock in many ways, but a center of maize genetics it was not. One wonders how different the story of maize-controlling elements might be had she stayed one more year at Missouri. As I see it, the moral for junior faculty approaching tenure is—hang in there.

NATHANIEL C. COMFORT

Deputy Director, Center for History of Recent Science, Department of History, George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052, USA. E-mail: comfort@gwu.edu

References and Notes

1. Lewis Stadler to Marcus Rhoades, 18 March 1941, Marcus Rhoades collection, Indiana Univ., cited in N. C. Comfort, *The Tangled Field: Barbara McClintock's Search for the Patterns of Genetic Control* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2001).

Hold the (Cell) Phone...

THE ISSUE IN THE NEWS FOCUS ARTICLE "CELL phone lawsuits face a scientific test" (M. Parascandola, 16 Nov., p. 1440) is whether users of hand-held cell phones are being exposed to an agent (radio frequency radiation) that could cause brain cancer. In the article's accompanying table, which lists studies examining this question, there is misleading information. Car phone and bag phone users, most of the cell phone users in the early days and who were participants in the studies listed in the table, essentially did not have exposure to radio frequency radiation (*1*).

The study by Muscat *et al.* (*2*) had 469 brain cancer patients. Only 66 used hand-held phones and are relevant to the topic of the article. The study by Inskip *et al.* (*3*) had 782 brain cancer patients who used a cell phone 60 minutes or more a day or regularly for five or more years. Only 40 used hand-held phones for that time. And the Johansen *et al.* study (*4*) had 420,095 cell phone users; however, no conclusions can be drawn from this study about hand-held phone users because the authors didn't analyze the data on them separately from car and bag phone users who had no radiation exposure.

> "...should we be making...decisions for more than 100 million users of hand-held cell phones on the basis of data from 106 patients?..."

The above are the major epidemiological studies in this area of research. Thus, should we be making public health decisions for more than 100 million users of hand-held cell phones on the basis of data from 106 patients, particularly when the

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