Homer Columbus Thompson

January 5, 1885 — April 12, 1976

Professor H. C. Thompson was the leading vegetable scientist in the world for many years.

He was raised on a farm near Gaithersburg, Maryland, and attended the one-room school when farm work allowed. At the age of sixteen he left the farm and obtained work as a student assistant for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washingon, D.C. Encouraged by his supervisors to get more education he took some night school courses and, in 1904, entered the two-year course in agriculture at Ohio State University since it did not require high school training. Before the end of the first year his professors suggested that he transfer to the four-year course in spite of the fact that he had only about one-fourth of the entrance requirements. He transferred to the four-year degree program and fulfilled the entrance requirements by examination, the last one shortly before receiving the B.S. in 1909.

During his college years, he continued working for the U.S. Department of Agriculture during summers and a full year in 1905-6, when he took time off from his college work. After graduating he served as assistant professor of horticulture at Mississippi A & M College for one year and as associate professor of horticulture at Clemson College the next year before rejoining the U.S. Department of Agriculture as project leader in truck crop production investigations.

During the First World War increased food production had first priority in agricultural research. Dr. Thompson's research had demonstrated that about one-third of the sweet potato crop was lost after harvest. He studied successful storage houses and combined the good features in some demonstration storage houses at several locations. The success of these demonstrations led to hundreds of storage houses being built throughout the South. His interest in sweet potatoes never lagged, and in 1929 he wrote the book *Sweet Potato Production and Handling.*

His career at Cornell began in 1918 when he was appointed professor in the Department of Farm Crops to work with vegetables. In 1921 he became head of the new Department of Vegetable Gardening (the Department of Vegetable Crops after 1931) after serving two years as acting head of the Department of Farm Crops. After coming to Cornell he began graduate work at Ohio State and by utilizing a three-month leave each year and part of a sabbatical leave, he received his M.S. in 1923 and his Ph.D. in 1926.

His study of the premature seeding of celery is a classic of horticultural research. He discovered that flowering of celery was controlled by temperature, and he devised growing techniques that prevented flowering of celery when grown for market and that accelerated flowering when desired for seed production.

Widely known for his training of graduate students, at the time of his retirement, he had trained more than half the men in the country with advanced degrees in vegetable crops. Some of his graduate students continued his work on flowering of biennial crops including celery, cabbage, beets, onions, and carrots. They also studied the importance of shallow cultivation of vegetable crops and did research on handling and storage of vegetables. He tried to pass to his students a research philosophy that one does not spend a lot of time finding out why something happened without first making sure that it does happen. His doctoral dissertation on cultivation illustrated the point. His objective approach to the problem showed that many previously held assumptions were not true, and much time had been wasted trying to explain these false assumptions.

He was not impressed by elaborate equipment or elaborate explanations. Asking the right questions and using the simplest possible experiments to answer them was preferable to using a lot of sophisticated equipment without knowing how the results would help solve the problem at hand. He urged his students to undertake some research that would yield quick results for the benefit of farmers, as well as longer term research of a more fundamental nature.

Author of *Vegetable Crops*, a standard textbook used in most agricultural colleges in the country and in many parts of the world since its first publication in 1923, Professor Thompson published the fifth revised edition of this book in 1957, with Professor William C. Kelly as coauthor. The textbook set a new standard of excellence when it was published in 1923. It was one of the first agricultural texts to utilize and cite the results of experiments. He also wrote the book *Asparagus Production*, and many articles and bulletins on vegetable growing and handling.

He was not an easy taskmaster, but students came to him in large numbers because they knew he was fair and what he asked of them was for their own good. He retained the respect and loyalty of his graduate students and kept in close touch with them wherever they went. Even the ones who didn't obtain a Ph.D. degree and assistant professors who didn't get promoted to tenure felt the same way about him as the more successful ones, because they knew that he had treated them all fairly.

One of his less tangible but equally real contributions was the feeling of belonging he created in his department. Part of it was due to the warmth and hospitality of both Professor and Mrs. Thompson. Part of it was the daily

operation of the department in which everyone was made to feel that he or she had an important role to play, whether as stenographer, field helper, laboratory technician, or professor.

For three years following his retirement in 1951, Professor Thompson was head of the Plant Industry Department and director of research and education of the Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences at Turrialba, Costa Rica.

In 1957, as president of the Ithaca Rotary Club, he attended the Rotary International meeting in Switzerland and visited a number of former students in Europe. In 1961, he was invited to Egypt by the minister of agriculture, a former student, where he counseled with agricultural and government specialists and visited other nearby countries before returning home.

Professor Thompson was named Vegetable Man of the Year in 1960 by the Vegetable Growers Association of America, and in 1965 he was elected a fellow of the American Society for Horticultural Science, of which he was president in 1925. He was also a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Dr. Thompson is survived by his wife, Clara Smith Thompson; two sons, John and David; nine grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. Dr. John F. Thompson is plant physiologist with the U.S.D.A.'s Plant, Soil and Nutrition Laboratory on the Cornell campus. Dr. David D. Thompson is director of the New York Hospital, part of the Cornell Medical College complex in New York City.

H. C. Thompson's influence extended far beyond the circle of those who were privileged to know him personally. The impact of his life and work extends wherever vegetables are grown and will be a lasting memorial to him.

Robert D. Sweet, Henry M. Munger, William C. Kelly