

Thomas Lenoir York

November 26, 1921 — December 21, 1957

Thomas Lenoir York, Associate Professor of Vegetable Crops and Plant Breeding, died in Ithaca on December 21, 1957 after an illness of several months. His death, at the age of 36, brought to an untimely end a career which was marked by a number of important contributions in research and teaching on the breeding of vegetables and which held ever greater promise for the future. Professor York was born in Waynesville, North Carolina on November 26, 1921 and grew up on a farm there. His undergraduate studies at North Carolina State College were interrupted by service in the Army from April 1943 to October 1945. During this time he spent two years overseas in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany. Returning to North Carolina he was awarded the Bachelor of Science degree in 1946 and continued studying there for the Master of Science degree. His work for the degree was essentially completed in June, 1947 when he came to Cornell University for further graduate study, but the thesis was presented later and the Master's degree was actually awarded in 1948.

As a graduate student at Cornell, he held an assistantship that involved the breeding of beans for disease resistance. He was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1950 and was immediately appointed Assistant Professor in the Departments of Vegetable Crops and of Plant Breeding, with main responsibility for the breeding of dry and snap beans. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1953. His research led to the development of a Red Kidney bean with resistance to halo blight, a bacterial disease that has prevented the growing of Red Kidney bean seed in New York State. Field tests in progress indicate that this research will save New York State bean growers many thousands of dollars annually in seed costs. His intensive work on resistance to fusarium root rot of beans led to the finding of a much better source of resistance than was hitherto known. This knowledge shared with other bean breeders has stimulated work at other locations and is expected to lead to a solution of one of the most serious problems in bean production throughout the United States.

In addition to his work on beans, Professor York did the principal work on an early tomato variety, several scab resistant cucumbers, and a hybrid cabbage, all of which are undergoing field tests preliminary to release.

While he did not regularly teach any formal course, Professor York was much sought as an adviser of graduate students. His scholarly and critical approach to their problems earned their respect, and his sympathetic understanding and quiet humor won their affection. He was much interested in foreign students and maintained correspondence with several of them after they left Cornell.

Partly as a result of his interest in foreign students, he held an appointment as Visiting Professor of Vegetable Crops in the Department of Agronomy, College of Agriculture, University of the Philippines. From April, 1955 to January, 1957 he worked to develop the vegetable crops teaching and research program of the College. He quickly recognized that for his impact to be lasting he must develop people and attitudes. The tangible results of his stay are measured in the accomplishments of other people, as they should be, but behind almost every activity of the section was his guiding hand, deliberately inconspicuous but nonetheless real.

In terms of instruction, he taught a graduate course primarily for young faculty members who were working toward advanced degrees. He advised five of these, two of whom remained to strengthen the local institution and three of whom carried his teaching to other colleges, thus spreading his influence. He taught an advanced course for undergraduates, primarily to train local faculty and to develop the course. He gradually shifted responsibility to the local instructors until they carried the course independently. Working with local faculty, he was also instrumental in reorganizing the elementary course in vegetable crops, including development of new laboratory outlines and mimeographed material in order to adapt available texts to Philippine conditions.

For all of his effort to improve the resident teaching and help the young and inexperienced faculty to develop as teachers, his major effort was in the development of sound research and competent researchers. The main projects included evaluation of some 600 vegetable varieties; testing of nutrient amounts, ratios, and placement in fertilizer trials; development of methods of storing seeds in tropical climates; studies of vegetable seed production; breeding of tomatoes, squash, pepper, sweet potatoes, and Irish potatoes for local conditions; studies on curing and storage of vegetables under tropical conditions; and special studies of onion and garlic production and storage. By the time he left, these were all going projects under Filipino staff, most of whom he had a large part in training.

He also stimulated a number of cooperative research projects with farmers and outside agencies, from three of which he was instrumental in obtaining financial support, which was in itself a tribute to the development of the vegetable crops section and its work. Under his guidance a flow of research findings was disseminated through bulletins, the press, and radio.

Quite beyond all this, Professor York and his family were outstanding ambassadors of good will. His sincere devotion to the Filipino people is amply demonstrated in his request that memorials to him be expressed in tangible form to the Church-Among-the Palms.

He is survived by his wife, Barbara Hunt York, whom he married in June 1950. Also surviving are their three children, Stephen, Amy, and Thomas; and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. D. D. York. His friends throughout the United States and in the Philippines share with his family a deep sense of personal loss.

H. M. Munger, M. G. Cline, R. P. Murphy