

Melvin B. Hoffman

November 19, 1903 — February 21, 1988

Melvin Butler (Pete) Hoffman was born in Blythewood, South Carolina and spent his early boyhood on the family farm. He quickly developed a passion for whatever was at hand, be it work or play, school or the world around him, in a family of two older half-brothers and two younger brothers and two younger sisters.

Pete attended the local school that provided instruction through the 10th grade. At the age of fifteen he sat for the South Carolina College Entrance Examination which he not only passed successfully, but was awarded a scholarship to Clemson College where he enrolled the fall semester 1918. After graduation in 1923 he worked one year for the Federal Horticulture Board in Texas. He then moved to Michigan State where he worked with the noted peach breeder, Dr. Stanley Johnson, and received his M.S. degree in 1926. Following graduation he was appointed to the position of instructor in horticulture at West Virginia University, a post he held until coming to Cornell University as a graduate student in pomology under Dr. A.J. Heinicke in 1931. Early in his graduate career at Cornell he teamed up with other graduate students — L.P. (Jack) Batjer, Frazier Cowart, J. Winston Neely, Charles Palm, Michael Peech and T.J. Peele — to rent an apartment on Stewart Avenue. This was their home during their years of graduate study and preparation for a variety of highly successful professional careers. Friendships and strong ties developed among that group, lasting throughout their lifetimes. The Depression was in full swing, and the frugal management of the apartment often fell to Pete, the senior member of the group. In addition to the serious side of graduate student life in the mid 1930s, there were occasions for relaxation and fun which Pete often recounted. His picturesque southern expressions were entertaining and good for a laugh!

Pete married Helen Kallenberg in 1934. They had two children: a son, Robert, and a daughter, Mary Louise; and, later, two grandchildren.

Pete's background of experience, professional competence, and dedication to fruit growing, led to his appointment as extension instructor in pomology at Cornell prior to receiving his Ph.D. in 1934. He stayed on in the department after receiving his degree and was made assistant professor in 1936. During his early tenure at Cornell he was one of the very few extension workers in the United States who held a doctorate.

Because of the Depression and loss of many trees due to the severe winter of 1933-34, there was a sharp decline in the number of commercial fruit plantings in New York. The decline in tree numbers was more than offset by a marked increase in average yield per acre so that total fruit production was maintained at a high level. The

larger yields were due primarily to improved cultural practices based on research in which Pete was involved and which he advocated as extension fruit specialist. His thesis research on photosynthesis in apple leaves led to the development and use of fungicides that controlled diseases as effectively as lime sulfur resulting in greater efficiency of the foliage on the trees. The pioneering studies on soils suitable for fruit production, with which Pete was closely associated, resulted in the orchard location service as an extension activity that brought about the concentration of new fruit plantings on the better soils and sites. The work on soil management and mineral nutrition of fruit plants paved the way for foliar analysis as a supplement to soil analysis. Leaf and soil analyses as a service to growers was established under Pete's direction. The research on chemical thinning of apples, to which he made major contributions, was widely applied throughout all apple growing regions and has helped to bring about annual production and increased hardiness of the trees. Before the 1960s, apple production fluctuated widely from year to year. Since the advent of very early fruit thinning, production has been relatively stable from year to year. He was also involved in developing sprays that would prevent the preharvest drop of apples. Chemical thinning and preventing preharvest drop of apples doubled the average yields of marketable fruit in New York.

Pete was appointed associate head of the department in 1944 when Dr. Heinicke moved to Geneva as director of the Agricultural Experiment Station. In 1960 Pete was appointed head of the department when Dr. Heinicke retired, and served in that capacity until his retirement in 1970, when he was named professor emeritus.

As department head, Professor Hoffman enthusiastically supported basic research on physiological, anatomical, and biochemical phases of production and storage problems, as well as applied research. He also supported new plantings of apple trees propagated on size controlling rootstocks. Soon after becoming department head, he was asked by the college administration to work with Professor John Einset at Geneva to review the pomology departments at Ithaca and Geneva, to assure that their programs were coordinated to provide the best total program for the fruit industry of the state.

In addition to his extension, research, and administrative positions, he annually taught an upper-division course for undergraduate and graduate students.

As an extension specialist, Pete enjoyed the confidence of all fruit growers. He was respected for his good judgment in suggesting practices that were based on a thorough knowledge of experimental evidence. His method of communication was down to earth, delivered with his southern accent and his famous sense of humor. Growers in all sections of New York felt that they could not conduct their fruit-thinning practices in the spring until they had their briefing sessions at the twilight meetings. Growers from as far away as Missouri would call Pete at

home for specific chemical fruit–thinning recommendations for their individual orchards. He was called upon for consultation and talks in other states. He travelled widely and kept up with the latest developments in other fruit producing regions.

In recognition of his contributions to the fruit industry through research and extension accomplishments, Pete received a special citation from the New York State Horticultural Society in 1969. He authored or co-authored more than forty research and technical papers where he presented his experimental work. In addition, he wrote numerous extension publications and articles for trade journals.

Pete was elected a fellow of the American Society of Horticultural Science in 1968 in recognition of his outstanding professional achievements. He was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, The American Institute of Biological Science, Sigma Xi, Phi Kappa Phi, and is listed in the *American Men of Science*.

Pete Hoffman lived a full life — one that touched many people. He loved his family. Professionally he excelled. Much of New York’s stable and sound fruit industry reflects the research and the guidance he gave to the growers. He provided leadership not only to the fruit industry itself, but to the Department of Pomology as professor and chairman. Pete’s contributions as a professional and humanitarian were substantial. He did much to encourage the work of graduate students and colleagues. Melvin Butler (Pete) Hoffman was respected by all of those who knew him.

G. D. Blanpied, Charles E. Palm, Loyd E. Powell, Louis J. Edgerton