



Thomas T. Poleman

November 28, 1928 – June 20, 2014

Thomas T. Poleman was appointed to a new position on the economics of agricultural development on May 1, 1963, and he retired as a professor emeritus October 5, 1999. Tom received his Ph.D. in 1960 from the Food Research Institute at Stanford University and also an M.A. from Stanford and bachelors and masters degrees from the University of Missouri. After completing his doctorate, he spent an additional year at Stanford and two years as a senior economic analyst with the CIA. The Food Research Institute was similar to a department of agricultural economics, with a small but distinguished faculty, that specialized in development economics and in commodity market analysis. Thus, Tom's training was appropriate for the position in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Cornell. (This Department is now the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, and development and international economics is one of the four pillars of this unit.)

An important portion of his work centered on the world food problem. Poleman was skeptical of the characterization of hunger in the world; he thought the breadth of the problem was exaggerated and that the characterization of the problem was wrong. Certainly over the span of his career, food production in the world grew at a faster rate than did the world's population, and the issue was importantly about the location and distribution of food and incomes.

His views are illustrated by the titles of some of his papers: *World Food: A Perspective* (*Science* 1975), *World Food: Myth and Reality* (*World Development* 1977) and *A Reappraisal of the Extent of World Hunger* (*Food Policy* 1981). Tom provided critical evaluations of the methodologies underlying the estimates of the extent of world hunger, e.g., *Global Hunger: The Methodologies Underlying the Official Estimates*, a department working paper (#97-14). He also wrote about the "cures" for hunger, as in *World Hunger: Extent, Causes, and Cures*, a departmental research bulletin (#82-17). As a consequence of these views, his policy

recommendations emphasized programs targeted to particular populations that he viewed as truly hungry.

Poleman's other research was on diverse topics driven in part by projects that were of interest to the graduate students that he supervised. Unquestionably one of Tom's major contributions was the supervision of graduate students' research. This included not only Ph.D., but also M.S. and M.P.S. students. The total number of graduate students that he advised over his career is unknown to us, but one record shows that he supervised the work of 28 students in a 10-year span ending in the early 1990s. The diversity of topics is illustrated by the titles of Ph.D. dissertations such as "The Marketing of Sweet Potatoes in Rwanda: Commercializing a Perishable Crop Under Difficult Circumstances" and "The Impact of Agricultural Prices on Rural Development and Wages in India."

Professor Poleman could be a tough supervisor, but many of his students appreciated his in-depth guidance and were very loyal to him. One example from a student doing a non-thesis research project: "He was a difficult task master ... and sparks often flew. But in the end, the final product was of better quality than the draft material I had submitted ... It eventually became [a staff paper and] it helped me get my very first job ... in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, West Africa."

Tom came from a research tradition that emphasized in-depth reviews of literature, a detailed understanding of the construction of secondary data used in the research (or collecting original data), and reporting results in monograph-type publications. Thus, a large portion of his writing, including co-authorships with students, was placed in departmental bulletins, working papers, and staff papers as well as in books. These modes of publication became increasingly inconsistent with the practice of the economics profession, which emphasizes publication in refereed journals. This perhaps explains, at least in part, why Tom's work was not as influential as he hoped that it would be. Nonetheless, a book like *The New Economics of India's Green Revolution*, written in collaboration with his Ph.D. student Rita Sharma and published by Cornell University Press (1993), was something of which he could be justly proud. Moreover, students benefitted from his insistence on careful scholarship and writing.

Poleman was interested in the welfare of his department as well as his students, but he could be impatient with administrators. Department chairs and the deans typically wanted more information about the intended uses of the funds that Tom requested for his graduate students or for his travel, while he thought that the justifications for these funds were more-or-less self-evident. Of course, students appreciated his "going to bat" for their funding, and he certainly left a legacy of graduate student alumni who have made important contributions to the welfare of the world's population.

Tom is survived by his wife, Charlotte; four children, Carol Becker, Clare Stephenson, Walter Poleman and Tom Poleman and their spouses; 12 grandchildren; and one great-granddaughter.

W. G. Tomek; B.F. Stanton; T. D. Mount