

Harold E. Thomas, 1900–1986

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Harold E. Thomas, professor of plant pathology, University of California (1928-1945), renowned for his pioneering researches on the strawberry, director of the Strawberry Institute of California, and, subsequently, of Driscoll Strawberry Associates, Inc., died December 3, 1986, at his home in Morgan Hill, California. A twin, Harold was born in Watsonville, California, March 25, 1900, in the heart of one of California's oldest strawberry districts. He never knew his father, who died five months

before he was born. Fortunately for the young family, a loving grandmother stepped in to help with many of the daily chores. Harold and she became special friends. From the time of his earliest formal education in a one-room schoolhouse, still standing at the junction of San Andreas and Buena Vista roads, Harold was never far from a strawberry patch. As a boy he witnessed ups and downs of strawberry production cycles, including total crop failures from unknown causes, and, when asked later in life to pursue scientific studies designed to improve the strawberry, he accepted the challenge and pursued his goals with dogged determination to the very end. He rightly deserves the appellation "Father of the California Strawberry Industry."

Encouraged by an uncle, W. W. Thomas, a 1916 University of California graduate with an M.S. degree in plant pathology, Harold Thomas entered the University of California, Berkeley, in 1919. He graduated in 1924 with a B.S. in plant pathology, and soon thereafter began graduate studies. In 1927, he joined the faculty of the Department of Plant Pathology of the University. The following year he obtained his Ph.D. His doctoral studies were on the biology of *Armillaria mellea*, a root destroying fungus primarily of deciduous orchard crops of California. As a member of the U.C. faculty, root diseases of deciduous orchard trees together with strawberry diseases became his major research responsibilities. Thomas was one of the first to identify the fungus *Rosellinia (Dematophora) necatrix* then recently introduced into California, probably on pear rootstocks from France. It, together with *Armillaria*, constituted a serious threat to California's orchard and grape industries.

Ever close to growers and ever in their service, Thomas worked with untiring energy and dedication to provide workable solutions to disease problems. On strawberries, he continued the researches of a colleague on the virus disease complex described at the time as 'xanthosis,' which in severity and rapidity of spread, held the potential of threatening the very existence of the California strawberry industry. With the knowledge gained that certain of the Pacific Coast's native strawberries possessed resistance to the viruses, Harold enlarged the strawberry breeding program already begun and collected wild strawberries from as far away as Oregon, Alaska, Chile, and Peru. He thus put California strawberry cultivar development on a firm foundation, with disease resistance as a foremost consideration. He was certainly one of the first in fruit breeding to employ wild parents as sources of virus disease resistance. Realizing the significance of this work, growers and the California State Legislature contributed funding for its

accomplishment. Perhaps in no other instance have farmer and state contributions resulted in greater returns, which to this day are still being realized.

Annual reports housed in the Department of Plant Pathology, University of California, Berkeley, for the years 1929-1944 detail the many strawberry crosses, sources of parents, the large progenies, commonly of 10,000-15,000 seedlings fruited and rated annually in the field tests for virus, root rot, brown core (i.e. red stele) and brown blight (i.e. Verticillium wilt) diseases, insect and mite depredations, and finally fruit quality.

Thomas became a lifelong associate of George M. Darrow, chief horticulturist, Crops Research Division, USDA, in charge of breeding research with strawberries, and of Earl V. Goldsmith, foreman of the University of California Deciduous Fruit Field Station, Santa Clara, where much of the early selection work for strawberry disease resistance was done.

In 1934 he and Helene Diepen, who was employed at the Deciduous Fruit Field Station, were married. In 1935 Earl V. Goldsmith became his research assistant and devoted himself fulltime to strawberry breeding; this cemented a lifelong friendship between scientist and layman, both dedicated to improvement of the strawberry.

In 1939, Harold published University of California Agriculture Extension Circular 113 entitled the Production of Strawberries in California. In 1945, delayed because of World War II, Thomas and Goldsmith published their now famous Bulletin 690, entitled "The Shasta, Sierra, Lassen, Tahoe, and Donner Strawberries." These milestone cultivars changed the character and scope of strawberry production in California and opened a potential for the strawberry as a fresh market fruit never before imagined.

In 1945, Harold Thomas resigned from the University of California to head the newly formed Strawberry Institute of California. Here he could divorce himself from other crop responsibilities and devote his full energies to strawberry research. Under his leadership, the Institute rose to prominence in applied research and development of strawberry cultivars unrivaled in beauty and quality anywhere else in the world. In 1966, the Strawberry Institute merged with Driscoll Strawberry Associates, Inc., which Thomas also directed for nearly 10 years. Dedicated to the same excellence in fruit quality and applied research, the Associates have continued unabated in their accomplishments in strawberry cultivar development, fruit production systems, and marketing capabilities.

Harold Thomas was one of the most dedicated and disciplined and kindest people one would ever wish to meet. He possessed a quiet, firm faith in God and the Bible to which the hymn "Rock of Ages," sung at his funeral, fittingly closed a long, dedicated, productive career. The book *A History of the Strawberry from Ancient Gardens to Modern Markets*, published in 1974 by the University of California, Division of Agricultural Sciences, was dedicated to Harold Thomas upon his retirement from Driscoll Strawberry Associates, Inc. Harold served on the Live Oak High School Board of Trustees, on the Central Santa Clara Valley Conservation District, was active in the Morgan Hill Lions Club, and attended the First Immanuel Lutheran Church of San Jose.

He is survived by his wife Helene and two sons, Donal, a physicist, and Darryl, a plant pathologist, both Ph.Ds. Both are married and both have two children.