

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION JOHN HUNTER THOMAS

(1928-2000)

John Hunter Thomas, Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences, died July 20, 1999 at the age of 71. He had served as an active member of the Stanford faculty for 37 years until his retirement in 1995.

John was born in Beaten, Germany on March 26, 1928, the son of an American mining engineer and his wife, both American citizens. He was raised in Poland (which the family left in 1939) and the northeastern United States and attended Kent School in Connecticut.

John got his undergraduate degree at Cal Tech and entered Stanford as a graduate student in 1948. He completed his master's degree in 1949 under Professor Ira Loren Wiggins, then Director of the Natural History Museum, working on distribution and taxonomy of the evening primrose family in the Sonoran desert. He continued working with Wiggins on a Flora of Alaska. John's graduate career was interrupted in 1951-52 by service as an officer in the Navy during the Korean war, and he was wounded while on the bridge of the destroyer Ernest G. Small. The ship, dodging coastal artillery fire, struck a mine and suffered 9 killed and 17 in addition to John wounded. The bow later broke off in heavy seas. One of John's favorite wisecracks, when described the shrapnel which remained embedded in his body for the rest of his life, was that although he had gained weight, the Ernest G. Small had been converted into the Ernest G. Smaller. From 1956-58 he was an instructor at Occidental College, and in 1958 he was hired by Stanford as assistant curator of the herbaria in the Museum.

John's doctorate was completed under Wiggins in 1959, and published by the Stanford University Press in 1961 as The Flora of the Santa Cruz Mountains. It remains the standard work to this day. Thomas' life-long interest in environmental quality was reflected in a sentence in the first paragraph of the Preface: "This flora will, I hope, acquaint at least a few more people with the plants around them, and perhaps thus serve as a stimulus, however slight, toward more permanent protection of our environment" (p. v).

Thomas became Associate Curator (1962), Curator (1963) and then Director (1972) of the 850,000 specimen Dudley Herbarium, with which he had a long and varied association. What he called "Uncle Dudley's Marginal Repository" was his favorite place at Stanford; he loved the collections; he loved making order of them. He also loved the lifelong friends he made there: Wiggins who was his major professor; Roxana S. Ferris, his predecessor as Curator, Richard W. Holm, and Peter H. Raven. He continued to work with the Herbarium's collections after they were placed on permanent loan to the

California Academy of Sciences in 1976. He was an Associate Professor of Biological Sciences from 1969 to 1977, and a Professor from 1977 until his retirement. At the same time he held appointments as Associate Curator and Curator of Botany at the California Academy.

John was a leading plant biogeographer, and remained a specialist in the plants of central California in general and the Santa Cruz mountains in particular. His other books include A Flora of the Alaskan Arctic Slope with Ira L. Wiggins, and Native Shrubs of the Sierra Nevada with D.R. Parnell. He was a dedicated teacher of plant taxonomy, and his extended course field trips are still remembered fondly by many Stanford graduates, some of whom have gone on to distinguished careers in biology. His systematic knowledge was also a source of aid to his colleagues and students of all persuasions in providing the critical identifications of plants necessary for their research. It must be recorded, however, that no one, except for John, has ever properly prepared a herbarium specimen – to say he was meticulous would be like saying that W.C. Fields would accept a drink.

Some of John's happiest days were in summers spent in Montana at the University of Montana's Flathead Lake Biological Station between 1965 and 1969. He was fascinated by books and very much enjoyed his service on the board of directors of the Associates of the Stanford University Libraries and on the Stanford University Press Board.

John had a deep and abiding interest in environmental issues. Although a Catholic, he publicly criticized Pope Paul VI's anti-birth control encyclical and gave lectures to both public and Catholic audiences on the problems caused by human overpopulation. He was a key player in the early organization and running of the world's foremost NGO concerned with demographic issues, ZPG. He also was engrossed in the history of systematic botany, and served as the biology department's informal historian. His other hobbies included reading English novels (C.P. Snow's "Masters" series and the works of Evelyn Waugh were near obsessions) and printing. He owned a printing press and amused himself churning out scurrilous mock reviews of colleagues books, and stationery for his rightly famous "Cardboard Carton Corpse and Cadaver Container Corporation," which he and his friends put to good use. His favorite quote was from Camus, and reflected his view of the environmental situation – "Fortunately there is gin, the sole glimmer of light in this darkness."

John faced the end of his life with calm deliberation, announcing to his friends that he had Alzheimer's disease, and remaining in touch with them as long as he could. He is survived by his wife Susan Davidson Thomas and his sister Mary Louise Thomas. A memorial service was held in Memorial Church August 24, 1999 at which tributes were delivered by many of his old friends and students. He is remembered along with

his close friend, the late Richard W. Holm, in Stanford's endowed Holm/Thomas Memorial Lectures in Population Biology. And all of us who miss him will remember well his wry sense of humor and willingness to help any one, student or faculty member, who was mystified by a hard-to-identify plant.

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