

Lee Homer Person, 1904-1970

G. B. Lucas and P. R. Miller



Lee Homer Person, the son of Una Cool and Lee Homer Person, Sr., was born on February 3, 1904, in Memphis, Tenn. Shortly afterward, his family moved to the nearby town of Bolton, Tennessee, where Lee spent his summers on a cotton farm. He often reminisced about "chopping cotton from sunup till sundown" for "1 dollar a day".

He was graduated from Russelville High School in Arkansas, received his B.S. degree from Mississippi A&M College in 1926, and his M.S. degree from the University of Minnesota in 1929. He accepted the position of Assistant Pathologist at Louisiana State University in 1929 to work on vegetable diseases. He continued work on his Ph.D. degree as a participant in the informal exchange program conducted jointly by E. C. Stakman and C. W. Edgerton, whereby graduate students from Louisiana and Minnesota spent time at both institutions and thus were exposed to the teachings and philosophy of each. As a result, Lee was a lucky member of that group of plant pathologists who were trained by two outstanding leaders in the field of plant pathology. Lee spent several summers in Minnesota taking coursework and participating in the barberry eradication program, and earned his Ph.D. degree in 1937.

During his stay in Louisiana, he did extensive work on seed treatment of vegetables. Largely through his efforts, the snapbean growers in Louisiana began to use certified seed to combat bacterial diseases. It was a simple program. Dr. Person explained the value of good seed and demonstrated its worth in field tests. He established the seed requirements of participating growers, and contacted seed producers in the western states. The seed was shipped by rail to Louisiana and dispersed from the railroad car directly to the growers who paid for the seed as they got it, an efficient and uncomplicated system.

During this time, he and coworkers also investigated soil rot of sweet potatoes caused by *Actinomyces ipomoeae*. As the disease was not prevalent in soils

of low pH, Dr. Person reasoned that applications of sulfur (which was inexpensive and in abundant supply) to the soil might provide an economical control. After several years' experimentation, it was determined that 500-800 lb. sulfur applied/acre practically eliminated the disease for as long as 4-6 years.

In 1943-44, Dr. Person served as Pathologist with the USDA in the Emergency Plant Disease Survey. This was a wartime program designed to protect the country's supply of food, feed, fiber, and oil by insuring immediate detection of outbreaks of plant diseases, whether introduced inadvertently or by design. Lee made an unusual contribution to this program because of his broad knowledge of plant diseases, especially those of vegetable crops.

In 1947, he remained for a short time at Michigan State University and during that same year accepted a USDA appointment as Plant Pathologist, Epidemiology Investigations, Crops Protection Research Branch, headquartered at North Carolina State University. During the next 22 years, his research contributed materially to the development of criteria for accurate prediction of plant disease epidemics. These predictions resulted in effective control of selected diseases of tobacco and vegetable crops by reduced use of fungicides, and consequent saving of many dollars to farmers in the southeastern United States. He was author or co-author of 40-odd publications.

Lee was a good diagnostician. If anyone could look at a sick plant, particularly vegetables, and tell you what was wrong, it was he. He enjoyed going on field trips, visiting problem fields, and talking to farmers. He was a practical plant pathologist interested in the control of plant diseases.

His yard was a showplace of azaleas and camellias whose welfare he personally supervised. Usually he grew the first ripe tomatoes each year in his neighborhood. His vivid talk, expressive idiom, and warm personality will linger a long time in the memory of those who knew him.

Dr. Person is survived by his wife, Helen Hayner Person of Raleigh, North Carolina, one son, Lee, Jr., a research test pilot for NASA, at Langley Field, Hampton, Va., a granddaughter, Kim, and his sister, Mrs. Leslie E. Mathers of Mason City, Illinois.