

John Thomas Presley, 1906–1984

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John Thomas Presley died Sunday, November 25, 1984, in Bryan, Texas, after nearly a year of illness following surgery for stomach cancer. He is survived by his wife Mary Alice, in Bryan, and his son John Richard Presley, living in Houston, Texas.

John Presley was born in Hamilton, Georgia, August 12, 1906, and moved with his family to Florida in 1911. He graduated from Ponce de Leon High School in Coral Gables, Florida. In 1927, he entered the University of Florida at Gainesville where he

studied for two years. He then joined the staff of the United States Plant Introduction Garden at Coconut Grove, Florida, and was transferred from there to Washington, D.C., in 1929. During the next few years, under the tutelage of O. F. Cooke, he traveled extensively in the Tropics and in the southern part of the United States in connection with work on palm, cotton, rubber, and other tropical plants. He took a leave of absence from his work with the United States Department of Agriculture, entered the University of Maryland at College Park, and earned a B.S. degree in agriculture in 1935.

Returning to his work with the USDA, John was transferred in January, 1936, to the USDA Field Station, Sacaton, Arizona, where he did research on diseases of cotton. His studies on *Phymatotrichum* root rot were of special importance. He was one of the first scientists to recognize the importance of competitive or suppressive microbial influences in the control of root rot. In 1937, J. S. Cates wrote in the *Country Gentleman* that "Somehow young Presley, when he attacked the mystery of how manure controlled root rot, got hold of the idea that a fungicidal bacteria [*sic*], the growth of which had been promoted by the manure, was doing the job of root rot control."

In 1938, John Presley entered the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota, St. Paul, with a major in plant pathology and a minor in genetics and plant breeding. His doctoral research under the direction of E. C. Stakman was principally on *Verticillium* wilt of cotton but also included studies on cotton rust. World War II interrupted his studies, and he received his Ph.D. in 1947, while working jointly for the USDA and Mississippi State University.

During his graduate studies John retained his position with USDA at Sacaton, Arizona, and with the United States' entry into World War II, he was transferred to the USDA Emergency Rubber Project in early 1942. With the Emergency Rubber Project he traveled extensively in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, working on agronomical and pathological problems of the guayule rubber plant (*Parthenium argentatum*). While traveling for his work on guayule, he met and courted Mary Alice

Barnhart of Pearsall, Texas. They were married shortly after the end of the war, on October 10, 1945.

Several months before the end of the war, John was transferred to State College, Mississippi. There he held a joint appointment with the Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station and had supervisory responsibility for all plant disease work in Mississippi. Although the primary emphasis of his research was on diseases of cotton, he also did work on diseases of other plants, including tomatoes, sweet potatoes, soybeans, kudzu, and kenaf.

In 1950, Dr. Presley was transferred to Washington, D.C., and became investigations leader for cotton pathology research in the USDA. In that capacity, he continued his personal research on *Verticillium* wilt and seedling diseases of cotton, and guided the research of other USDA pathologists across the United States cotton belt. He was an energetic and highly motivated scientist, as reflected in his authorship or coauthorship of more than 90 papers during his career. His energy and motivation were important in imparting a sense of urgency in their work to the scientists with whom he worked and whom he supervised. As cotton pathology investigations leader, he played an important role in the initiation of uniform regional seed treatment trials, basic studies of variability in fungi, biochemistry of resistance in cotton, and the multi-adversity resistance cotton breeding program of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. He was instrumental in both the planning and construction of the USDA National Cotton Pathology Research Laboratory at College Station, Texas.

Dr. Presley retired from the USDA in 1969 and moved to Bryan but did not retire from work on plants and diseases. He became a licensed plant breeder in Texas and worked with cotton seed certification programs. Additionally, he developed a new interest in sugarcane diseases, and became a consultant with Gulf and Western Industries. He also became actively involved in breeding for resistance to the bacterial stripe disease of sugarcane caused by *Xanthomonas albilineans* and published the first report of the occurrence of sugarcane rust in the western hemisphere.

In Texas, Dr. Presley frequently visited scientists at the National Cotton Pathology Research Laboratory, several of whom he had hired, and with faculty and students at Texas A&M University. Because he had worked so long with cotton and had published on all major diseases of cotton in the United States, those of us who visited with him found him a virtual encyclopedia of information on cotton and its diseases. As one student said, "Man, he wrote the book on cotton diseases." We miss his visits, comments, and suggestions very much.

Dr. Presley was a member of The American Phytopathological Society, The American Association for the Advancement of Science, The Cotton Disease Council, the American Genetic Association, the Torrey Botanical Club, the Mycological Society of America, and the Mississippi Academy of Science. He also was a member of Alpha Zeta and Gamma Alpha fraternities, and the Cosmos Club of Washington, D.C.