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Obituary for Robert F. Thorne

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ROBERT FOLGER THORNE (1920–2015)

Curator emeritus of the herbarium at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden Robert Folger ‘Bob’ Thorne peacefully passed away on Tuesday, March 24, 2015. He was 94.

Dr. Thorne was born on July 13, 1920 in Spring Lake, New Jersey. Up through his high school years, he lived in Gulfport and St. Petersburg, Florida. He graduated *summa cum laude* in 1941 from Dartmouth College and earned his M.S. degree in economic botany from Cornell University in 1942.

The advent of World War II imposed a hiatus to his graduate studies while Bob served in the Army Air Force flying 40 missions as chief navigator aboard a Consolidated B-24 Liberator. Ever the botanist, he loved to tell the story of the time that his plane was shot down over the Adriatic Sea. As he parachuted near the water, and despite the obvious predicament he was in, he observed to his delight an aquatic plant that he had not seen before.

Following WWII, Bob completed his Ph.D. at Cornell (1949). His academic career began at the University of Iowa, where he advanced from assistant to full professor (1949–1962). An offer from Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden brought Thorne to Claremont, where he served as taxonomist and professor, as well as curator of the RSABG herbarium (RSA-POM) (Fig. 1).

Together with Arthur Cronquist and Armen Takhtajan, Bob Thorne formed a triumvirate of botanists who grappled with the monumental task of sorting out relationships among all angiosperms in the years just before the advent of phylogenetic methods and DNA data. Bob’s 1992 publication in *The Botanical Review*, “Classification and geography of the flowering plants,” is a citation classic. Bob was also keenly interested in biogeographic patterns among plants; his 1972 paper in *Quarterly Review of Biology*, “Major disjunctions in the geographic ranges of seed plants,” is also widely known and cited. A third major interest was in floristics of western North America, with emphasis on California. His flora of the higher elevations of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, Baja California, Mexico, was published in *Aliso* in 2010.

Thorne’s research resulted in numerous collections from nearly all parts of the globe. These collections numbered more than 60,000 and contributed greatly to strengthening the herbarium at RSABG, making it the superlative resource that it is today. In addition to his plant collecting, he was a serious collector of postage stamps, amassing a large collection that emphasized stamps of plants and birds.

About working with Bob in the herbarium, curator emeritus Steve Boyd (who followed Thorne as head of RSA-POM) notes:

“Bob was justifiably proud of the taxonomic and geographic depth and breadth of the collections. It was a physical manifestation of his phylogenetic and biogeographic concepts, [and] also a herbarium that provided ease of use to other botanists and students.”

Bob took great delight in seeing new accessions coming into the collection, and was always on the lookout for specimens that represented first records for some family or subfamily based on his phylogenetic classification. When we received and accessioned specimens [of] a previously unrepresented family in the herbarium it was cause for celebration. And, for Bob, celebration meant cake [with] lots and lots of thick frosting!”

His botanical acumen and ability to inspire young plant scientists were recalled by Jim Henrickson, Research Fellow at the University of Texas at Austin Plant Research Center and former Thorne student, “Bob loved plants and his enthusiasm for fieldwork was infectious. He took students on field trips into the wilds of California and Mexico and got them to know and love the flora, not just the groups they were working on, but all the plants, all the families. He made botanists out of them. When they saw an article about *Garrya*, *Ipomopsis*, *Thamnosma*, *Bursera*, or *Ornithostaphylos*, they knew that genus – it wasn’t just a name.”

Over the course of his long career, Thorne was recognized with many awards including a Fulbright Research Scholarship (1959–1960), Botanical Society of America Merit Award (1996), and Southern California Botanists Lifetime Achievement Award (1999). In 2001, he received the prestigious Asa Gray Award from the American Society of Plant Taxonomists. Among colleagues who wrote to support his nomination for the Asa Gray Award, Dr. Peter Raven (now president emeritus, Missouri Botanical Garden) wrote, “Bob is an incredible scholar and a marvelous human being! ... a world leader in the study of plant geography, phylogeny, and floristics ... under his guidance, the herbarium grew and prospered, becoming one of the outstanding repositories of plants from the western United States and elsewhere.” In 2006, Thorne was recognized as a Distinguished Fellow of the Botanical Society of America—the highest honor that BSA bestows.

His colleagues in the plant sciences and many friends will sorely miss Bob Thorne but, by virtue of his scientific contributions, his legacy will long endure.



Fig. 1. Robert Folger Thorne in pursuit of botany in the 1960s (upper left), 1970s (upper right), and 2009.