Robert Harry Stover, 1926 to 2003

Randy Ploetz

Robert Harry Stover was born in Chatham, Ontario, Canada on 2 December 1926, far from the tropics he came to love. In 1947, he obtained a B.S. in agriculture, specializing in bacteriology, from the University of Guelph. From 1949 to 1951, he was plant pathologist and head of investigations on tobacco diseases with the Canadian Department of Agriculture in Harrow, Ontario. During the winter months he attended graduate school, and in 1950 he graduated from the

University of Toronto with a Ph.D. in plant pathology and mycology under Professor D. L. Bailey.

Harry began his distinguished career in La Lima, Honduras, soon after receiving his Ph.D. He was hired by the United Fruit Company in 1951 to investigate and devise strategies for managing Panama disease. At the time, this disease was decimating export plantations throughout the tropics and threatened the very existence of the trades. It is hard to imagine a more difficult challenge for a young scientist, but in a short time Harry made major contributions to our understanding of the control and epidemiology of this disease, and the biology, ecology, and pathology of its causal agent, *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense*. This research culminated in postdoctoral studies at Cambridge University with Dr. S. D. Garrett during which he wrote, "Fusarial Wilt (Panama Disease) of Bananas and Other *Musa* Species" (CMI, 1962).

After the trades converted to the resistant Cavendish cultivars, Harry's focus shifted to Sigatoka leaf spot, caused by *Mycosphaerella musicola*. Although this disease did not have the lethal impact of Panama disease, it had a major influence on fruit yield and quality. His work on control of the disease witnessed a heightened sense of urgency when, in the early 1970s, black Sigatoka was first detected in the Americas. Black Sigatoka, caused by *Mycosphaerella fijiensis*, had a more serious impact on production than Sigatoka leaf spot, and quickly became the primary concern for export producers throughout the humid tropics. As he had done with Panama disease, Harry established himself as the world authority on the Sigatoka leaf spots. In 1990, he edited "Sigatoka Leaf Spot Diseases of Bananas" (INIBAP, 1990), which remains a useful reference.

Although he was best known for his work on Panama disease and the Sigatoka leaf spots, Harry was an authority on all diseases that affect banana, as well as all aspects of the production and management of this crop. His book entitled "Banana, Plantain and Abaca Diseases," published by CMI in 1972, remains a major reference on these problems, and his "Disease Management Strategies and the Survival of the Banana Industry" in the 1986 *Annual Review of Phytopathology* provided a succinct and compelling summary of the major issues that still face the export trades. In 1987, Longman published his major treatise on this crop, "Bananas," 3rd edition. The following passage by Harry's co-author on this book, the late, eminent Professor N.W. Simmonds,

is a testament to Harry's all-encompassing knowledge of this important crop. In the book's preface, Simmonds wrote, "This book is almost entirely due to Dr. Stover, very little to me. The only justifications for my name appearing as an author are that a few chapters of my *Bananas* remain more or less intact, that Longman urged joint authorship and that Dr. Stover was kind enough not to disagree. So this work is really "Stover on Bananas" and I can't imagine a more suitable author. He has lived with those delightful plants for more than 30 years...and the fact is everywhere apparent. If I can claim any credit, it is that I acted as godfather to the present work in advising Longman that Dr. Stover was their man, and that he knew far more about the crop than I did."

In addition to the above books, Harry wrote over 110 articles in refereed journals, and numerous book chapters, reviews, and technical publications. Yet, despite his reputation as a researcher, he spent much of his career as an administrator. He served as the chief of the Department of Plant Pathology of the United Fruit Company from 1961 to 1974, and director of the Division of Tropical Research of the United Fruit Company between 1975 and 1977. He became the director of the Division of Tropical Research in the Services for Tropical Agricultural Research, S.A. (SIATSA) of United Brands in 1975 and served in this capacity until 1984, when the Fundación Hondureña de Investigación Agrícola (FHIA) was created with facilities donated by United Brands. Harry remained active after he retired in 1985. He started and directed a laboratory in which consultative work was conducted for banana companies, agrochemical firms, agencies, and individual producers in Mexico, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, Africa, Australia, and Asia. He also remained in close contact with colleagues at FHIA and was a frequent visitor of the FHIA research library, which houses one of the world's premier collections of literature on banana, plantain, and tropical agriculture.

Harry was on the governing board of the College of Agricultural Science Professionals of Honduras in 1969 and 1970 and was one of the original members of the Board of Trustees for the International Network for the Improvement of Banana and Plantain (INIBAP) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research. In 1977, he was named a Fellow of The American Phytopathological Society (APS), and in 1983 he received the Award for Contributions to Banana Research of the Asociación para la Cooperación en Investigaciones de Banano en el Caribe y en América Tropical (ACORBAT). In 1985, he received the Gold Medal of the College of Profesionales in Agricultural Sciences of Honduras (COLPROCAH), and the Medal of Honor for Merit from the University of San Pedro Sula. He was an active member of APS, the Canadian Society of Phytopathology, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, COLPROCAH, and ACORBAT. In 2001, the FHIA research library was named the R. Harry Stover Library to recognize contributions he made during his career and the decades-long support and direction he provided.

No account of Harry's career would be complete without mentioning all he did for the people in his adopted country of Honduras. He contributed in ways large and small to students and schools throughout the country, and conducted diverse activities to improve the health and living conditions of his countrymen, especially the poor. On the morning of 25 February 2003, Harry passed away outside La Lima. Clearly, Harry will be missed by his many friends, colleagues, and acquaintances around the world.