



*L. Thomas*

## LEO J. "JACK" THOMAS

1936–2011

Elected in 1984

*"For imaginative and productive leadership in the management of science and engineering leading to the development of innovative products for the consumer and commercial-industrial marketplaces."*

BY EDWIN P. PRZYBYLOWICZ

LEO J. "JACK" THOMAS's election to the National Academy of Engineering at the age of 47 recognized not only his past accomplishments but portended his future as well. He succeeded Dr. Wesley T. Hanson (inventor of the Kodacolor film system) as director of research at the Eastman Kodak Company in 1977. His rise within the company, which he joined in 1961 as a new Ph.D. in chemical engineering from the University of Illinois, was meteoric. Jack tackled problems facing the research and development organization at a breakneck pace. The worldwide research organization that he managed numbered over 5,000 research scientists, engineers, and support personnel located in seven laboratories throughout the world. In 1984 he had established an eighth research laboratory in Japan.

Jack's abilities as a manager and a leader of people were evident from his earliest days at Kodak. In his interactions with people he conveyed an interest in and understanding of their work. He had a wonderful combination of curiosity, a photographic memory, and a strategic bent in his thinking. He was a voracious reader with an interest in not only science and technology but also people and their lives. His capacity for absorbing and utilizing information was unsurpassed.

A reflection from Jack's early days at Kodak came from a colleague who in 1962 was asked to act as a photographic mentor for Thomas, who had had no previous training in photography. He recalled this in 1987 on the 75th anniversary of Kodak Research:

Jack was the brightest young colleague that I had ever met in my long career at Kodak. He had a knack of asking the right questions and of getting directly to the heart of a problem.

When I had the opportunity to fill out a performance appraisal on Jack Thomas after he had been at Kodak for six months, I remember writing: "I predict that I will be working for him within 10 years, and that he will be head of the research labs within 20 years [he became Director of Research 16 years from when he started] if he is not president of the company first." He was a remarkable person to have as a friend, with whom to discuss serious and not-so-serious matters. He knew how to work and how to play and how to deal effectively with people.

As director of research, Jack challenged himself to know all 5,000+ members of the Kodak Research Laboratories in Rochester by their first name. He was a "walk the talk" manager, preferring to visit labs and talk with people in his organization rather than work in his office. During his tenure as director of research, he created an informal and open atmosphere in the research organizations across the Kodak world that facilitated communication and collaboration. Annually he would present a "state of research" presentation to members of the research community during which he would extemporaneously and comprehensively acknowledge the individual contributors to each project he highlighted.

"Make this elephant dance" was the company mantra under Walter A. Fallon, Kodak chairman and chief executive officer, who asked Jack Thomas, age 40, to lead the research organization. He inherited a world-renown, centralized research organization that like Kodak itself had grown large, bureaucratic, conservative, complacent, and somewhat too relaxed.

Jack led the transformation of the research laboratories from a technology-driven enterprise to a market-driven one. The organization became responsive to competitive pressures in existing markets and began to develop products for new ones where needs could be met by utilizing the science and technology base of the Kodak Research Laboratories. Jack himself discussed this challenge as he reflected on 75 years of Kodak research in 1987:

We had come out of an era where the company had more or less grown outward from a set of core technologies. We grew to have a set of very large functions which were managed as functions. Taking an idea to the marketplace, therefore, required the very active cooperation of the people who were in all these functions. It wasn't possible for anyone, short of the chief executive officer, to get anything done by himself.

Under Jack's leadership many contributions were made to the success of major photographic programs, such as the Kodak Instant Camera and Print program and the VR family of color negative films (ASA 100, 200, 400, 1,000—the 1,000-speed film employing revolutionary tabular silver halide grains). The first Kodak commercial digital imaging system (the SP 2000 Motion Analysis System for recording up to 2,000 images per second), the development of the Kodak disc cameras and film system, and the Ektaflex PCT products for simplified enlargement of color prints were a result of the momentum Jack developed in the research laboratories' programs.

He led Kodak into new product areas, such as unique optical and organic light emitting diode technologies, equipment and dry film chemistry for carrying out clinical chemistry tests (Ektachem products), and copy/duplicator products based on electrophotography. During his tenure as director, the research laboratories produced an impressive series of new high-technology products and expanded the company's portfolio of intellectual property.

Jack led the search for new market areas that could be served by Kodak science and technology, and he was convinced that the strong base of chemistry and chemical engineering could

be utilized to provide products in major markets such as the health care sector. In 1985 he left the research laboratories to form a new business group within Kodak, the Life Sciences Division, and became its first director. This division embodied a new direction for Kodak into the pharmaceutical industry. This coupled Kodak technology with that of the company's acquisitions, such as Sterling Pharmaceuticals and a joint venture with the pharmaceutical giant Sanofi. Jack became chairman of the Sterling Drug Company in 1988 and executive vice president of Kodak's Health Group in 1989.

Then, with the fortunes of Kodak's photographic business being heavily impacted by a shifting technology base from chemistry to electronics, Jack was called back in 1991 to head the photographic business. He was appointed president of the Imaging Group at Kodak and was elected a member of the Eastman Kodak Board in May 1992. By this time the technology shift in the imaging sector had gone beyond the "tipping point" toward digital imaging. Electronic imaging was displacing chemical imaging technology at a precipitous rate. Kodak shifted major resources to electronic imaging products but still had to manage its exit from conventional photographic products. Jack retired from Eastman Kodak in 1996 at the age of 60.

Throughout his career at Kodak, Jack was a strong supporter of innovation and the environment for the advancement of science and technology. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, he sought to improve working relationships among industry, academia, and government as a member of the Board of Directors of the New York State Science and Technology Foundation, which directed programs to stimulate the transfer of technology between universities and industry. In 1979 he was a founding member of the Council for Chemical Research, an organization that continues today as a strong voice for collaboration among academia, industry, and government. He also served on advisory committees at his alma maters—the University of Illinois and the University of Minnesota. In 1988 he was named Distinguished Alumnus of the Department of Engineering of the University of Illinois and in 2005 received

the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Department of Chemical Engineering and Materials Science of the University of Minnesota. Also, Jack was the keynote speaker at the 120th commencement ceremonies (1988) of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, where he was awarded an honorary doctor of engineering degree.

As part of his broader professional activities, Jack was involved in leadership roles in the Industrial Research Institute as a member of the Board of Directors (1982–1985). He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1984 in the Bioengineering Section and chaired the Bioengineering Peer Committee in 1988. He also served on the NAE Council from 1990 to 1995 and in 2002 chaired the Russ Prize Committee.

In 1991, Jack was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was also a member of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and a founding fellow of the American Institute for Medical and Biological Engineering. In 1995 he was named “Man of the Year” by the Photographic Manufacturers and Distributors Association and also received the Presidential Proclamation Award from the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. In 1996 he was elected an honorary member of the Society of Imaging Science and Technology, and in 1999 he received the prestigious Progress Medal and an honorary fellowship in the Royal Photographic Society of Britain.

On December 27, 1958, Leo “Jack” Thomas and Joanne Juliani were married in St. Louis County, Minnesota. They moved to Rochester, New York, in 1961. There they raised four children—Chris, Greg, Cindy, and Jeff. While Jack’s responsibilities during his career at Kodak were daunting, he managed to find time to enjoying many other dimensions of life. He was a lifelong fisherman, stemming from his Grand Rapids, Minnesota, boyhood home. He regularly found time to go off on fishing weekends to the back country in Canada with family, colleagues from Kodak, or friends from his neighborhood. He delighted in recollections of these trips.

Jack’s responsibilities for worldwide operations throughout his career afforded an opportunity to travel the world, which

he relished with great interest and enthusiasm. During his working years at Kodak, he found time to travel widely with his wife Joanne and their family. He enjoyed the cultural experiences that such travel afforded. He was a bon vivant in addition to being a loving husband, father, grandfather, and outstanding member and representative of the National Academy of Engineering. His wife remembers that in retirement Jack spent time enjoying his grandchildren's sports, music, dance cheerleading, and drama activities.

Leo Jack Thomas passed away on April 11, 2011. He is survived by his wife Joanne; their four children and spouses—son Chris (and Kathy) Thomas (of Northport, New York), son Greg (and Elise) Thomas (of York, Pennsylvania), daughter Cindy (and Dave) MacLean (of Wayland, Massachusetts), and son Jeff (and Kim) Thomas (of Jobstown, New Jersey); and 12 grandchildren—Kelly, Michael, Eric, Jack, Emma, Annmarie, Megan, Joseph, Sean, Derrick, Julia, and Brad.

