

Richard Thomas:

Catalyst for International Diplomacy

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Exploring Unsung Heroes in History**

When typhoons devastated Yamanashi, Japan, in 1959, Richard Thomas, an Iowan stationed in Tokyo, wanted to help restore the prefecture's livestock industry. The following year, his idea to send breeding stock from Iowa to Japan took flight. I first learned of the "hog lift" through a *Des Moines Register* article celebrating the 50th anniversary of the event. Archival photographs of pigs emerging from a cargo plane caught my eye. When I dug deeper into the story, I discovered the legacy of Richard Thomas, an unsung hero.

My research began at the State Historical Society of Iowa Library in Des Moines where I found newspaper clippings describing the hog lift and leads to additional sources. Next, I traveled to Iowa State University in Ames to access Walter Goepfinger's papers. Goepfinger, a corn grower, was instrumental in executing Thomas' idea. His collection includes scrapbooks, photographs, articles, and correspondence with Japanese citizens. One immediate consequence of the hog lift was the establishment of a sister state relationship between Iowa and Yamanashi—the first such relationship with Japan in the U.S. following World War II. To explore the significance of that relationship, I interviewed Carol Grant, director of the Iowa Sister States Office. I corresponded with and then interviewed Christie Vilsack, who has visited Yamanashi in an official capacity, formerly as the first lady of Iowa and now with her husband, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, during trade missions. I also corresponded with Secretary Vilsack, Yamanashi Governor Shomei Yokouchi, Ambassador Kenneth Quinn, and Bruce Aune, a broadcaster who provided me with Yamanashi-TV newsreel footage of the hog lift through his contacts with journalists in Japan. Books about the U.S. occupation of Japan after WW II and periodicals from the time of the hog lift in Drake University's

collections helped me explore the economic and social context. My interview with Hans Goepfinger, son of Walter Goepfinger, provided an eyewitness account of the hog lift.

As Iowa and Yamanashi celebrated the 50th Anniversary of their sister state relationship, my family hosted students from Japan and I was involved in ceremonies to reaffirm this historic international partnership, continuing Thomas' diplomatic legacy.

I created a web site because it allowed me to incorporate the photographs and video I acquired through research. I chose a green color scheme to represent the agricultural connections that bridged two very different cultures.

“When pigs fly” is an expression of disbelief. It was unlikely that an Iowa farmer stationed with the U.S. Air Force in Tokyo could put in motion a successful campaign to rebuild Japan's decimated livestock industry following the typhoons. It is astonishing that this humanitarian gesture created the groundwork for diplomacy that would make Japan one of the leading markets for U.S. agricultural products. Most importantly, citizen diplomats from both countries built lasting relationships that, according to Ambassador Quinn, helped former enemies heal lingering wounds of war. Richard Thomas' name may not be well known, but his ideas and actions created a legacy of peace and friendship.