

BROMELIANA

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Early Legends, and Some BSI History

by HERB PLEVER

At our Holiday party I was asked how our New York Bromeliad Society was organized, and I told about our first organizing meeting in 1962 at the Long Island City apartment of Dr. George Milstein and that the famous Mulford B. Foster had flown up from Florida to welcome our group into the BSI. I was surprised to find that nobody at our holiday party knew who Mulford was, though I had written extensively about him in Bromeliana.

So it is appropriate that I write again of the contributions of the brom pioneers. In February Americans will celebrate the birthday of George Washington, our first president and often known as the father of our country. But there are not many people left who remember Mulford Foster, the first president of the Bromeliad Society and the man we often called the "Father of the Bromeliads" or "Mr. Bromeliad".

The story of this incredibly talented, intrepid naturalist-explorer is intertwined with that of other important bromeliad legends: his wife Racine and his friend Lyman B. Smith. I add to this triumvirate the name of Victoria Padilla. I also think of Charles Wiley of California, Nat DeLeon of Florida, Walter Richter, an Honorary Trustee of BSI from what was then East Germany and of brom pioneers from "down under" who were influenced by and who followed Mulford: Muriel

Waterman and Bea Hanson of New Zealand and W. B. Charley and Grace Goode of Australia.

What these legendary people had in common was their dedication to advance knowledge about bromeliads and enhance public awareness about the joys of growing them.

Mulford B. Foster (Dec. 28, 1888 - Aug. 28, 1978) was, to quote from Victoria Padilla's 1978 BSI Journal obit (V. 28, No. 6, pgs 243-244), an "explorer, writer, artist, lecturer, botanist (with no formal training as such Ed.) naturalist, horticulturist, hybridizer, photographer, raconteur, bromeliad grower, bromeliad collector, gardener, Co-founder of the Bromeliad Society, President from 1950 to 1959, Editor (of The Bromeliad Bulletin) from 1951 to 1958, Director and Honorary Trustee."

Mulford and Racine settled in Florida in the 1920s and he "discovered" bromeliads in the Everglades while looking for snakes and again in 1934 while traveling in Mexico. His growing interest in the Bromeliad Family led him to travel (often with his wife Racine) over 150,000 miles through Brazil, Mexico, Columbia, Honduras, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Peru, Dutch Guiana, Ecuador, Trinidad, Cuba, Venezuela and Jamaica. Mulford discovered and collected about 200 new species of



BSI officers, 1952, top l. to r.: Morris Schick Dir., Russell Seibert 2nd V.P., Frank Overton, Treasurer; Bottom - Victoria Padilla, Secy., Mulford Foster Pres., David Barry 1st V.P. (from the Journal, V.32, No. 6. All Californians except Mulford from Florida. Photographed at Padilla's house by Jules Padilla.)

THERE WILL BE NO MEETING IN FEBRUARY



Foster memorial in Bromel-La
"Let the rain be your tears"



The Fosters



Racine in 1980



Bromel-La

bromeliads, about one-eighth of all the species then known and identified in taxonomy!) He also rediscovered and collected almost **100 old species** that had been found and described in by 19th century explorer-naturalists but which subsequently had been lost to horticulture.

Mulford Foster was the first person in the United States to hybridize a bromeliad. His *Billbergia* 'Fantasia' (*B. pyramidalis* x *B. saundersii*) is still my favorite, most frequent flowering billbergia. He also crossed *Tillandsia inonantha* x *T. brachycaulis* to make *Tillandsia* 'Victoria' - named for Victoria Padilla.

Racine S. Foster (1910-1991) was a legend in her own right. She roughed it with Mulford on many of those trips through, forests, mountains and deserts. She kept a journal with catalogued notes of the flora, fauna and terrain, and she made the herbarium specimen pressings for all the collected plants which were later sent to their friend Dr. Lyman B. Smith for identification.

All the collected plants were brought home to Florida and she had more than equal responsibility for growing them on and creating and maintaining seedlings and pups from the collections, especially when Mulford was away. In 1945, Racine and Mulford wrote a widely read book called: "Brazil, Orchid of Tropics" which described the adventures of their collecting trips in Brazil. They were such enthusiastic supporters of the BSI that they paid for the costs of printing and publishing the Bromeliad Society Bulletin. She wrote many articles for the Bulletin and for the BSI Journal as it was later called. Racine succeeded Mulford as editor of the Bulletin for Volume 8; she was a copy editor of the Journal, on its editorial advisory board and a Trustee of the BSI.

The Fosters first lived within the city of Orlando, but they bought property out of town "in the

country" in a forest of century-old live-oak trees where they established a home and a 12 acre bromeliad sanctuary for all of the collected plants and hybrids, called Bromel-La. Racine's 1973 description (BSI Journal V. 28, No. 5, pg.172,) is most apt: "...it took us six years just to move the plants before the house for us was built...When people say: 'You are so lucky to have this place', we remind them that it took forty years of experience with plants and many sacrifices to buy, build and move from town. We wanted seclusion and privacy, so we made a perimeter around this property, a screen of Ligustrum, Yuccas, Podocarpus, Rhapsis Palms, Cycads and various shrubs..."

"The natural clusters of trees determined the shape and location of the walks and ways for people as well as for the areas for bromeliads near trees, so they could climb up trunks, or so they could extend themselves in the sandy leaf mold open areas; this they did and now are growing in great masses crowding the trees...In town, we had raised thousands of seedlings from the collected species; this gave us the opportunity to bring many plants to Bromel-La in minimum space, and only now, years later, have some of these seedlings reached maturity; they are flowering and ready for identification. They are acclimated now, some happier on one side of a tree than the other...Bromeliads have an amazing adaptability...They do not mind being transported, dried out or starved; they can take abuse, half of which would kill many other plants."

Bromel-La was a fabulous mecca for those who were fortunate to have seen it. I had met Mulford in 1963 and had visited Bromel-La in the early '70s, in 1979 and in 1980 at the time of the WBC in Orlando. I had a close relationship with Racine as snail mail correspondents; she was a subscriber and avid reader of Bromeliana. By the late 1970s Racine

felt she was no longer able to maintain Bromel-La. We had corresponded about raising funds to make Bromel-La a BSI educational center. Unfortunately this did not happen and Racine was forced to sell the property.

In every field of human endeavor, there are only a few people whose contributions to the advancement of that field are so important that progress in that pursuit would be inconceivable without their work. Such was the contribution of Dr. Lyman B. Smith (1904-1997). Lyman spent some 60 years studying the *Bromeliaceae* as a member of the staff of Harvard's Grey Herbarium and later as Senior Scientist at the Dept. Of Biology at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. He was not content to merely analyze herbarium specimens, but he made many field trips to Brazil, Columbia, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Argentina and Cuba.

Spurred by these studies and the new and rediscovered species sent to him by the Fosters, Dr. Smith published hundreds of titles and descriptions of bromeliad species in books and botany journals including the BSI Bulletin and Journal. This work led to the publication of his reorganization of the Bromeliad Family in the monumental 3 volume Monograph of the *Bromeliaceae* in Flora Neotropica from 1977 to 1979. It was later revised and updated by Lyman and his colleague, Dr. Robert Read.

In the early years of the New York Bromeliad Society we were privileged to have Lyman as a speaker, teacher and writer for *Bromeliana* from 1963 to 1968. He was warm and witty, a man with many contrasts and interests. Lyman was a mild and modest scientist who spent his entire life among plants, but few people know that he was a champion light-weight wrestler while in college.

Victoria Padilla, a co-founder of the BSI in 1950 was a vital force in the bromeliad world until her death in 1986. She was its Secretary until November, 1959 when she became Editor of the Bulletin. Within a few years Victoria had transformed the Bulletin to our BSI Journal, more professional with glossy paper and color photos and with the same high quality of material as its predecessor. She personally reached out to growers and scientists for articles of interest, and she was very persuasive.

Victoria was not only a great editor, but she



Lyman Smith in Bromel-La, 1980 WBC in Orlando

also wrote two basic books on bromeliads that greatly contributed to members' education: "Bromeliads" and "The Colorful Bromeliads". She was totally dedicated to the BSI, but she was somewhat elitist - well intentioned but benevolently imperious. She and other leaders of the Los Angeles Bromeliad Guild were responsible for the formation of BSI in 1950; that group remained the main local bromeliad society while other chapters were being chartered. The Los Angeles Bromeliad Guild was an elitist - by personal invitation only - society with restricted and limited membership (of about 30 people).

For too many years I have refrained from writing about some critical, controversial issues in our past that seriously affected BSI, because the highly emotional reactions to them left sores that never seemed to heal. I am now 90 years old and it is time for me to write of those events while my memory is still sharp, difficult though it may be. In this issue I want to describe the first event that was a campaign in 1979 to democratize the BSI.

In the three decades following the founding of BSI in 1950 there were many local affiliates, but they had no right to elect directors to the BSI board. Under BSI bylaws, only the board of directors could nominate new directors, and those were usually recommended by Victoria Padilla based on their contribution of articles for the Journal. That was how Sue Gardner Sill, Eloise Beach and I and other writers became BSI directors.

We were really not expected to attend Board meetings which were held in California, usually at Victoria's house in N. Hollywood, California. Notice of the meeting was sent by postcard which I would receive on a Friday for a meeting the following Tuesday; this did not leave outside directors time to adjust their work schedules so they could attend the meeting. Victoria and active Board members who attended meetings viewed the BSI as a group of subscribers to the Journal, and while they welcomed new local societies, they were cautious about giving a voice to people they suspected did not have the commitment to BSI or capabilities that they had.

Some time in 1979 I received a telephone call from Sue Sill (then Dr. Sue Gardner) who at that time was President of the Corpus Christi Bromeliad Society. Sue told me that the bromeliad societies in

Florida, Louisiana, Texas and Georgia had become so incensed at being denied a voice in the BSI that they had met in secret to plan a secession from BSI and to organize an opposition society. The colorful journal called Grande which had published 5 issues was their trial Journal. (I found the same resentment when I visited members of the LaBallona Valley Bromeliad Society on one of my trips to California in the 1970s.)

Sue and I agreed that a split in the BSI would be disastrous and we decided to attend the next board meeting in the hope they would take steps to democratize BSI when they were told of the southern societies' plans to secede. We met at the L.A. airport early on the Tuesday evening of the meeting which was called for 8:00 pm, rented a car and drove out to Victoria's house. When we came in, Board members were shocked at our presence - "What are you doing here?" We asked that we be given a place on the agenda, and Sue then detailed the decisions to secede taken by officers of southern societies at several secret meetings she attended.

The response of the officers and board members to Sue's presentation was mocking hilarity and derision. They laughed at the idea that societies would secede. They would have nowhere to go, they said. Sue and I drove back to the airport highly offended and determined to take steps to prevent a coming catastrophe. We decided that as directors we would move to amend the BSI bylaws to provide voting rights for the election of directors to all the societies from all regions around the world - and make the "International" in the Bromeliad Society International a reality. We needed to meet to refine the idea and to formulate the motion. We felt we could use the input from at least another director and decided to ask Eloise Beach to join with us in the work. Eloise agreed and asked Racine Foster to participate, and Racine invited us to spend a weekend at her Bromel-La home in Orlando.

After a weekend of intense work we all agreed on language for the motion that would entitle every region around the world to directors in proportion to the number of their BSI members. Copies of the motion were sent via registered mail to every Director and Officer, for the agenda of the Board meeting in Orlando, Florida in 1980. Then we assiduously contacted every director asking them to vote for the motion to amend the bylaws. We knew we would need the support of at least several Californians.

Prior to the vote I received a letter from

Victoria telling me that I had betrayed her friendship and how hurt she was over my actions, which she regarded as attack on the BSI and on her personally. She was so blinded by her concern that outsiders might ruin her BSI that she was unable to see that the motion would greatly benefit the BSI.

The vote was conducted by secret ballot, and the proposed new bylaws were adopted by the Board by the narrow margin of two votes. If just one vote for the motion had gone to the opposition, there would have been a tie and the amendment would have failed. I believe the swing vote was by former BSI President Charles Wiley who voted in favor of the amendment. He was the leader of the South Bay Associates bromeliad society, well respected, knowledgeable and unalterably honest. He was later snubbed by his California friends when his position became known.

I am certainly not anti-California; I had and have many friends in that state whom I admire. It was important to me to show the dangers of regional provincialism - which has afflicted other regions as well. The courage of Charles Wiley and Sue Sill prevented a regional split and made a democratic BSI possible. I will recount another serious controversy in our history in a subsequent issue. It has been famously said that those who fail to know their history are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past. □

N E W S and *N O T E S*

2015 DUES are now due. Single and joint membership are \$25.00; the domestic rate for **BROMELIANA** is \$8. Mail your check payable to N.Y. Bromeliad Society to Barbara Lagow, 54 W. 74th St. #603, New York, NY 10023.

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