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Notes About O. F. Cook

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In the fall of 1943, a few weeks after my return to Harvard University from a 3-month's trek along the newly created Alcan (Alaska) Highway, I received a letter from Carl O. Erlanson in which he offered me a position in the United States Department of Agriculture's Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction at Beltsville, Maryland. Since orchid research, in which I was engaged at the time, was a far-cry from our war effort, I eagerly accepted what I thought should be a more useful and productive job with our government.

I was soon on my way to work at Beltsville and to live mostly alone for more than six months in a spooky, isolated farmhouse that sat in a grove of trees on Plant Industry Station property, and which served as "bachelor's quarters" for such as I. To have moved my family from New England to the Washington area at the time was out of the question.

It so happened that I was thus introduced to Orator Fuller Cook during his 76th year. Although he was retired, he maintained an office, which was the custom, adjacent to mine. We were on the second floor of the North Building at Plant Industry Station. Just across the hall from us were offices of the taciturn Fred Hermann and the sensitive, gentle Sidney Blake. Down the hall Walter Swingle and Robert Young, both retired, occupied other offices.

Though at first it was unknown to me, I soon learned that I had been brought to Beltsville with the express purpose, as well as with the hope and expectation, that I would absorb as much knowledge as pos-

sible from Dr. Cook, and thus I would then be qualified to carry on his work as a palm specialist. Therein, one might say, lay a tale. To be honest, officialdom had delayed too long the installation of an understudy. Although I spent an inordinate amount of time with Dr. Cook, at our final parting I knew as much about palms as I did when I first arrived in Beltsville.

Dr. Cook, who was born in 1867, had by 1943 become somewhat feeble, and, because of the relatively recent death of his wife, his interest in what had been his lifelong work was obviously diminished. He was a small, rather firmly built man, scarcely more than 5 feet 4 inches tall. He walked with a slow, inquisitive manner, always seeming to observe closely his surroundings. He would suddenly appear in the doorway of my office, a subtly gentle smile on his weathered face, with owlish eyes peering at me over wire-rimmed spectacles, his thin white hair neatly combed. He stood there quietly. If I kept on working he would unobtrusively turn and slowly return to his office. If I raised my head and looked at him he accepted it as an invitation, and he would come in, sit down, and begin a philosophical monologue. His favorite subject always was Goethe, who in his opinion preempted Darwin in the matter of evolution.

In spite of all my efforts, I could never draw Dr. Cook into a discussion of palms. He gave me the feeling that, to him, the subject of palms was a very private and personal matter and concern to him, and that concern had been terminated. For instance, one day I found him in the palm section of the National Arboretum Her-

barium, at that time housed with our offices at Beltsville. He was holding a sheet of an unidentified palm specimen. With a sly glance at me, as a little boy with his hand in the cookie jar, he slithered the sheet into a pigeonhole with the comment—"If one asked me what this is I'd say it's" I did not hear the name because I was busily fumbling for a pencil to offer him, which probably anyway would have been to no avail. This incident tells the story of my success as an understudy.

During the winter of 1943-44 I spent a number of week-ends as a guest of Dr. Cook at his home in the countryside at Lanham, Maryland. He lived well, and his housekeeper was an excellent cook, especially where heavy beef was concerned. The house was filled with primitive artifacts that Dr. Cook had picked up during his worldwide botanical travels in out-of-the-way places. He preferred objects that were made of wood. During our afternoon strolls through the woods about Lanham Dr. Cook would pick up a small knot or oddly shaped root, or piece of wood lying among the leaves and begin scraping it. In this way he personally made many kinds of articles, from knickknacks to walking sticks. After a hearty dinner I would soon make my way down a long upstairs hallway that was gorged with hundreds of books of all descriptions to a frigid, unheated bedroom. It was real country

living in the old style—the kind than can arouse nostalgia with the passage of time.

In his office Dr. Cook sat only to think. When he was actively working he always stood up to an old-fashioned Bob Cratchet type of clerk's desk. With the passing of years before and after his retirement his usually unopened mail, government circulars, directives, and other bric-a-brac began piling up on top of the old clerk's desk. With his short height, he stretched himself as long as possible in order to scribble on top of the mounting accumulation. Finally, he could stretch no farther. He then had a broad plank rectangular stool made exactly 7 inches high upon which he could stand and continue to scribble on the top of his mountain of paper. I can say 7 inches because I just went over to the stool nestled in a corner of my room to verify its height.

Upon Dr. Cook's death, my friend, W. Andrew Archer, was given the task of clearing out his office. He found the pile of mail, circulars, scribbled notes, and other items to be nearly two feet high on the clerk's desk. Andy thought that, because of my friendship with Dr. Cook, I should inherit his footstool and several sturdy walking sticks that he had made.

I have often wondered what might have happened to me if I had met Dr. Cook in his heyday as an arecologist!