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The California Spotlight: Pauline Sullivan

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For many members residing in Southern California, The International Palm Society is nearly synonymous with Pauleen Sullivan. An ardent Society supporter, Pauleen is often associated with the ubiquitous mobile Bookstore, through which members may select and purchase a variety of reading and learning material. But Pauleen's personal interest in palms extends far beyond her Bookstore activities and her position as Vice President of the International Palm Society. The following conversation highlights a few of the facets of this multi-talented lady.

How did your involvement with palms come about?

I was always interested in tropical plants, even as a child. All types. But my husband, Joe, didn't care about plants at all until I came down with polio in 1950. I had plants outside my window while I was confined to my bed. After we built our house in Ventura in 1949, we had tried to make the yard look like a tropical garden. While confined in the hospital, I kept telling Joe, "You've got to take care of my plants; you can't let them die." So, naturally, he began watering and looking after them. By the time I came home from the hospital, he had become so enthusiastic about the tropical plants, that he said I would never have to take care of them again. He said I had lost my hobby to him! Of course, I couldn't take care of any plants because I was in bed for almost a year. Joe got so involved with growing tropical plants, that soon all he could think about was going into the nursery business. At about that point, he really began to like the palms. So Joe quit his job and we started a nursery

in Ventura. It was called The Tropical Garden; we raised only tropical-effect plants, and Joe started collecting palms. Once, we visited Tetley's Nursery in Corona. When Joe saw all the palms there, and walked underneath the tall *Washingtonia*, he decided we needed more land to grow more palms. We hunted around, and found about an acre and a quarter of land; this is where the Tonga apartments are now. We planted palms there, and sold them as they grew up. Joe wanted more land for more palms. Finally, we ended up with fourteen acres, and we planted 45,000 palms there. That was in the mid 1950's. And at that time, we really had not heard of any Palm Society.

Well then, how did you become a member?

We joined in 1956, just after it was started. How we found out about it? Well, I was in the hospital in Ventura, and then after that, I went to a rehabilitation center for polio patients in Santa Monica to learn how to survive as a "handicapped" person. I would be down there during the week, and Joe would come down to pick me up and bring me home for the weekend. Friday nights, after he picked me up, we would go over to Dave Barry's place, and look at his plants. Dave was one of the earliest members, and he was the one who told us about The Palm Society. So that was how we joined.

1956! Thirty years as a member.

Thanks to Dave Barry, we were able to start collecting other palms to go with the *Washingtonia*, *Phoenix reclinata*, are-

castrums (*Syagrus romanzoffiana*) and *Trachycarpus* we were growing on our land. Things like that. Those palms were still fairly uncommon in our area back then. This was before all the palm nurseries started popping up out in the desert.

After we started our nursery, we found out that it wasn't so easy to make a living selling only tropical plants. We found that we needed to carry more of an assortment of plants. Luckily, we were also into landscaping. At that time, there was no classification as "landscape architect," but my husband was a licensed landscape contractor and designed landscapes to help the nursery income along. During the week I would run the nursery and do landscape designing for him while he was out with his crew. On the weekends, we both worked at the nursery. The hours were long and it was hard to make a living.

After a while, an inventory tax law came out which affected nursery plants. At first we were taxed on only the ones in containers, but later we got a new assessor in Ventura, and he came over and told us that we would have to pay a tax on all the palms we had in the ground. About 50,000 palms, plus the ones we had in cans. I said we could not afford to do that; it was an impossibility. I told the assessor we would have to go out of business, and he said he would be "lenient" on us for that year. We began selling our palms at a reduced price if people would come out and dig their own. In this way, we got rid of nearly all of them. This was in 1969. A few years later a large nursery challenged the law in court and won. Now there is no inventory tax on plants in the ground.

So we got out of the palm nursery business, but I stayed interested in palms as a hobby. During the time with the nursery, my husband was getting seeds of the rarer palms and raising them up, just like I do now. But back then we were not able to get nearly as many seeds as the Seed Bank gets today. In one year we were lucky to receive maybe ten packages of rare seed.

The grounds around your apartment buildings display a really exciting variety of palms. Did you design the landscapes?

Yes, and I designed the whole building for the Tonga apartments. When we bought the other buildings, we tore out the landscaping and replanted the places with palms. Most of the palms around the apartments came from our nursery. It took a bit of time to do all this. It was 1964 when I landscaped the other buildings with palms we had raised. It was not a very fast process, as I am still planting palms.

How did the memorial garden (for Mr. Joe Sullivan) at Ventura College get started? It's really an interesting collection.

John Tallman, Vice Chancellor of the Ventura College district, Vice President of the Northern California Chapter of the International Palm Society, and now an ardent palm grower had just moved down here from Washington State. On his way to the college each day, he started to admire palms growing in Ventura. This led him to our door. John said he would like to start a botanical garden at the college and asked my husband's help. Joe said sure, he would help. He showed John around our places, explaining how he grew palms from seed and gave John some palms to help get the garden started. A few months later, while we were on a "palm seed collecting" trip in Indonesia, my husband died suddenly.

It seems like you are always at Palm Society meetings.

I attend every one.

Can you explain how the Palm Society Bookstore got started?

At the Palm Society meetings in 1973, different members kept coming over to me and asking where to get "Palms of the World." Most book stores, I guess, had

trouble supplying it. I asked my husband if we could go ahead and buy copies of the book, for me to sell at the meetings. He said okay, and the monies we made were given to the local chapter. That was how the Bookstore actually got started. Later came "Supplement to Palms of the World," and we were able then to sell two palm books at the meetings. After a while, the Board of Directors of The International Palm Society decided that the "store" was a beneficial feature, and I was asked to sell palm books on a regular basis to all members. The Bookstore now has 29 books and five palm papers.

Do you fertilize your palms regularly?

Yes. I fertilize everything almost once a month, unless I use a slow release fertilizer that lasts for about four months. I fertilize right up to the end of November, then stop for December and January, and start up again near the end of February. I believe in giving the palms a lot of water. I try to attend to each palm individually.

Let's embark on an armchair tour. Can you recall some of the palm-filled places you have visited?

I've been lucky enough to visit New Guinea, Sulawesi, Borneo, Brazil, Australia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, Colombia, Central America, and Mexico. I love travelling, especially to places with lots of palms. The South Pacific is beautiful, with islands like Tahiti, Fiji and Samoa. On our 30th wedding anniversary my husband took me to the island of Tonga. I particularly enjoy the Asian countries. The people are nearly always friendly and helpful. But the two locations which really stand out in my mind are Malaysia and the areas around the Amazon. Those places are filled with native palms, many species, growing everywhere.

In addition to the gorgeous Pinanga, Licuala and Ptychosperma growing in

your yard, which uncommon palms have you grown successfully outdoors, here in Southern California?

Well, I believe the *Ceroxylon* at the apartments is probably the tallest and oldest in the U.S. We planted it in 1967, a seedling with two leaves, and now it is around twenty-five feet tall. I have beautiful mature specimens of *Hedyscepe canterburyana* and *Lepidorrhachis mooreana* from Lord Howe Island. Both are fruiting. I never get tired of looking at my *Euterpe edulis*, and then there is cute little *Chamaedorea tuerckheimii* (the potato chip palm). My favorite palm is always the one I'm looking at, as I love them all.

Advice for new Palm Society members?

Listen to other members talk about their successes and their failures. Then try it out for yourself. Some of the members have been growing palms for quite a while, and they have a lot of knowledge to offer. But always remember things may work differently for you.

How many genera or species of palms are in your collection?

I have no idea. I don't count them. I just enjoy them.

You have one of the largest Jubaeopsis caffra palms in California. How did you acquire such a fantastic specimen?

Dave Barry had that palm. It was planted in an office building complex next door to Dave's nursery. The palm had been there for a number of years, and was really sort of sad-looking. My husband wanted to buy it from Dave. Dick Palmer also wanted to buy it. And, Mardy Darian was interested in getting it, too. This was about fifteen years ago, in the early 70's. Finally, Dave decided to split up the palm. There were three healthy divisions growing, and Dave offered to sell one to each of the three men. They had to dig it themselves, and

they drew straws to see who got first choice. My husband drew the first-choice straw. The largest offshoot sold for \$200.00, and the other two were \$150.00 each. These plants were about three feet tall at the time. So we brought ours home and planted it, and it has grown very well.

You have been involved in more than one potentially dangerous situation while travelling in other countries?

I think one of the scariest things to happen on a trip was in Sumatra. We had been driving in a landrover for six hours or so, heading for an area which had some unusual palms. John Dransfield had written to us, and had given us directions to a location in the Medan area. Very few people spoke English there, but we had an English-speaking guide with us. But the driver of our landrover could not speak English, and after driving for about six hours, he suddenly stopped. In the middle of nowhere, really. Our guide told us we had to get out, walk to a river up ahead, and travel in a canoe over some rapids. The canoe could only hold one person at a time, and you had to hold on to a rope while you went across the rapids. I asked the driver, "How am I supposed to go across the rapids in a wheelchair?" We had no idea this was going to happen, since we had been told there would be no problem getting to the area. But here was a problem. Since we had come this far already, we decided that my husband would cross the rapids, and I would wait near the landrover. So my husband and the guide left, and I stayed behind with the driver, who spoke no English. It was very hot and humid, and they took me out of the truck and put me under a tree. Well, as soon as my husband and the guide left, our driver took off. Just drove away. So there I was alone in Sumatra with no guide, no car, and no husband. Pretty soon, one after another, some local boys came out of the jungle and stood around looking at me and

my wheelchair. Then they began touching the wheelchair. I counted about thirty people surrounding me, and at that point I began to get really scared. I was almost in tears. Then I remembered that I had brought my camera with me, and I started taking pictures of the boys. They knew what a camera was and liked having their pictures taken. I think this helped a lot. Soon the novelty of my being there wore off, and everyone left. But I was nervous for awhile! To think this was the way I celebrated my birthday!

Sounds like it was a close call.

Well, I guess maybe it was. Another time, on the Amazon, we were in a little boat, again with an English-speaking guide. We would rent this tiny boat, which was about two feet wider than my wheelchair, and travel up the Amazon and into the tributaries. When we saw a spot that looked good for palm collecting, we would pull the little boat up to the bank, and my husband would go look for the plants. The guide would go with Joe, and I was always left in the boat. So there I was again, alone, and this Indian pulled up next to me in his canoe. He just sat there and looked at me, while I looked at him. Then he left, but he came back with another Indian in a second canoe. The two canoes pulled up, and both Indians sat there and stared at me. I kept saying "palma, palma," pointing up to the land where we had seen peach palms (*Bactris gasipaes*) growing. All of a sudden, one native's face lit up. He called out to someone in the jungle, and it turned out to be his son, who brought me peach palm seeds. Later on, my husband returned with no seeds, and there I was with a cluster of seeds without leaving the boat. In fact, I have one of those peach palms growing outside in Ventura. It's over fifteen years old. So that episode worked out okay, but it was sort of scary for a few moments.

Then there was the time Lois (Rossten)

and I were in New Guinea. Dr. Fred Essig had written us on where to see the palms in New Guinea, along with the "do's and don'ts." He said a restaurant in Lae, called *Rosie's* had the best Chinese food he had ever tasted, but we should not go there or anyplace at night in New Guinea as it was too dangerous for two white women to be out on the streets. Hungry for Chinese food, we decided nothing could go wrong if we had our hotel manager call a taxi and tell the cabbie to take us to *Rosie's*. After dinner we would ask Rosie to call a cab to take us back to the hotel. The cabbies didn't speak English. We got in the taxi at our hotel heading for *Rosie's*. As we got closer to *Rosie's* every street corner was crammed with restless, idle men. Then we saw *Rosie's* with a big sign on the door CLOSED MONDAYS. Petrified, we tried to tell our non-English speaking cabbie to take us back to our hotel. He kept smiling and nodding and then headed in the opposite direction from where our hotel was. Lois and I clutched each other's hand and waited for the worst. Suddenly he pulled up in front of another hotel across

town. Well, we got that hotel manager to tell our driver to take us back to the hotel where he'd picked us up.

You have supported The Palm Society in so many ways—as Secretary for eight years, Vice President, Member of Board of Directors, Chapter Chairperson, Bookstore Manager—and you have coordinated a number of fund-raising functions, including a drive to help finance the publication of Genera Palmarum.

I feel that The Palm Society is a very worthy organization. It's a good cause, and I try to help out whenever I can.

Then it's safe to assume that you favor increased palm planting?

Of course! As the rain forests disappear throughout the world, The International Palm Society will play an important part in preserving and planting palms, so that future generations can enjoy these exciting, beautiful plants.

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