

The Dent Smith Collection at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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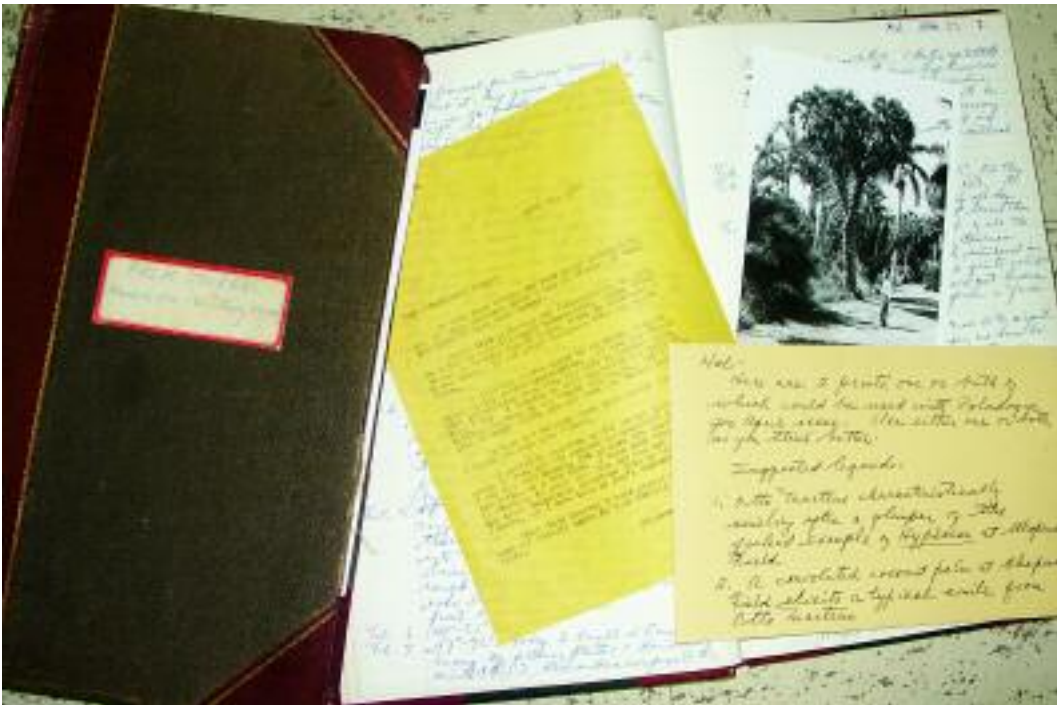
The International Palm Society exists today primarily due to the perseverance and dedication of one man, Dent Smith, an indefatigable palm enthusiast and keen observer of his own palm garden in Florida.

Dent Smith was born in 1897 in Staunton, Virginia; he lived what even he called “an itinerant life.” In his youth, he sought very little formal education, job stability or financial reward, but while itinerating somewhere in Mexico, he decided it was time to grow up. As with everything else he did in life, he attacked his new plan with enthusiasm and persistence and no small amount of sharp intelligence. Eventually, he made enough money as a bond trader on Wall Street to retire comfortably while still in his early 50s. He moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, and started growing palms. Overcome by the palm bug and self-described as a palm fanatic, he decided to start a society devoted to the love of palms.

Smith noted on March 18, 1955, “I have started the Palm Society” [Palm Log, March 18, 1955] and listed among the first recruited

members: H. Bertram Smith, James E. Smith, Mrs. L. H. Wait, Mr. Stanley Kiem, Harold Loomis, Mrs. David Fairchild, Mrs. Robert H. Montgomery and Mr. & Mrs. Arthur C. Langlois. After 10 months of hard work and persistent recruiting, the Palm Society boasted 200 members. The first issue of *Principes* was published almost within a year, with Smith the principal editor and writer.

As a palm enthusiast, it was quite natural that Smith developed a relationship with Fairchild Tropical Garden (now Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, FTBG). In fact, the first official meeting of the Palm Society was held at FTBG on April 17, 1956. Because of the long-term and very congenial friendship with FTBG, Smith felt this would be an excellent place to house the bits of history encompassed in his correspondence and writings. As a result, Smith



1. These items represent a small portion of the Dent Smith Collection, housed in the archive of Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.

gave his papers to FTBG and his correspondence from 1955 to 1986 is now housed in FTBG's archive.

To recognize the 50th anniversary of the IPS, FTBG recently organized and cataloged the collection of notes, letters, manuscripts and photographs (Fig. 1). The Dent Smith Collection contains over 4600 letters from over 200 internationally prominent palm botanists and horticulturists, mostly from 1956–1975. The list of correspondents represents most of the people responsible for the formation of the Palm Society, now the International Palm Society, including Palm Society officers and board members David Barry, Jr., Walter H. Hodge, Jerome P. Keuper, Otto Martens, Kenneth C. Foster, Lucita Wait, Nixon Smiley, Harold R. Loomis, Margaret and Arthur Langlois and Harold E. Moore, Jr.

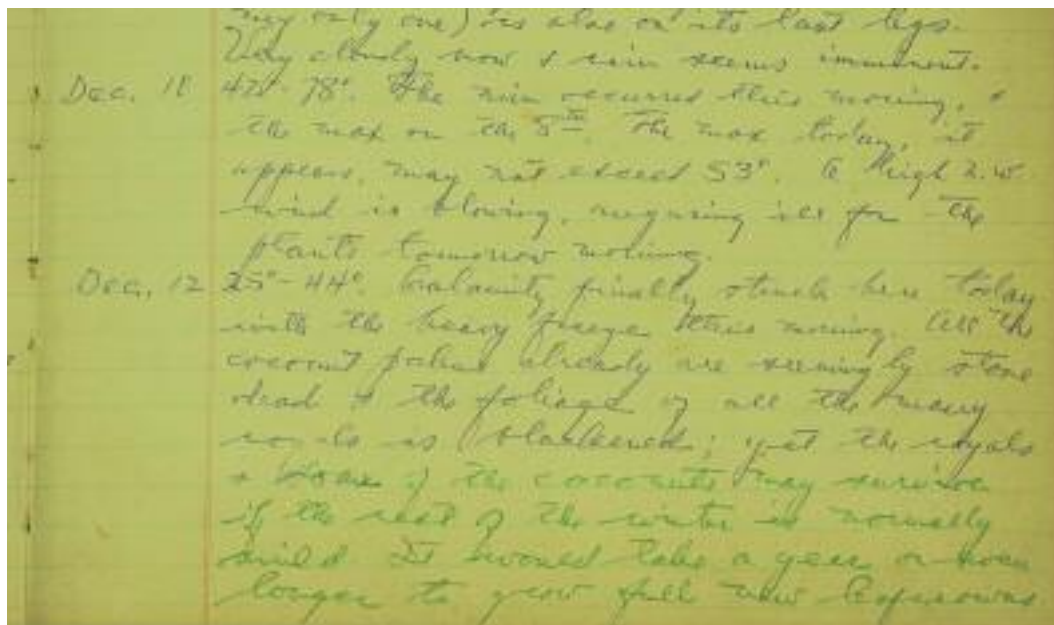
Fortunately for us, Smith was diligent about making copies of his own letters. As a result, one can, in some cases, follow both sides of the written conversations through many years. The letters at times read almost like a story. Many of the roughly 300 correspondents' files include only a few letters; but Smith's correspondence with others was lengthy and lasted for many years. For example, there are about 600 letters in each of the files from

David Barry, Jr., Harold E. Moore, Jr., and Lucita Wait. Each of these people holds a special role in the formation of the Society: Harold Moore, Jr. was the first editor of *Principes* (now *PALMS*); Lucita Wait served for many years as the secretary and behind-the-scenes 'spark,' and David Barry served as President, Director and driving force behind the International Palm Seed Exchange Service.

As expected, the topic of most of the correspondence is the formation and nurturing of the Society. Smith's discussions of even the mundane details are often witty, humorous and entertaining. Although the impetus behind the hundreds of letters may have been the administration of the society, the topics often turned to other matters, most notably palms themselves and his trials growing palms at a time when horticultural information was scarce.

Dent Smith on Meteorologists

Smith had little faith in professional meteorologists. Of course, trying to grow tropical palms in Daytona Beach naturally required very close attention to weather. The health and survival of his palms depended on accurate forecasts. As he recorded in his palm logs, a forecast for frost triggered hours of



2. "Calamity finally struck here today with the heavy freeze this morning." In his Palm Log, December 12, 1957, Smith recorded his observations on the palms in his garden as they succumbed to a lethal freeze.

preparation and considerable anxiety. Unfortunately, forecasting weather was not an exact science, and as a result, Smith often vented his frustration on the local meteorologists. He dubbed the forecasts as "sorry and incompetent guesses." One devastating February low was actually "10 degrees lower than forecast by the biggest boob of all the boobs in the local Weather bureau." [Palm Log, February 10, 1963]

On Being a Palm Fanatic

Smith was well and truly bitten by the palm fanatic bug. Reading his correspondence and notes, one can see that he loved his palms. He suffered when they did, as in the winter of 1957-58 when frost killed a substantial number of his palms (Fig. 2). Undaunted, he kept planting, and by November 1960 he discovered while making a list that he had 771 palms in the ground, 161 species in 62 genera. This impressive tally was recorded only two months after the devastation of hurricane Donna. Nothing kept him from planting and nurturing and making observations and notes about his palms.

Again, in December 1962, Daytona Beach received a period of very severe cold. According to Smith, it was "worse than the winter of '57-'58. It now appears that more than one half of all my palms are dead or dying, and in

fact the number may run even to two-thirds or more." [Palm Log, December 13, 1962] Just one day later, he noted in his Palm Log the delivery and planting of more palms. He never gave up. He later noted that he did lose more than 600 palms in that one hard winter.

Hurricane Observations

Smith made careful observations about specific plants and their reactions to hurricanes. He noted that the palms fared much better than other plants. His oaks were totally destroyed in Hurricane Donna, leaving the palms that weathered the storm dangerously exposed to bright sunlight. Overall damage to the palms from the extreme winds looked remarkably like damage from severe cold, except that the wind damage was immediately observable while the cold damage sometimes took a few days to appear.

A full description of the holdings of the Dent Smith Collection is available on FTBG's website <<http://www.fairchildgarden.org/research/SmithCollection.html>>, along with information for scholars wishing to examine the materials. The Dent Smith Collection preserves the history, both entertaining and mundane, of the formation and early years of the Palm Society, as well as the history of Smith's palm collection and enduring fascination with that most remarkable family of plants.

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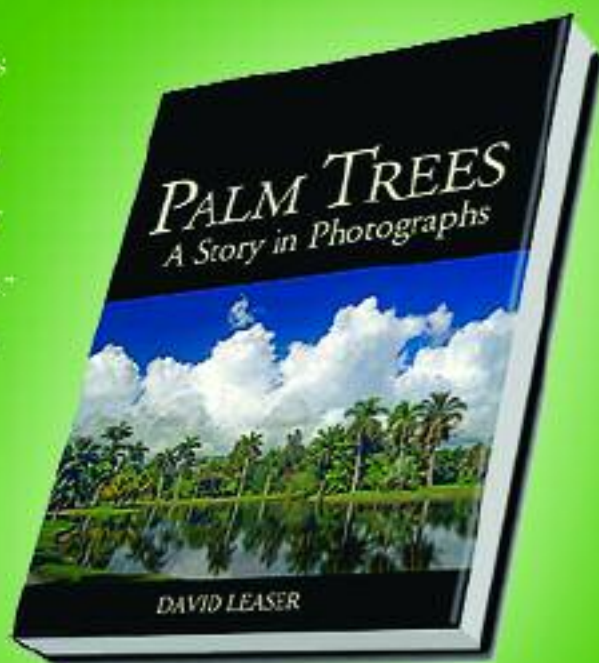
—*Paul Craft, President, International Palm Society*

"A BEGUILING PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY"

—*Mike Mancini, Director, Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden*

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