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Melvin W. Sneed

LEONARD H. GOLDSTEIN

8101 SW 72 Ave., #313W, Miami, FL 33143

A number of talented individuals died in Miami on February 8, 1995. One had been the quarterback and captain of his Missouri high school football team. Another was a musician who spent Depression-era summers playing trumpet with a touring dance band to help finance his college education. A third began a long career in the nation's capital as a research staff member of the esteemed Brookings Institution.

These able and versatile "men" were, in truth, one man, Mel Sneed. Armed with a master's degree and state government experience as a statistician, Mel left his home state of Missouri for Washington, D.C., in 1940. From that time forward—with interruptions only for a brief return to his home state and for wartime service in the U.S. Navy—he worked in the federal government in a variety of challenging jobs involving legislation affecting education, labor, welfare, and health. His last assignment was as clerk of the Joint Committee on the Reorganization of Congress. Mel and wife Phyllis raised four children during those years.

Nothing in Mel's busy work life pointed to a passion for tropical plants until someone gave him a gift of McCurrach's *Palms of the World*. But, ever the scholar, he made up for lost time with a period of intensive learning, and in 1968 he and Phyllis moved to a two-acre homesite overlooking Montego Bay, Jamaica. In one whirlwind decade, the Sneeds developed their private botanical garden, hosted a post-Biennial trip, and scoured the tropics in a quest for palm seeds, which they generously shared with the Palm Society Seed Bank and botanical gardens.

To understand the depth of Mel's commitment to his new hobby, a closer look at his so-called retirement years is in order. I suspect that meticulous preparation was a lifelong trait that continued to serve him well even outside the Washington maelstrom. Careful advance planning enriched the Sneeds' journeys and led to many warm friendships and noteworthy accomplishments around the world.

In June 1975, following the Palm Society's Biennial Meeting on the campus of Florida Institute of Technology in the east coast city of Melbourne, nearly 40 members and guests continued on to Jamaica for a visit hosted by the Sneeds. What the group encountered at Sneedview was a hilltop site blessed with a 270° view of the waters of Montego Bay. To this grand natural setting the Sneeds had added a vast diversity of palms grown mostly from Seed Bank distributions, but also from the literal fruits of their own travels. Teddie Buhler, writing a post-Biennial summary in *Principes* several months later, described the palms as "the start of a truly magnificent collection."

As coordinator of the Jamaican excursion, Mel contacted a local tour company for transportation and also invited Dr. Robert Read to organize the itineraries for two separate tour groups. The travelers saw many of the delightful features of the lush, mountainous island, including Castleton, Hope and Bath botanical gardens. And palms were not their only discoveries: In a quaint episode during a tour of Castleton, longtime garden employee Uriah Bennett introduced the group to a resident spider. As Gertrude Cole drolly reported the encounter in *Principes*, "[O]ld Uriah's cane opened the door of a trap-door spider. I knew it was there, he said modestly."

Bob Read, who had earned his doctorate at the University of the West Indies, was an excellent choice for chief guide, knowing as he did the whereabouts of troves of botanical treasure. He impressed the visitors with not only his informative commentary, but also an impromptu fan dance using two of the huge round leaves of a *Thrinax radiata*. (Post-Biennial tours are nothing if not educational.) In all seriousness, the trip to Jamaica was very well received and long remembered.

Notwithstanding the beauty of Sneedview and environs, however, Mel educated and entertained even more palm lovers through a long series of travelogues which demonstrated his skill with both the written word and the camera. The trip that



1. Mel in 1973, at Sneedview, Jamaica. 2. Mel and Phyllis in Africa with Victoria Falls in the background.

impressed me particularly for its arduousness was a 1984 venture under the auspices of Lindblad Tours, a company willing to conduct excursions custom-designed by the travelers themselves. The 4,000-mile voyage west from Papua, New Guinea included a long stretch of the southwestern coast of Irian Jaya, the Indonesian half of the large island.

Because of the isolated and primitive nature of this territory, there was no dockage for the Lindblad vessel. Access to villages was achieved by rafting and sometimes by wading. To reach the Asmat coast, for instance, the travel party had to raft from six miles offshore. Having been led to expect a friendly greeting at sea as per local custom, the group instead gradually perceived that it was being approached by war canoes bearing villagers whose dress—bodies and faces painted, heads adorned with feathers—must have inspired at least some concern that they were less a welcoming committee than a hunting party. Mel described the encounter as “startling, if not frightening,” and Phyllis to this day regards the episode as very intimidating. Fortunately, though the Asmat villagers were still active headhunters, their gaudy display proved no more than a sign of curiosity over a rare appearance by westerners.

A less threatening, but equally surprising, botanical event awaited the Sneeds further along the coast of Irian Jaya. Returning to rafts at Triton Bay, the party navigated numerous limestone islets which seemed almost totally covered by a single, beautiful palm species. (John Dransfield later

inferred that the Sneeds had rediscovered *Gronophyllum procerum*, a species described in 1843, then “lost” for over 140 years.) Even after the adventures on New Guinea, much remained to be seen in the long voyage west. I commend to your reading this and the rest of Mel’s accounts.

It was clear from these articles that Mel and Phyllis tolerated rain, mud and diverse means of transportation—including elephants—to optimize their travel goals. When hot on the trail of palm seeds, Mel even suspended his abiding aversion to climbing any kind of hill. By the time his last account appeared in *Principes*, he had reported to a generation of palm enthusiasts about venues from China to New Zealand, in numerous Indian Ocean locales, and throughout tropical Asia.

And while all these accomplishments are clear testimony to Mel’s thorough embrace of palms, nevertheless his farthest-reaching influence on the International Palm Society occurred during eight years as a member of the Board of Directors. Perhaps three decades of observing the processes of and refinements in government allowed him to gaze into the future and identify the needs of our own growing organization. At his urging, even insistence, the Board not only established a permanent endowment for the Society, but created the Revolving Publications Fund. Since 1987 the fund has helped the Society publish three books, including the recent *Palms of Madagascar*.

We shall miss Mel Sneed’s enthusiasm and his counsel.

Mel Sneed

When Dr. Moore died suddenly on October 17, 1980, the editing of *Principes* became John’s and my responsibility. Shortly thereafter an agreement was reached for us to go ahead on “*Genera Palmarum*.” A visit to Fairchild Tropical Garden would provide an opportunity to work on palms. Paul Drummond was president of the Society at the time and early in 1981, Charles and I traveled to Miami to meet and stay with the Society’s treasurer, the late Ruth Shatz. My introduction to Phyllis and Mel and Paul occurred in her lovely home when she prepared a gourmet loin of pork and invited us all to partake. Mel impressed me as rather reserved, and obviously sagacious. He had a wry sense of humor and was devoted to The Palm Society and to *Principes*. His support took many forms. He wanted *Principes* to be a scholarly journal, but he had little sympathy for certain scientific articles especially those about “chromosomes!” One way he supported the journal was by writing for it. His travelogues were popular. We always knew that complaints about overly technical content would not arise if the issue contained one of his articles. Altogether he contributed 15 articles. You can find them in volumes 20–28. They are carefully prepared and provide a pleasant introduction to both the palms and many different tropical areas of the world where palms occur.

In talking with Phyllis I have learned that the Sneeds’ travel in search of palms amounted to as much as three complete round-the-world trips. It was a source of much satisfaction to Mel to meet

people, often in very isolated places, and spread the word about The Palm Society and its Seed Bank. Both for natives and for people living in foreign countries such friendships are very important. Visitors are welcome and often royally entertained. Mel and Phyllis searched the tropics for seeds of palms, which they provided to botanic gardens and to the Seed Bank for distribution to other society members. The ambassadorial role that they undertook did much to establish The Palm Society as an international organization. Furthermore Mel frequently thanked his hosts for their hospitality by giving them memberships in the Society, some years providing as many as 200 such gifts.

In the late summer of 1991 when I was recovering from surgery in the Blue Ridge mountains, I was delighted one day to get a call from Mel. We spent a pleasant half hour talking about palms, about *Principes*, and about Mel's other goal, a permanent endowment for the IPS. Perhaps his greatest legacy is the IPS endowment fund which he worked to establish during his years as a director.

NATALIE W. UHL

Mel Sneed

I first met Mel and Phyllis in 1974 in Bogor in Indonesia. At the time, I was working in the Herbarium Bogoriense and the Kebun Raya on a British Government aid project and, in those days of isolation, any visitors to Bogor were a cause of some excitement. But when the visitors were also members of the Palm Society, their visit became special. Mel and Phyllis were two such visitors, arriving late one morning in the Gardens. They enthused about palms, dutifully admired my personal favorites, and gently pulled my leg. This was the beginning of a correspondence that lasted almost 20 years. When Natalie and I took over the editorship of *Principes* in 1981, we soon realized that we had the strong support of the members of the Board of Directors. One person in particular was always keen to ring us or write to us to tell us what he thought of the journal and what we could do to improve the content and make it accessible to as wide a range of the membership as possible. This was Mel Sneed. Mel was passionately concerned about *Principes* and the importance of guaranteeing its future. Mel's concern was to ensure that *Principes*, the official organ of the society that reaches every member, should always have sufficient funds for it to be published to a high standard, and that it should appeal to the entire membership. He was also concerned that the contents of *Principes* should be scientifically accurate, whether the article was a popular travelogue or a scientific report. We knew we could rely on Mel's support, and we could also rely on him to write us a travelogue. His articles required a minimum of editing and were always fun to receive. We knew, also, that if we included an article that was too obscurely written or of very limited appeal (especially something to do with chromosomes), he would be more than likely to telephone and growl (in a friendly way) at us. In fact we valued his input greatly. This advice came at a crucial time for us, supporting us when we needed it, and reminding us of the need to cater to the entire membership.

JOHN DRANSFIELD

Melvin Sneed

Can any one of us who attended the Biennial in Jamaica ever forget Mel's enthusiasm for his palm collection? He and Phyllis traveled extensively while living in Washington, D.C. and had decided to retire to Jamaica. They lived on a rocky point with a breathtaking view of the sea. There he planted palms.

In August 1975, the Sneeds traveled to Asia. Reread of their palm seed collecting adventures in *Principes* 21 issues 1-4.

GERTRUDE COLE