

THE STORY OF THE ORCHID BOOM

THE HAY DAYS

BY GORDON GILES

The story started before the 1939/45 war. The orchid nurseries in England, sensing trouble ahead, and knowing they would not get a coal ration to heat their glasshouses (coke or coal was the fuel used) if there was a war, or if they received a ration they would have to use most of it to grow food, decided to send a number of their better plants to a few of their customers in Australia.

At that time there was a very limited number of orchid growers here, who while having some hybrids that originated in England, which was really the only source, also grew a number of Indian species. The latter were very cheap to buy, but unfortunately they were not all easy to grow. One that was imported in large numbers was *Dendrobium Jamesianum*. This had large white flowers that florists liked for weddings. The plants never seemed to last long.

Now as the cost of things seems to be the main interest in a boom, I have to quote in numbers that are relative to today's values. The generally accepted rate of converting 1950's pound (£) to 2010 dollars is between \$50.00 to \$70.00 to the pound. I have chosen and will quote the lower figure of \$50.00, and will bracket the present day dollar value.

During and just after the war, the American servicemen stationed in Sydney wanted orchid flowers to give to the ladies. My father had a few cattleyas and would get £1 (\$50.00) per flower. The florist we supplied said if the girls brought the flowers back the next day undamaged, he would repurchase them for £1 and sell them again. I dread to think what the Americans were charged.

After the war there was a growing interest in cymbidiums. The people who had them were reluctant to sell. There was one man who had quite a few plants but would only sell back bulbs.

Because no fertilizers were used a back bulb would often shoot two even three times. He had a very large plant of a clone called *Ceres F.T. Handbury*. It had spidery brown/red flowers. I was at his home with my father when he was offered £200 (\$10,000). He refused to sell. My father later said to me "two fools just met, the one that offered and the one who refused".

Bill Worth was the editor of the *Australian Orchid Review*. He was a good friend of my father, and when he died suddenly, his wife was not in a very good position financially. He had a goodly number of orchids, mainly cymbidiums, which his wife did not want to keep. Nobody knew what the orchids were worth, so my father said he would auction them for her. We had just built a new glasshouse, so the plants were brought to Carlingford and auctioned. It was a huge success and the prices amazed everyone.

We decided to build a larger more open glasshouse, so that we could continue with orchid auctions. This really started the boom, as there was now a market where people could deal. At the height of the auction business, we were selling on the Saturday up to £7000 (\$350,000.00) worth of plants, and it was nearly all taken as cash. There was a lot of black-marketing going on in the aftermath of the war. Unfortunately we only got our commission but it was still very lucrative. There were a number of orchid nurseries now operating. Carrington Deane operated Girrawheen nursery. This was the most up market and was famous for the different varieties of the grex *Girrawheen*, of which *Girrawheen Enid* was the most famous. This plant regularly sold for £100 (\$5000.00) per bulb. Indeed my father once sold one for £200 (\$10,000.00) to a man who apparently sold one that was wrong and had to replace it. The man was asked to select which bulb he wanted and then break the plant himself. He did and the bulb came off with no roots. He said "oh well". I remember this well for at that time I did not think that anyone could be so casual about such a vast sum of money.

Carrington's brother Roy, operated a nursery at Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains. His was not an up-market nursery like his brother's. At the time a bushfire swept up out of the gully and devastated his nursery. The plants survived though most had to be reduced to back bulbs. Labels at that time were made of celluloid which ofcourse burnt. For the next few years Roy sold these plants as "Bushfire Specials". He said there was a plant of Girrawheen Enid and a couple of other very valuable plants, so you bought a lucky dip and could get a Girrawheen Enid. Many people thought that you would know where your valuable plants were – apparently not.

The auctions continued. Refreshments were alternatively provided by the Rachael Foster Hospital and the Crippled Children's Association. We always donated a plant that was auctioned for them. The plant always sold for more than it was worth, and on numerous occasions the person who bought it would resubmit it as a gift to the charity. There was a lot of money about. With the plant and the money from the refreshments, the charities did very nicely.

At this time I was given a piece of a seedling that was called "Lucifer Dianne". I had admired it at the owner Pat Ready's home. It was brown and at the next flowering was granted an Award of Distinction. We naturally had to try to get a piece to auction. The owner said, and this I remember clearly, "you sell yours, you are young and the money will help you a lot more than it will me". As he insisted I do this, we sold the plant which was by now two small pieces. They sold for £80 each (\$4000.00). For someone saving to pay off a block of land it was a real windfall. (Mr. Ready said he was very happy for me) He was a good man who cared for other people.

There was a man who was importing watches. He used to run an advert on the back page of the Sunday Herald. Apparently there was a problem with the customs department and he needed money in a hurry. He had imported a plant called Anthony Evans 'St Melons'. He approached us to see if we were interested in buying it. My father and I drove to his home and bought the plant along with two others. On the way home my father said to me "this cannot last" because the three plants on the back seat were worth more than the car we were in. The car was an almost new Chevrolet.

Doug Lancely, who was a very keen enthusiast, flowered a plant Marion Lenfesty 'Splendens', which met all the requirements shape wise and had a very good spike habit. The colour was a wishy washy pale pink. It was winning all the shows and was thus in great demand. Doug had no intentions of selling. Gerald McCraith from Melbourne contacted us regarding buying a piece. We were to be the go-betweens and had no desire or intention of benefiting financially. Both parties were our good friends. As Doug was quite wealthy we suggested to Gerald that he should make his best offer first up, as we were not going to feel the matter out for him. He offered £1000 (\$50,000.00). Doug said "no". Some years later Doug died and the plant disappeared, never to be seen again. He gave us a flower to cross on the faithful Balkis. He was given whatever seedling he wanted and the rest we quickly sold for £1 (\$50.00). None of the progeny came to anything.

As always happens when there is a lot of money about, the villains arrived. We decided it was time to get out. We treasured our good name too much to be accidentally in anything at all dodgy.

What was happening was plants were being cut into even smaller pieces and at one of our last auction sales, we were given plants by a grower who we knew had the right clones, but he submitted false ones. I had done a part of my horticultural apprenticeship in a Rose nursery. There you had to be able to recognize many of the roses by their thorns. If a wrongly labeled one was brought to the packing shed it could be recognized and put to one side. As the actual number of cymbidium clones that was being traded was fairly low I found it quite easy to recognize them by their bulb and foliage. Some of the people who continued to run auctions got into trouble.

We even had a case of what is now called 'money laundering'. A man who we knew well, also well-known in the Banking system, asked us would we mind a plant till the next auction. We said yes. Next thing we were served with a legal notice that said we were the receivers of stolen goods.

Apparently someone had asked the banking man to wash £1000 (\$50,000.00). The idea was to buy an orchid in England, bring it to Australia, sell it and the money was clean. We were devastated. We treasured our reputation for honesty. After some legal manouvers the plant was returned to the owner. The plant was called 'Starlight Crown'. It was a pale apple green that faded after a couple of weeks. This may sound like a Damon Runyon story but I can assure that it is true.

There were villains away from the auction scene as well. I will not mention names as there may be descendants, whom I am sure would not like to be thus associated.

Apart from putting the wrong names on the plants, one method was to put two plants in the one pot. There was a man (no women involved) who built fancy show cases with glass sides where you could look but not touch. You chose, he took the plant away, removed a piece. You could not have the flowering piece, it was needed for the next pigeon, and of course your plant was wrong. If he thought that you were wealthy enough, you would be invited to tea, wine and dined (as men of class do), or so he said, and then the pigeon was plucked.

At the Dos Pueblos nursery at Dee Why the plants were grown in the ground. People would mark a plant and then come back when it was no longer in flower and buy it at a much cheaper price. It didn't matter though as the plants never flowered as well again as they did when grown in the ground. The Company had selected a site with deep black sand. They added a large quantity of peat moss and some sheep manure, which was blended into the sand. They were the best grown plants that had been seen at the time.

One man used to sell plants in Paddy's Market, using the flowering plants as the lure, and saying that the pieces under the bench were the same. I once asked him if he ever had complaints. He said rarely as most people were either embarrassed to have been taken or could not be bothered. To the ones that did complain he gave another piece with an apology. He said you then had another couple of years before they flowered the plant, and then they just gave up.

The Orchid Society of NSW met at the YWCA building in Oxford St. It was said that there was more business transacted in the lobby than in most nurseries. The hall was always packed, if you were late you ended up in the balcony that was usually full as well.

The first Show that was held in the Sydney Town Hall was underwritten by my father. He was an astute business man and saw the potential of the show being held in a prominent site. It was a huge success, as he foresaw, and he did not have to put up any money. The Town Hall shows really put Orchids on the map and helped the NSW Orchid Society become financially secure.

There were lots of interesting people involved, and the displays were magnificent. We had a heated glasshouse that was used to grow tropical foliage to compliment our displays. The Town Hall was full of flowers and packed with viewers for the entire duration of each show. Even here tricks were played. A yellow cymbidium called Cariga 'Sorento' was exhibited with an orange spot light on it. It looked magnificent and was sold for £600 (\$30,000.00). It was a different colour in daylight and was possibly not even a Cariga. Names were sometimes changed so people would not know where to go to get similar clones.

However as with all good things the boom had to bust. In France a Dr. Morel was able to tissue culture cymbidiums. At first many people did not believe it possible or that it was doable and the plants would not come true to type. Of course they did.

A gentleman, Bob Van Dyke, started mericlone in Sydney and that was the beginning of the end of the orchid boom. It had been an interesting time and had been good fun.