

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

SATURDAY MORNING

October 15, 1960

General Chairman Don Hartmann introduced Mr James S. Wells, James S Wells Nursery, Inc, Red Bank, New Jersey, to give the keynote address of the conference.

THE PLANT PROPAGATOR — THE BASIS OF OUR INDUSTRY

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MR. CHAIRMAN. Fellow growers

It is customary for the speaker to begin by saying how pleased he is to be here, but I do so on rather a different level because it is not often that a speaker has the opportunity to give essentially the same speech under the same title twice in ten years

It was in 1951 that the Plant Propagators Society came into being, and quite by chance it fell to my lot at that time to put forward some ideas as to how our society should be organized. Last week, as I read through the proceedings of this first meeting, I realized that I could hardly improve on what I had said ten years ago. It might be simpler if I suggested you read the first three or four pages of proceedings Number I and sat down. However I feel you expect a little more of me than that.

I am deeply conscious of the importance of this meeting to you and of my responsibility to it. Fortunately my position is rather an impregnable one, because events have proven that the ideas of ten years ago have developed into what by any count can be considered a very successful organization

I would like to hark back to the first meeting and briefly describe some of the thoughts that passed through our minds and over which we ranged our discussions at that time. We were conscious of the fact that there had been a Plant Propagators Society in existence in this country way back in the early thirties which had failed partly because of the depression, but mostly because there was a wide discrepancy between the number of people who had knowledge to impart and those who did not. When the neophytes outnumbered the experts things began to dry up. We realized that unless we could re-organize the society on a different basis, adjusting and controlling the level and the quality of our members it could not and would not last.

Most of you know that plant propagation has been a somewhat secretive business. This I am ashamed to admit comes largely from Europe and to some extent it still exists there. In its most extreme form a grower will lock his propagating houses and not allow anyone

in. Other growers are not quite so blunt but many may be most uncommunicative and not at all ready to give information away. I am glad to say that this archaic position is slowly dying out, and it was the purpose of our Society when it began to eliminate it entirely from the ranks of its members.

In my original thinking it seemed to me that the plant propagator was one of the last strongholds of the real craftsman. Here may I quote directly from the first proceedings; —

“It is well for us to consider that the craftsmanship and skill of the plant propagator is the beginning of a long chain of events running through every phase of our industry. It is upon this skill, and upon nothing else quite so much, that all other parts of our great industry ultimately depend. Of what use would the landscape architect or the garden contractor be to the home owner if no plants of any kind were available? Where would the florist obtain his flowers, his bulbs and seeds, and what would be the value of fertilizers, barrows, garden centers and garden magazines without plants? Horticulture in its widest sense is the art of growing fruits, vegetables and ornamental plants. All of these, everything growing which is covered by the term horticulture has to originate with the plant propagator. He is, in very fact, the basis of our industry. Holding such a position as this it says much for the character and integrity of this man that he has not wished to take advantage of the situation in any way. Many other groups of workers have thought it right to hold the rest of the community or other members of their business fraternity to ransom in what they like to call their own best interests. Without going into the pro's and con's of labour relations we can look at the record with justifiable pride for I believe there can hardly be another section of the nation which has such a clean record. The true plantsman has little time for such “goings on,” he has more important things to do. Just as long as he can make a reasonable living and see that his family is well provided for, then by far the most important thing to him is his work. In this day of machines and mass production the plant propagator is one of the last and as yet unassailed strongholds of the true craftsman. This I suggest is the pivot upon which this meeting (— and indeed the meeting we are having today) should depend and upon which we should base our plans for the future existence of the organization” This was my thinking ten years ago and I would not wish to change a word of it today.

We then moved on to discuss what the requirements of membership should be, and it is here that I would like to emphasize something very clearly and strongly. The requirements for membership should be stringent and should reflect an extremely high standard of ethics, skill and experience. If there is any criticism I have to make of our Society it is that the requirements for membership and the manner in which they have been applied have not been stringent enough. Our society has been so successful that people have joined it and are continuing to join it from all parts of the world. As we become larger the problem of retaining and maintaining the high level with which we undoubtedly started is becoming more difficult. Guests can come to our

meetings and of course they are warmly welcomed but when you have a membership of some 250 people, all of whom may bring two guests if they wish, it is possible for us to have a meeting of well over 500. The intimacy and vigorous direction of our earlier meetings would then be lost. You may say "well why shouldn't we have 500 people if they are all keen and eligible"? and I suppose there is an argument for it, but whether we like it or not it is impossible for some people to get up in front of a crowd and say what they want to say and the bigger the crowd the worse the problem becomes. There is no question in my mind that we have to keep the size of our society within bounds and that as the quantity of people who want to join becomes greater then we must raise our standards so that we may continue to cull the cream of the crop. This selectiveness, whereby those with superior knowledge and skill are chosen for membership in our society is, in my opinion, essential to it's success

It was my desire to call the original organization the Plant Propagators Guild but apparently the word guild has a connotation in this country which it does not have in Europe. To me it means a group of highly skilled technicians and craftsmen who get together as a fraternal organization to help each other, to discuss the day by day problems of their work and to pass on useful knowledge one to the other. What are the essentials for the establishment of a guild? The first and most vital necessity is the collection of a group of people with a high degree of knowledge and skill. The second essential is that this group must be willing to share what they know with others of a similar calibre, and that both must be willing in turn to help the novice attain proficiency in the craft. To quote again from the first proceedings, —" What then should the requirements of full membership be? I would like to suggest these

1. At least 10 years active and practical experience in the art of plant propagation.
2. A high standard of integrity in the community and the trade. This should be vouched for by not less than four people of similar standing.
3. Already willingness to freely share his knowledge and skills with other members.

It is hard to assess which of these three would be considered the most important, but a willingness to share with others would quickly show whether knowledge and experience were there, and the very act of sharing would suggest integrity. I think therefore, that this last a ready willingness to freely share his knowledge and skills with other members should be considered of paramount importance." With these ideas in mind, our society was organized.

We now have before us two clear pictures of different phases of the Plant Propagators Society. The first phase was back in the 30's when we had a simple society to which people paid so many dollars a year to become a member and came to the meetings when they were called. People with knowledge grew less and less in number, people without knowledge increased. This imbalance, further accentuated by the problems of the depression finally eliminated the society. In 1951 it was

re-organized, but this time we made sure that virtually all the original members were knowledgeable and that they would plan the distribution of their knowledge in an orderly manner to help those less well trained or less skilled in this profession. The last phase has, I think you will agree, been quite successful. Although the controlled nature of our organization may go against the grain with some, I think our harshest critics must accept the fact that we have a formula which is successful

Before passing on I feel that I should discuss this question of sharing very briefly, because it is a fundamental part of our organization, yet now that I am operating a business for myself I can see perhaps a little more clearly some of the arguments which people put forth in which they say "Why should I go out of my way to help my competitors?" I have come to the belief that it is only wise to be a little discriminating. Let me give you an explanation. I have a competitor in my area who is growing many of the plants which I grow. He is selling them at cut-throat prices and he is a disturbing influence because he is upsetting the proper balance of trade. He is not a member of our society and were his name to come up and I had the opportunity, I would veto his application. He has been to my nursery and I have shown him around in a casual manner. When he wanted to buy hormone powders of a special type we were just out. He is treated with courtesy but not with detailed co-operation

What is the other side of the picture? Four years ago when I began my business I went to my many nurseryman friends and said "Can I have some cuttings" and without exception I was handed a pair of clippers and told to help myself. I found the most warm and generous openhandedness on the part of everyone. It was generous enough to set me up in business growing plants which they are selling. Now when any one of them appears on my nursery, or writes and asks for advice I respond immediately. I have received tremendous help from all of these people and I like to think that in some small measure I have been able to help them too.

Coming now to the actual meetings of our society, those of you who have attended will know that you have never taken part without coming away with more knowledge than you gave. This is a unique situation! We have a society of keen and knowledgeable people all of whom trust and like each other. They know that their neighbour is not trying to steal a "march" on them: they know that this country is big enough and the opportunities are sufficiently great to justify anyone getting into the production of any plant that interests him, for we have not yet scratched the surface of the horticultural potential in the United States. They know that if they help this man today, tomorrow they will come to a discussion which will help them to do their job more efficiently. Time and time again members have come to me and said "I heard so and so at the last meeting. We tried it last winter and it works to perfection" This atmosphere, this quality of knowledge plus a desire to share one with the other has not come about by chance. Therefore I cannot urge you too strongly to organize on a similar basis and to organize not at all on the basis of quantity but solely on that of quality.

We are surrounded today with quantity — millions of units, billions of dollars. We talk glibly in these figures and in many respects quantity is the criterion by which success is judged. I would not decry this completely because it does indicate a general vigour and aggressiveness which is an integral part of a growing economy. But it won't suffice for us, for quantity is not what we want. If we want quantity, if we are interested in joining societies then just look in the horticultural Who's Who and slap down a couple of hundred dollars and join 50 societies. There is practically no limit to the number you can join. You will pay your \$5, receive your bulletin and that's about it. I believe that we want something more from our society, and in order to achieve it we have to be selective.

Therefore, to sum up, I would urge you to organize on a very high level. Let membership in your chapter of our society be something to be prized above all other membership that might be available to the person concerned. Let it be something that he has to strive to attain, and once attained, has to maintain at a high level in order to keep. Let there be stringent requirements of him not only to get in but to keep in. Let him be required to contribute regularly to the meetings or to the News Letter or to some aspect of your corporate activities, so that he remains an active contributing member. It is far better that you have a modest number of such people actively working together, than that you have a large number with but few contributors. The atmosphere generated and the pleasure each will receive from your meetings in the limited group will be far greater than in the wide unrestricted one.

One final point. We who were in at the beginning of the society are delighted to be here also for the first meeting of the first chapter. We realize that geography and climate will dictate your interests which may well be different from those of the parent society. But we hope that you will plan and develop in such a way that you can maintain the closest possible contact with the central organization. The "WESTERN CHAPTER" is our first born, and as such must always hold a special and most high place in our regard. We shall follow your development with keen attention, wishing you well in every way, and hoping that your activities can further enhance our mutual desire to establish and maintain the plant propagator as a craftsman of the highest order.

PRESENTATION OF OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS OF THE PLANT PROPAGATORS SOCIETY

Chairman Don Hartman convened the session which took place Saturday evening, October 15 and turned the meeting over to Mr. Philip Barker, Department of Landscape Horticulture, Davis, to introduce the officers and committee members of the Plant Propagators Society.

MR. BARKER: The first person that I would like to introduce is the President of the Plant Propagators Society. He attended Georgia Tech University and spent some time at Yale and the University of the South. For 20 years, he was a cotton merchant in the South. As he in-