

Following in the Footsteps of Legends! Lessons Learned Through Four Generations[©]

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SUMMARY

Through four generations of horticulture, the King family has been influenced and inspired by a number of the legends of the horticulture industry. These included influential nursery professionals, plantsmen and academics that all had one thing in common: a deep love and respect for horticulture. The accomplishments of Lynn Lowery, Benny Simpson, Dr. Barton Warnock, and others shaped the practice of horticulture in the Lone Star State. These legends also taught many valuable lessons to many willing students along the way. Their influence and accomplishments are outlined in the current work.

Keywords: Lynn Lowrey, multi-generation family business, Benny Simpson, Barton Warnock, native plants, plant collectors, wildscapes

INTRODUCTION

In 1915, J.B. King Sr. began growing strawberries in the sugar sands of east Texas (Fig. 1). With no other strawberry growers in the area, he developed a market for them by shipping the

produce to Shreveport, Louisiana. Soon the idea became popular with many neighboring farmers, and J.B. realized that he needed to differentiate his farm. He began grafting and growing fruit trees and roses - and the King Nursery was born (Fig. 2). His slogan was: "Where the name of the firm indicates the quality of stock." In 1947, J.B. King Jr. was called into service at the nursery. He incorporated more ornamental plants into the nursery's inventory, until the early 1950s when it became a one-stop shop for retail customers. Even though the nursery has always depended on retail customers, J.B. Jr. had a wholesale sensibility. He was a tremendous propagator and preferred the solitude of plant production to the often-hectic nature of retail sales (Fig. 3).

In 1979, J.B. Jr.'s son, Aubrey King, began full-time work on the nursery. Like his father, he was an excellent plantsman; however, he was also highly skilled in the art of sales (Fig. 4). Treating customers as students, he would spend hours with those that showed interest in horticulture. He placed his signature on the nursery by offering cutting-edge plant material, especially in the area of perennials and small trees. These men, three generations of horticulturists, passed to the next generation much knowledge and many lessons that were taught to them by experience and many great friends and mentors. This paper is an attempt to highlight these lessons and pay homage to those that helped to teach them.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH INCREDIBLE PEOPLE

In the 1950s and 1960s, there were three horticulturists/botanists that scoured the Texas countryside in search of new and rare plants. These men rarely worked together, but their combined efforts changed the trajectory of horticulture in the Lone Star State. Lynn Lowrey, Benny Simpson and Dr. Barton Warnock were each uniquely qualified to make their own contributions - yet they shared a passion for improving the plant palette in a state rich with

ecological variety (Fig. 5). Though each of them worked extensively throughout the state, it has been said that boundaries for their “regions of expertise” were understood. If the state were divided into thirds, Lynn would have been responsible for the southeast, Benny the northeast and west Texas would have been covered by Dr. Warnock.

Lynn Lowrey spent his career working for nurseries, generally around the Houston, Texas area - including owning and operating his own nursery. He quickly set himself apart from other nursery professionals based upon his interest in native plant material (Fig. 6). Selling native plants in the 1950s was a tough job, but Lynn proved to be up to the challenge. Along with these native plants, he also championed a more naturalistic landscape design, even going so far as to install them in some of Houston’s most affluent neighborhoods. Along with many of the native plants that he introduced, this “wildscaping” concept is seen widely in Houston still today. Lynn touched the lives of many customers, but also many fellow horticulturists.

Along with his contemporaries, Benny and Dr. Warnock, Lynn influenced many younger horticulturists including Dr. William C. Welch, Dr. Dave Creech, Dr. Jerry Parsons, Jill Nokes and Greg Grant (Figs. 7 and 8). Plants that Lynn was at least partially responsible for introducing to the Texas nursery trade include *Quercus canbyi*, *Q. polymorpha*, *Q. risophylla*, *Lagerstroemia indica* x *L. fauriei* ‘Basham’s Party Pink’ (possibly the first ever hybrid between these species) and *Scutellaria suffrutescens*, among many others.

Benny Simpson began his career in 1954 at the Texas Research Foundation in Dallas, Texas. In 1972, as Texas A&M University assumed control of the Research Foundation center, he developed an interest in discovering native Texas plants and introducing them to the nursery trade. Although the previously-mentioned “boundaries” were in place, Benny made many fruitful trips to the Trans-Pecos region and brought back plants to the northeast that he thought

would thrive. Though he had many selections, some of his most popular plant introductions include *Chilopsis linearis* 'Dark Storm' and *Leuchophyllum frutescens* 'Green Cloud'.

Dr. Barton Warnock studied botany at Sul Ross State Teachers College and later was on faculty there. He was the foremost collector of plants in the Trans-Pecos region, especially the region that became Big Bend National Park. Dr. Warnock was among the first to catalog and collect plants in this expanse after the federal government acquired the property. Once the park was opened, he continued to work there, taking students on collecting trips and instilling his love and passion for the plants of the region into others. He trained many well-known botanists and left his mark in many other ways. The Barton H. Warnock Environmental Education Center sits on the Big Bend Ranch State Natural Area and houses an arboretum filled with plants collected by Dr. Warnock himself.

Each of these men provided inspiration for nurseries all over the state of Texas, including the Kings. But more than their inspiration, the plants that they introduced were vital to shaping the industry.

The Kings were impacted personally through relationships with many other leaders in the horticulture world. A chance meeting with Greg Grant, a well-known horticulturist who lived only 20 miles from the King's nursery in Tenaha, set Aubrey on the path to discovering new plant material and many new friends. Greg introduced the Kings to Dr. William C. Welch, Dr. Dave Creech and Dr. Jerry Parsons, just to name a few. These horticulturists were responsible for expanding the plant palette, notoriety and imagination of many nurseries - including the Kings. Dr. Welch's style and class, Dr. Creech's adventurous plant collecting and Dr. Parsons' intense practicality, all influenced the Kings and their operation. This could be said by countless other firms as well.

PLANTS DONOT READ BOOKS

The aforementioned plant collectors certainly had their share of technical knowledge about the plants they were collecting. After all, each of them either wrote or inspired books about the plants of a given area in Texas. They realized however, that finding a plant that was “out of place” (e.g. an acid-loving plant in an alkaline soil; a cold-sensitive plant in a cold area) represented an opportunity rather than a conundrum. Perhaps they could not explain why that plant was thriving in said area - but they were certainly excited to see it and consider the possibilities of introducing the species into a new area.

Throughout childhood, I was taught that *Leucophyllum frutescens* and *Dermatophyllum secundiflorum* would not thrive, or even survive for long, in the southeast; yet as we toured nurseries throughout southern Louisiana, I saw both of them thriving in a humid, mesic environment. Virtually any horticulturist, that has been one for long, has their own story about finding a plant that is growing in the “wrong place.” Often, we find that this is an artifact of an unintended artificial environment (e.g. structure providing protection for a cold-sensitive plant), but when it is not, it can be an exciting breakthrough in plant distribution. Ultimately it reminds us that plants cannot read, and what an author has written about them is merely from their experience.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Through the many years, the Kings have seen trends come and go, and the common theme is that nurseries are often left with large inventories that have fallen out of favor with consumers. At times, they simply took their loss and moved on to the next crop, dumping the

previous crop to make room. Alternatively, there were times when they thought outside of the box and repurposed the previously-trendy crop for another use. In the fall of 2017, I was reminded of this concept when grounds maintenance on campus at Texas A&M University decided to take a new approach to pruning the *Tecoma stans*. They had grown to approximately 15 feet tall by late October, and were just beginning to bloom. Instead of cutting them back to the ground prematurely, they limbed them up, creating a yellow-blooming, multi-stemmed, small tree. The first time I observed them from afar they appeared to be the “holy grail”: a yellow Crapemyrtle. Alas, they were not; but what they were, was beautiful and interesting, all because someone thought outside of the box.

EDUCATE

Through Aubrey King’s tenure as owner/operator of King’s Nursery, many people came to Tenaha for the hard-to-find plant material, many people came for the affordable prices, but most people came for his knowledge. Industry-wide, nursery professionals hold some of the most widely sought-after information in our society today. If you question the last statement, just tell someone that you are a horticulturist and then be ready for the barrage of questions that are sure to follow. Educating people about the nuances of horticulture is one of the true joys of the field. There is certainly some validity in limiting the interaction time between the professional and the consumer. This is a highly-efficient model that can lead to great productivity and economic gain. However, there is also value in the interaction with consumers, and enriching their lives with the knowledge that you have acquired. It is not the way to do business, but it is a way to do business, and it is a great way to make lifelong friends and customers. Share your knowledge. Educate.

Ultimately, the nursery industry is a great one. I'll never forget my father's words: "The nursery business is a wholesome way to make a living." They are still true today and hopefully they always will be.



Figure 1. The Kings' strawberry field in Tenaha, TX in the early 1920s.



Figure 2. J.B. King, Sr. and Katie King standing in front of the King Nursery sign in the late 1930s.



Figure 3. J.B. King, Jr. grafting *Cornus florida* in the late 1970s.



Figure 4. Margaret King (J.B. King Jr.'s wife) and Aubrey King on the nursery in the late 1990s.

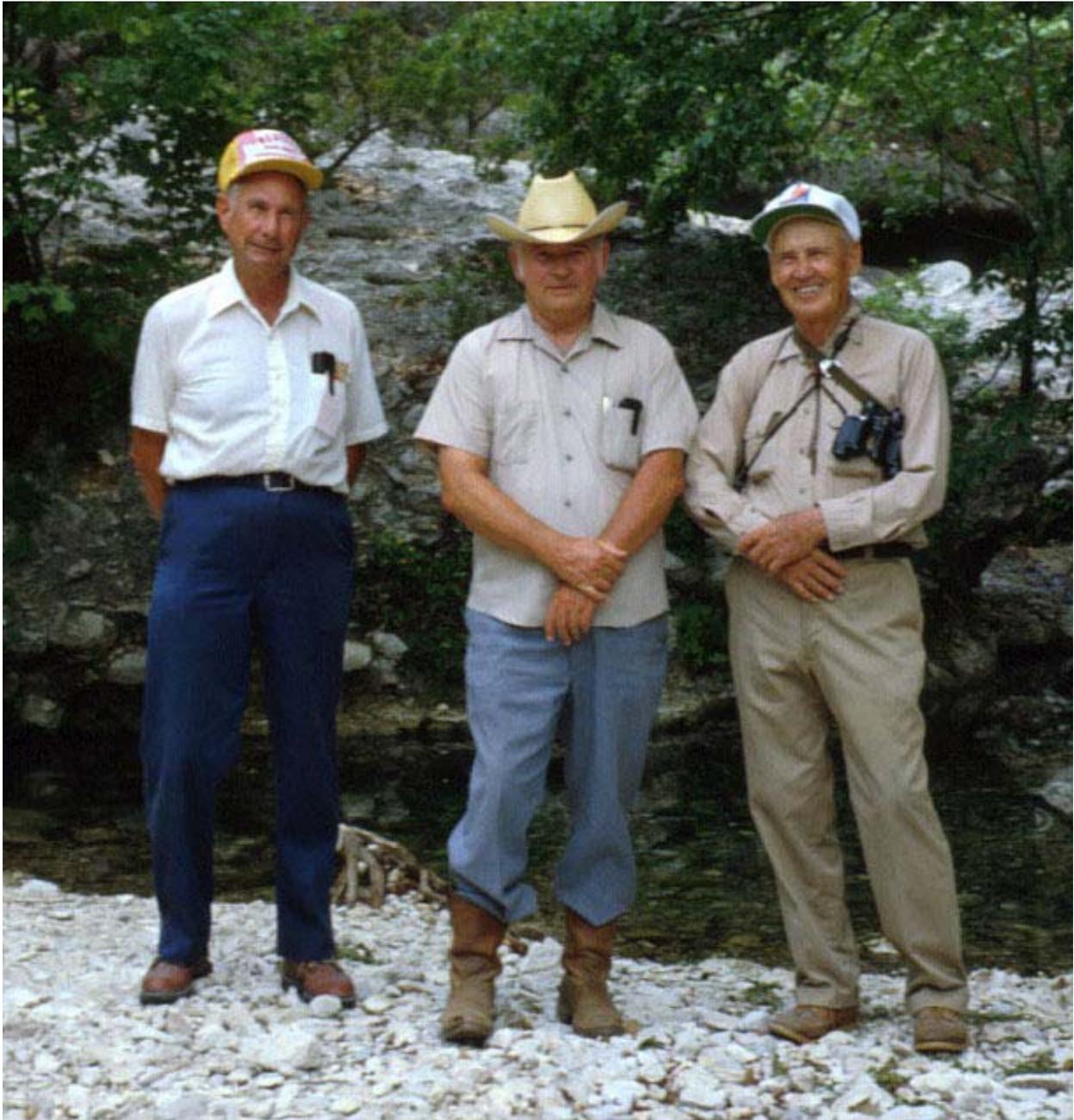


Figure 5. From left to right: Lynn Lowrey, Benny Simpson and Dr. Barton Warnock on a plant collecting trip to Mexico in the late 1980s. (Photo courtesy Dr. Dave Creech)



Figure 6. Lynn Lowrey collecting *Scutellaria suffrutescens* in Mexico in the late 1980s.

(Photo courtesy Dr. Dave Creech)



Figure 7. Dr. William C. Welch at his home outside of Round Top, Texas in the mid-1990s.

(Photo courtesy Greg Grant)



Figure 8. Dr. Dave Creech awarding the “SFASU Senior Horticulture Student of the Year” to Dr. Andrew King. (Photo courtesy Dr. Dave Creech)