

BROMELIANA

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(As promised, here is another archival piece from the April, 1976 Bromeliana.)

OUR GEORGE KALMBACHER

By Herb Plever

On this coming May 14th, George Kalmbacher will celebrate his 79th birthday, and we all wish him many more fruitful years of work. George is now in his 26th year as taxonomist and Custodian of the Herbarium at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens.

A perennial bachelor, he has had the good fortune to be wedded to his work which has been for him both an occupation and a passionate avocation. George is known in botanical circles throughout the world. Yet few people know that he has had no formal training in botany or taxonomy and is completely self-taught.

George grew up in Rochester, N.Y. and graduated Rochester Catholic High School in 1914. His studies there in Latin and Greek were to be significant to him in his later life. After World War I, he moved to New York City where he began work as a mail handler for the old Railway Mail Service of the U.S. Post Office, a position he was to hold for 30 years.

As a young man George developed a passionate interest in all the natural sciences, and he began a systematic program of self-study in Geology, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Zoology, Ornithology, Ichthyology, and finally, Botany. His free time was spent in the library and museums until closing time. George became most interested in Botany, especially

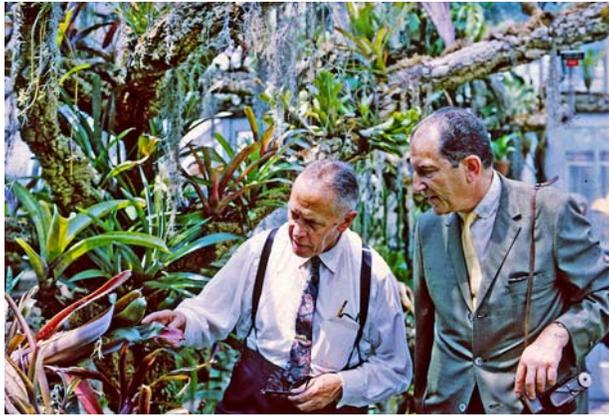
plant taxonomy, because information and live material in that field was accessible to him as a self-taught student without the necessity of laboratories and equipment required for the other disciplines he had been studying.

After he started working for the Railway Mail Service George started a regimen of traveling throughout the world, taking two or three trips a year. He continues this practice of extensive traveling even more actively today.

Once he became involved in taxonomy, George's weekends and days off from work were spent in the

botanical gardens and arboretums in the New York area and at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, Mass., where he began intensive study of trees and shrubs, methodically memorizing the botanical glossary and the names and meanings of every plant listed in L. Bailey's "Manual of Cultivated Plants" - and he studied each plant's taxonomic data. While working, George continued this study for 30 years without a let-up.

He became a member of the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens in 1950 and spent most of his free time there with his copy of Rehder's "Manual of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs", checking the descriptions with the live material. He would annotate the margins of the Manual with additional descrip-



George Kalmbacher and Ed Sard at the Gardens

THERE WILL BE NO MEETING IN JANUARY.
BEST WISHES FOR A Joyous holiday and a HAPPY NEW YEAR

tions or note any contradictions or errors. Thus George became well known to and respected by the Garden's staff.

In 1951 a book, "Taxonomy of Vascular Plants" by Dr. George H. M. Lawrence of Cornell University was published while he was in Europe and was thus unable to proof-read the copy for accuracy. As a result, the first printing contained many errors - which George Kalmbacher promptly enumerated to Dr. Lawrence in a lengthy correspondence.

When in 1955 the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens taxonomist resigned without notice, members of the staff recommended George for the position. However, Dr. Avery, the chief executive of the Gardens, balked at making the appointment, because he wanted a formally trained PhD. He was persuaded to appoint George, however, by the unequivocal recommendation given by Dr. Lawrence.

Thus in 1955 George Kalmbacher became taxonomist and Custodian of the Herbarium, a job to which he has been selflessly devoted for the past 26 years. Many of the bromeliads in the Gardens present collection were purchased by George with his own funds, because the Garden's pauperous budget cannot afford it. In 1974 George became taxonomist emeritus, but he continues to do the same work and devote long hours every day as he has done in the past.

George's main loves are bromeliads, cacti and succulents, begonias and the flora of the tropics and sub-tropics. He has written extensively in articles for the Journals of the Cactus, Bromeliad and Begonia Societies and the American Horticulturist. His first book was 'Tree Trails in Prospect Park.'

George has been consultant and identification authority for many books such as: "Flowers of the World" by F. Perry (Crown), "Color Guide to American Gardening" by Hellyer (Bounty), "Dictionary of Garden Plants" by Ray & Sunge (Crown), "Dictionary of House Plants" by Hay, McQuown & Beckett (McGraw Hill), "What Plant is That?" by Macoboy (Crown), "The Color Dictionary of Shrubs" by S. Gault (Crown), and the "Time-Life Encyclopedia of Gardening Books".

George is especially dear to the hearts of bromeliad people. As a Director of the Bromeliad Society International, and as a founding member, past President and Director of our New York chapter, he has contributed greatly to our understanding - and he continues to participate in our work. Are there any bromeliad chapters which George has not visited or

addressed?

A collection of the numerous anecdotes about George from his many friends would doubtless be entertaining. One thinks of the Dinner Banquet at the World Bromeliad Conference in Houston, Texas in 1972 when George as a BSI Director was seated on the dais. Watching our George devouring his luau dinner, Corpus Christi's David Gardner drawled: "Shor' eats good for a little feller, don't he?". David then proceeded to regale us with stories of George's exuberant appetite and I told a few of my own.

Then there are George's slide travelogs which are always interesting - such as the pictures of Honduran bromeliads growing in habitat, interspersed with repeated flashbacks of bikini-clad beauties at a hotel swimming pool. George explained that it was very hot and he did a lot of swimming.

George Kalmbacher's friends are legion - his detractors none. □

(Editor's Note: I failed to mention in this article that George had written the introduction to Victoria Padilla's first book - "Bromeliads" (Crown). Among the many interesting articles George wrote for the BSI Journal, I still remember his several guides to pronouncing the Latin names of Bromeliads. I think of the time when I first met Mulford Foster in 1962, and I asked him how he pronounced *Aechmea*. He replied: "I call it Eckmea, but if you go to Harvard you'll say Eeechmea." It took me awhile to overcome my resistance to proper pronunciation because the names sounded strange to me when I pronounced them properly according to George's rules. Now a word like Bromel-ee-ay-cee-ee comes smoothly off my tongue.

George also wrote two articles about the construction and maintenance of the big bromeliad tree in the Garden's Bromeliad House - "A New Tree In Brooklyn" and "A Special Tree In Brooklyn", a sly reference to Betty Smith's book. After the tree was established, Sig Sussman and I used to spend a few Saturday mornings a month to mount broms we contributed and to check on those that were growing there.

Among the members of our club at this time, I can think of only two other members who knew or can remember George Kalmbacher. For at least 15 years George was well known in the various bromeliad groups around the world. Yet I doubt there are many members who can remember him today.)

ANOTHER CHEERFUL HOLIDAY PARTY



Michael Riley's epiphytic wall

Once again Michael Reilly and Francisco Correa were the generous hosts of our annual holiday party. It was held on December 20th.

Michael and Francisco provided a succulent roasted, stuffed turkey and fresh-made cranberry sauce. Appetizers, salad, vegetable side-dishes and three delicious cakes were brought by members. This was also a brief, official meeting which lasted only for the time to have all officers and directors reelected

by acclimation. A number of members were unable to attend, but still we had good enough attendance to fill the places at the huge dining room table.

This is a good place to extend a belated welcome to Elizabeth Capen and Helen Rosenbaum who joined our club last year and to new members, Victoria Silverstein and John Lane who recently joined us.

Members, especially new members, spent lots



Hohenbergia correiaaraujoi inflorescence



Happy tillandsias

of time inspecting the 17 foot epiphytic wall of mounted bromeliads, orchids, aroids, cacti, ferns, anthuriums etc. Everything seemed to be thriving. There was a large, papaya tree that I hadn't noticed before, and it had six small fruits growing that Michael says will soon grow to full size. He brought it back as a seed from Ecuador a few years ago.

The large *Goudaea ospinae* v. *gruberi* and the giant *Tillandsia duratii*, *T. straminea* and *T. streptocarpa* have grown even larger than when seen last year. As always there were many small tillandsias in bloom. There was continual discussion about our broms, and the new members asked many questions. A new member who grows under lights asked about *Cryptanthus* 'Elaine' and requested that I post a photo of my 'Elaine' in Bromeliana (picture below.)

I grow the plant in my florescent light unit, about 3 inches below the tubes. The tubes are a mix of VitaLite and Verilux fluorescents which give a combined color temperature of about 55° Kelvin, and excellent spectral output for bromeliads. However they were developed a long time ago and are in an old T12 setup, so they don't put out very high lumens.

Today you can get tubes with good spectral coating that emit much higher lumens. I wired and constructed that light unit more than 50 years ago, and it is still working well 12 to 14 hours a day (depending on the season) controlled by a timer. Now as I approach 94 years of age, I'm no longer able to work on my back or knees so I'm not thinking of setting up a new T6 unit. The old one will have to do until it or I give out. □



Giant *Tillandsia streptocarpa*



Elegant dining



Dining table centerpiece



Cryptanthus 'Elaine' grown close under lights

XMAS BROMELIAD DECORATIONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



Bromeliad tree from 'Orlandiana', Central Florida B.S.



Christmas wreaths of T. ionantha, Nicaragua. Photo: Scott Sandell



Bromeliad Xmas tree mounted by San Diego BS in Balboa Park

NEWS and NOTES

REMINDER! - There will be no meeting in February. The next meeting will take place on March 6th, 2018.

2018 DUES - are now due and payable. Single and joint memberships are \$25.00; the domestic subscription rate for BROMELIANA is \$8.00 and an overseas subscription is \$12.00. If you have not paid your dues, please mail your check payable to N.Y. Bromeliad Society to Barbara Lagow, 54 West 74th Street, #603, N.Y.C. 10023.



Bromeliad tree from Sarasota BS newsletter

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