

History of the Manatee Orchid Society

The year was 1957 or maybe it was 1958. There were two friends, Melvin Bates and Bill White. Melvin was a schoolteacher and a Rotarian. Bill was a building contractor. The Rotary Club was having a carnival to raise funds. Because of Melvin's horticultural background, he was called upon to set up the garden booth. Bill helped him built it and somehow or other an East coast orchid grower became involved. He sold them a group of cheap orchids for the booth. When they arrived, they were all bare root. Naturally, with little or no knowledge of orchids in the area, they did not sell.

Enter Lowell Schook, a local printer and copier, who along with Melvin took the plants home to see if they could grow them. Bill bought one plant for his wife, Thelma. By early 1960 Melvin was in the orchid business. Bill's plant had bloomed, and they were off to the races!

Interest had blossomed to the point that on April 10, 1962, about 20 people gathered at the home of Melvin and Ruth Bates. Slides were shown from William Kirch, a grower of note whose nursery was in Hawaii. Now everyone was excited and decided to form a society. It took until June to get a name, bylaws and officers and the Manatee Orchid Society was born. Officers were: President Melvin Bates, Vice President Bill White, Secretary Mary Hayes and Treasurer Otis Dye. They met at the Palmetto Federal Savings and Loan. This was the beginning of a great adventure! Thelma White tells me that by that fall they were invited to display in the Sarasota Orchid Show. She says, "Now most of us had never seen an orchid show much less exhibited in one. We still jumped at the chance. Can you imagine ten people trampling over each other trying to put on a 200 square foot exhibit? Well, it didn't matter. We were having a wonderful time. We took third place and were really excited about that yellow ribbon. Those who weren't enthusiastic before really were now!" By 1966, the society was participating in six to eight shows a year.

In 1969, the Tampa Orchid Club show was held in the West Shore Plaza. This was one of then first air-conditioned malls in the west coast area. It was here that the society learned that surgical tubing dyed black could be used to cover pots. We still have some of these tubes today. Their exhibit in this show was titled *Mama Sans Garden* and it won the AOS trophy. In 1970, Bill and Melvin became student judges and in 1972, the society sent 200 plants to the Capitol Botanical Garden in Washington DC for use in the 1976 Centennial Celebration.

Within a period of three months, the two most active members died: Bill White on November 14, 1973 and Melvin Bates on March 5, 1974. They were both AOS judges at the time of their death. It was a cruel blow to the society.

In 1988, there was a serious rift in the society which caused it to split. Recovery was difficult, but Ken Anderson took the presidency as he had done earlier and soon a solid footing was in place.

Over the years the society has met in three banks, the Civil Defense Auditorium, The First Baptist Church, Blake Hospital, The Telephone Company, The Bradenton Herald, The Art League, the Courtyard, The Bradenton Woman's Club and presently, the Manatee River Garden Club.

Memoirs of Roger Miller

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