

SUMMIT, ORCHIDS AND THE OLD GUARD

The Old Guard of Summit was established on December 2, 1930. Some time later, the orchid was selected as its symbol and logo. To this date, the orchid is still used on Old Guard letterheads, folders and on the Certificates of Appreciation presented to our speakers; and a live orchid is presented to female speakers. With the passing of time, the reason for choosing the orchid seems to have been lost. The purpose of this paper is to outline the history of the orchid in Summit and show how these facts support the choice of the orchid as a meaningful and legitimate emblem for our organization.

John E. Lager is the person identified with the Orchid industry in Summit. Lager was born in Sweden, moved to England where he worked at Kew Gardens in London. This led him to study at Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Returning to England, he worked as a collector for Frederick Sanders of St. Albans, who at that time was considered the "Orchid King." In 1888 Lager immigrated to the United States to work in the Sanders greenhouses in Summit, NJ. When Sanders was unable to meet its payroll, Lager negotiated for the Summit operation in lieu of wages.

In 1896 Lager joined with Henry W. Hurrell to form an orchid growing and export firm in Summit. They combined Lager's expertise in collecting and importing orchids with Hurrell's business and financial acumen. In 1898, they acquired the property at 424 Morris Avenue. The property eventually had four greenhouses and a two-story office building, all connected, plus a small barn. The sale of this property is listed in the county register as "John E. Lager and Henry Hurrell, partners trading as Lager and Hurrell, dated February 15, 1898, and recorded March 1, 1898 in Book 333 of Deeds at page 405."

The Lager & Hurrell Orchid Nursery was one of the first orchid entrepreneurs in this country and grew into the largest commercial producer and distributor of orchid plants in the US. Some of the ways Lager did this was by traveling the world-over seeking new strains of orchids. Some of his expeditions lasted as long as two years. Often they took him to remote areas where he faced dangers such as hostile Indians, fever, snakes and the weather. In the San Martin and Cassanare regions of the Andes, he discovered a gold-powdered red *Masdevallia* orchid previously unknown to science. He collected the most valuable orchid on the globe, the pure white *Cattelya Gigas Alba*, which he sold to a European firm for \$10,000. Lager developed new varieties of orchids, two of which were the "Summit Queen" and the "Summit Snow." Lager also helped establish the New Jersey Orchid Society.

Pictured in the book *Images of America: Summit...wish you were there*, by Patricia E. Meola (1998) is an advertising card for the Lager & Hurrell "Grand Orchid Exhibit" at the American Orchid Institute in New York City in 1905. The display consisted of 359 plants of 103 species and varieties, and won first place. It was described as the most remarkable exhibit of orchids ever shown here or abroad.

"Cut" orchids for the general public were never a significant product of Lager & Hurrell. Others cultivated these, primarily the Thomas Young operation in Bound Brook, NJ. The state of New Jersey became the second largest source of "cut" orchids in the United States.

Although Lager died in 1937 and Hurrell in 1943, the firm continued under the tutelage of two successive generations of the Lager family. Following the pattern of John E. Lager, his heirs named John B. and John B., Jr., traveled widely to the earth's jungles in quest of new varieties of orchids. They too met

adversity and adventure, hacking their way through the jungle, one even falling into the crocodile-infested Amazon River. The plants they discovered overseas were shipped back to New Jersey dry and wrapped in newspaper, to be restored here with an infusion of sugar water.

As the availability of “ tropical “ flowers increased, the Summit firm became more prominent. By the 1960’s, Lager & Hurrell had over 10,000 types of orchids. They coded the orchids, recording and registering them with the Royal Botanical Society, and lodged photographs of them with the Smithsonian Institute. Lager & Hurrell shipped orchids all over the world, even to Presidents in the White House. Summit had become known as the Orchid Capital of the United States. According to Leona Roll of Berkeley Heights who started the Berkeley Florist and Garden Center in 1948 and bought orchids from Lager & Hurrell, they had an international reputation as well. In the office building at 424 Morris Avenue the shelves and safe displayed silver trophies, gold medallions, and awards from flower shows, demonstrating the appreciation of Lager & Hurrell by the botanical world.

Lager also encouraged the growing of orchids in the home. Orchids are fairly easy to raise. To grow them dust-like seeds are started in a sterile solution, and then moved into small pots. Since they are epiphytes, no soil is need. An example of his influence is seen in Fred Schechter, a Brooklyn surgical student who in the 1960’s drove “to Summit, New Jersey to visit John B. Lager of Lager & Hurrell, one of the first commercial orchid growing firms in the US.” The student “got hooked,” went on to grow orchids, and in retirement has an orchid firm in Fort Pierce, Florida.

The second generation Lager, John B. Lager, died in 1968. His obituary included the following paragraph, describing his work:

Mr. Lager pioneered the concept of growing orchids in the home and had a worldwide reputation for his rare and unusual plants. He was an exhibitor of renown, having won all major horticultural medals, including the Charles H. Totty Memorial Medal. In addition, he was an honorary judge of the American Orchid Society. Orchids were his hobby as well as his business. He was an active member of the American, New York, Long Island, Matinecock, and New Jersey Orchid Societies, and the Horticultural Society of New York.

At a February 2003 meeting of the Old Guard, Peter J. Moran III, CEO of the Society of American Florists, described the changes that transpired in the florist industry in the last half of the 20th century. A nation-wide highway system came into being, energizing the trucking industry. Refrigerated trucks and railroad cars permitted shipment of perishable products swiftly and cheaply. Rising labor costs moved many industries into less costly areas of the country and to overseas sites. Enlarged wholesaling processes changed small local stores or outlets into large chains of consolidated business.

These industrial changes affected the orchid industry. In 1977 after functioning as a Summit enterprise for 81 years, and attaining a reputation as one of the world’s leading orchid firms, the third generation Lager, John B. Lager, Jr., relocated Lager & Hurrell to Lilburn, Georgia. The firm has since disbanded.

Although the Lager & Hurrell Orchid Nursery business is no longer in Summit, there are still today evidences of the Lager families’ legacy to Summit. It is appropriate to include the following information in the story of Summit and the Orchid.

The Lager and Hurrell families maintained residences on Kent Place Boulevard, which at that time was a private park with a dirt road and an iron gate for closing it off from the rest of the city. The senior Lager,

John E., became involved in Summit community life, serving on the Common Council from 1914-1927. In his roll as Chairman of the Council's Park Commission, he laid out the Summit park system.

In 1959 some of the Lager & Hurrell parcel was sold to the City of Summit for the new Summit High School. The site of Lager & Hurrell greenhouses is occupied today by two fenced athletic fields adjacent to Summit High School, extending its property east to Morris Avenue. The Biber Partnership building, housing an architectural firm located at 422 Morris Avenue, was renovated from the last home of John B. Lager's wife. This indicates that the Lager & Hurrell boundary stretched to Weaver Street. White Oak Village apartments, at 412 Morris Avenue, also stands on Lager & Hurrell land sold in 1976. Public housing was built more recently on another portion of the property off Weaver Street. Still standing as the highest tree in the area is a large "Dawn Redwood" imported from China and planted by John B. Lager in the late 1940's.

Old Guard minutes offer insights into the orchid connections. Minutes of March 1, 1938 record that John B. Lager spoke to the Old Guard about growing orchids, their types and colors, and their prime locations. In the January 4, 1949 minutes is the first mention of an "orchid" being presented to a speaker. A random survey of 1953-57 minutes show a wide use of the term: "verbal orchid," "mystical orchid," "invisible orchid," "orchid of appreciation," "electronic orchid," "orchid of merit," and the word "orchid" alone. Commonly the word "orchid" appears to be used as a symbol for "thanks." Once it was reported that "a real orchid was given to the speaker." The most common and repeated minute, almost a formula, was "*Name* presented the 'orchid' and a rising vote of thanks was given to *Name*."

Although Summit is no longer known for orchid production and distribution, at the time of the inception of the Old Guard orchids were a significant factor in the communal and economic life of the city. It can be clearly understood therefore why this prized and admired flower was adopted as the organization's symbol. The orchid connects the Old Guard to its roots in Summit, and helps maintain continuity with its founders and their aims in the "good old days" of the fledgling Old Guard.

So, as we lift our voices in friendship and fellowship and sing "All praise Old Guard to thee," we pay respect to former Old Guard Boys who chose the orchid as the symbol for our organization.

12/7/03

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Special thanks and acknowledgment to the following persons for information and reflection that substantiates the story.

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Robert E. Rowland, Harris N. Sanfilippo, and Robert D. Zenker
Leona J. Roll, President, Berkeley Florist and Garden Center, Berkeley Heights, NJ
John Sullivan, President, North Jersey Orchid Society, Oakland, NJ
Summit Historical Society: Patricia E. Meola, president, and Baldwin White, founder and compiler of historic
notes
Summit School System personnel: Paul Grills, Lawton Johnson & Nancy Kilner

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