EDWARD C. HUMMEL—PLANTSMAN AND HYBRIDIZER

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For 43 years (1935–1978), Hummel’s Exotic Gardens of southern California distributed a great variety and quantity of succulent and other xerophytic plants, bromeliads, and orchids, including numerous excellent hybrids developed at the Gardens.

Edward Charles Hummel, called Mr. Hummel by nearly everyone, including his wife, was born in Prosperity, Missouri, on July 18, 1903. When he was 7, his father Perry was killed in a mine accident. Theresa, his mother, took Edward and his younger brother to Aberdeen, California, on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, where he completed elementary school. Theresa had moved to the Los Angeles area and suggested that Edward come there for high school. He kept his days free for schooling, but found part-time work at the Sherman Hotel in Sherman. Since the railroad tracks near the hotel were used in movie settings, he was able to witness the making of silent movies.

Because the broken shift of school and work was strenuous, Edward took a job at the Beverly Hills Nursery during his first school vacation. At the time, there was great competition among the affluent estates to acquire the most desirable plants—cycads, orchids, palms, rare tropical plants—and young Edward was fascinated by the comments among nurserymen concerning the competition among wealthy collectors.

From Beverly Hills, Edward moved to Owens Valley, along the eastern Sierra Nevada, and worked at various jobs, including driving cattle into the mountains for summer grazing and helping his grandfather on road construction.

Edward joined the Navy ca. 1921, mainly for its promise to provide an education. While the education differed from what he had expected, it afforded considerable variety. Shore leave during cruises along the coasts of Mexico and South America provided ample time to explore the tropical parks of the coastal cities, and he made occasional excursions inland.

Following an accident on board the battleship Wyoming and a medical discharge from the Navy in the spring of 1922, Edward returned to Owens Valley and worked at various jobs.

In 1925 he married Minnie Belle Byrne. She was born in Piedmont, Wyoming (now a ghost town), on April 14, 1904, the third of William and Cecil Byrne’s eight children. Her grandfather’s family, Irish immigrants, were early settlers and ranchers who grazed cattle on their own extensive holdings and on government land. Becoming dissatisfied with the encroachment of sheep ranchers and small farmers, William Byrne moved his family to California’s Imperial Valley in 1908, and to Owens Valley in 1909.

For a time following their marriage, the Hummels lived in Owens Valley, where Mr. Hummel worked on the Red Mountain Fruit Ranch, one of the valley’s largest. Their children were born there: Marquetta Belle, born on October 16, 1926, lives in Carlsbad, California; and Edward Myron, born on March 12, 1928, resides in Soquel, California. Ultimately Mr. Hummel went to work for the City of Los Angeles on the Tinnemaha Dam project. He worked a broken shift as a maintenance man on large equipment, and the free time enabled him to take several courses through the Extension Division of the University of California. This training helped immensely in later work.

In 1929 Mr. Hummel was transferred to Los Angeles and built a house in Inglewood for his family. They enjoyed rural living, but the City of Los Angeles decided to enforce its rule that all its employees must live within the city limits. At that time the Depression was at its worst and jobs were scarce. Compelled to leave his city job, Mr. Hummel found employment as a rigger at a Standard Oil Company plant in El Segundo.

Eventually the Hummels purchased a lot on a strip connecting the Los Angeles airport with an adjoining small town. For $800 they built a complete two-bedroom, 800-sq. ft house. A Japanese friend gave them a dismantled 20 by 20 ft lath house, which, when erected, provided a place for

Fig. 1. Minnie Belle Byrne, age 18, on a 1923 field trip. She married Mr. Hummel in 1925.
Fig. 2. The Hummels with their children, Edward Myron and Marquetta Belle, in the family's Inglewood cactus garden. In 1935, this picture and a similar one appeared nationally in many magazines in a Quaker State Motor Oils advertisement. The Hummels were amazed when hundreds of hobbyists throughout the U.S. wrote for information.

their diverse assortment of plants. Mr. Hummel resumed his job with the city.

Since they had a commercial-zoned lot, the Hummels decided to open a nursery. During the next 8 years, they purchased the 11 adjoining lots, providing them with a nursery site with a 240-ft frontage on Imperial Highway. Being a city employee, Mr. Hummel was not permitted to have his own business, so Mrs. Hummel started the nursery.

In 1935 Mr. Hummel entered his collection of imported cacti in the Cactus and Succulent Society of America show, exhibiting several species not shown previously and winning the sweepstakes and 20 ribbons. Encouraged, Mr. Hummel decided to produce drought-resistant plants.

He obtained quantities of cactus seeds from German collectors who had been exploring and collecting extensively in Central and South America. To produce rapid growth, he grafted
many of the small species, e.g., Lobivia, Echinopsis and Rebutia.

In 1935 Quaker State Motor Oils of Oil City, Pennsylvania, invited national magazine readers to write their experiences with Quaker State Oil. Mrs. Hummel's letter ("I Was Trying So Hard To Cut Expenses") with a picture of the Hummel family in their cactus garden was one selected for publication. They were amazed when hundreds of hobbyists throughout the United States wrote for information. After this response, they decided to operate a mail-order business and began selling small quantities of plants locally in 1935. Two years later, they changed to a wholesale-only mail-order business.

The Hummels purchased only new seed and small plants. Plants were bought for new stock, never for immediate resale. That was always the Hummels' policy. To increase their stocks rapidly, they grafted extensively.

In 1939 Mr. Hummel resigned his City of Los Angeles job to work full time at the nursery. Sales were so good that the Hummels found it unnecessary to publish a catalog. During the first few
Fig. 5. When published in February 1943, Hummel's Victory Picture Book was an instant success. The third edition appeared in 1944.

years of business, they offered mostly succulent plants, gradually adding more unusual foliage plants. The Hummels also sold plant assortments of their own selection, specializing in sales to distributors who needed only a few plants of one kind.

The Hummels operated their Inglewood nursery from 1936 to 1948, when exhaust fumes from nearby Los Angeles International Airport created problems. They purchased 7 acres in Rolling Hills on the Palos Verdes Peninsula and built their home there. The site was used as outdoor growing grounds. Unable to find land for a nursery site at the base of the hills, they moved to Carlsbad, where they purchased the Poindexter nursery.

In 1941, Dr. Robert W. Poindexter, a well-known cactus and succulent nurseryman, had moved his nursery from Compton to Carlsbad, but he died unexpectedly in March 1943 while working at the nursery. His greenhouses were unused until his son John, a Ph.D. graduate, returned from military service in China. Through 1951, John conducted a mail-order business and sold locally, but in 1952 he joined the faculty at Occidental College in Pasadena and sold the nursery to the Hummels; he died in 1954.

The Hummels had planned to move immediately to Carlsbad, but their son Edward was called to military service during the Korean War. Under the supervision of Tom Almanza, their Carlsbad foreman, the plants were moved from Inglewood and Rolling Hills to the new nursery site. (Almanza, now 80, resides in Carlsbad.) However, not until their son's return in 1954 were they able to transfer their total operation to Carlsbad. The Hummels built their home on the property in 1956 and expanded the nursery.

New plants were acquired from other nurseries, collectors, and botanical gardens. Visitors, many from overseas, offered and sent cuttings of worthwhile and unusual plants from their collections. The Hummels produced all the plants they sold. From the millions of seedlings in their nursery, they were able to select and offer hundreds of unusual variants—crested, monstrous, variegated, clustering and miniature forms.

The majority of plants they sold originated outside the United States, hence their business name: Hummel's Exotic Gardens. Seedlings that produced unusual numbers of offsets were especially desirable and were selected for the trade. They introduced Hoya carnosa 'Compacta', H. carnosa 'Exotica', a reverse variegation; and H. bella 'Variegata'. They also acquired and sold
Mr. Hummel grew prize-winning plants as evidenced here by some of his trophies, ca. 1942. He began entering CSSA shows in 1935.

three variegated forms of *Portulacaria afra* 'Variegata', the Rainbow Bush.

The Hummels hybridized extensively and were especially well known for their bromeliad hybrids, but they produced numerous cactus, succulent and gesneriad hybrids, too. Probably the most widely distributed hybrid was 'Hummel's Giant Christ Thorn', a *Euphorbia milii* hybrid. They also developed a great variety of *E. milii* hybrids, mainly with *E. milii* var. *breonii* and var. *splendens* crossed with *E. pedilanthoides* and others in a wide range of colors—white, yellow, orange, brick red, and red-and-white-variegated. However, they were not offered commercially but were sold with the entire plant stock in March 1977.

The Hummels considered their business a very modest success. They had accomplished their original intent: to lead an interesting life with few worries while obtaining much pleasure from their nursery business. They were gratified that their products and services were appreciated by those they had served.

Hummel's firm was a family business and many of the immediate family worked there. Their son Edward was with them until they began to consider retirement. Theresa Wommack, Mr. Hummel's mother, helped during World War II. Iris Rae Dechambeau, Mrs. Hummel's sister, managed records, succulent propagation, and packing for 32 years. Several other family members helped out when needed.

For approximately 4 years, Mr. Hummel served as a director of the Bromeliad Society and was awarded their Certificate of Appreciation. He also served on the Committee of Nomenclature of Cacti and Succulents under chairman Robert W. Pointdexter. Mr. Hummel's life-long friend, William Hertrich of the Huntington Botanical Gardens at San Marino, was consultant, and other committee members included Robert Craig, Howard Gates and Forrest Shreve.

Mr. Hummel contributed several articles to the *Cactus and Succulent Journal*: "Grafting, 6(3): 46–47, 1934; Fasciation, 7(4): 53–56, 1935; Identification, 8(7): 102–104, 1937; Collections, 9(1): 13–15, 1937; and Bottles as miniature glass houses, 10(6): 89–90, 1938. In the latter article, the picture of Mr. Hummel with his "glass house" bottles was reprinted in Scott Haselton's 1938 book, *Cacti for the Amateur*.

*Hummel's Victory Picture Book of Cacti & Succulents*, a 40-page booklet with 270 photographs published jointly by Hummel's Exotic Gardens and the *Cactus and Succulent Journal*, was an instant success when issued in February 1943; it was in its third edition in 1944. In the foreword, Mr. Hummel commented, "Perhaps you will wonder at receiving this free picture book which contains no prices of plants. If you enjoy a few minutes of interest and relaxation in looking it over, it will have fulfilled its obvious purpose. If your interest and curiosity are stirred to the point that you write us for further information, it will have fulfilled its hidden purpose."

Because the Hummels had become recognized nationally as expert growers of succulent plants, they were asked to contribute to the chapter on cacti and succulents in *Commercial Flower Forcing* (sixth edition, 1958, by Alex Laurie, D. C. Kiplinger, and Kennard S. Nelson, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., New York; 509 pages). Their section contains 22 pages of advice on propagation and cultivation and 43 illustrations.

The Cactus and Succulent Society of America named Mr. Hummel a Fellow in 1969 for his extensive horticultural experimentation and hybridizing of succulents. In 1976, The Southern California Horticulture Institute presented him their Annual Award for Outstanding Contributions to Horticulture.

In addition to plants, Mr. Hummel had many...
other interests. He read constantly on travel, exploration, the history of the glass industry and its products, American Indians, and ancient Chinese art and history. He also had a large library of cookbooks from many countries and enjoyed cooking.

In 1978 the Hummels retired to Oceanside, California, and sold their nursery stock, but they continued to grow a "few" plants on their enclosed patio. Mr. Hummel died November 29, 1979; Mrs. Hummel died January 15, 1993, at the age of 88.

**CYRUS GUERNSEY PRINGLE**

Cyrus Pringle (1838–1911), a Vermont botanist, made 39 botanizing trips to Mexico where he collected half a million plants, embracing some 20,000 species, about 12% of which were new to science. A substantial number of plants in many genera were named in his honor, among them *Pachycereus pringlei*, *Mammillaria pringlei*, and *Ferocactus pringlei*. Marcus Eugene Jones, in his *Contributions to Western Botany*, No. 16, 1930, recalled a trip he had made with Pringle 48 years previously. "In the spring of 1882 I was at San Diego and Charles C. Parry (1823–1890) told me that Pringle had just arrived, and he suggested that we form a party and go to Ensenada together, which we did. On that trip I saw much of him. He was then about 40 years old, some 10 years older than I. We had many pleasant visits around the camp fire on the trip. He told me he was of Quaker stock, was married and divorced because of inability to get along with his wife, and that this was the reason for his trips west. He was a very mild spoken man, with positive opinions which he never tried to impress on others. He was a very quiet man also. He had a young man along with him as helper, and had his own outfit for traveling, that is a team and wagon and horses. In later years Pringle specialized on west Mexican botany and discovered many new species of plants. Pringle impressed me as a very conscientious man, absolutely on the square about everything. I have known men who knew him in Mexico, and at whose places he stayed while botanizing in those regions. He usually sought out the missionaries of the regions, and stayed with them."

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