

1983

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Recommended Citation

Manning, Robert D. (1983) "From Orange to Green "Gold": The Roots of the Asparagus Fern Industry in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 62: No. 4, Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol62/iss4/5>

FROM ORANGE TO GREEN "GOLD!": THE ROOTS OF THE ASPARAGUS FERN INDUSTRY IN FLORIDA

by ROBERT D. MANNING

CENTRAL Florida was a sparsely settled frontier at the end of Reconstruction. In the 1870s and 1880s, however, an influx of pioneers transformed this wilderness into a loose network of settlements. These early communities were linked by the steamships that navigated the St. Johns and Oklawaha rivers down through the chain-of-lakes— Lake Griffin, Haines Creek, Lake Eustis, Dead River, and Lake Harris.¹ This river freight route, which ran from Jacksonville to Yalaha, soon became obsolete with the expansion of the railroad in the 1870s; regional development was no longer restricted by geographic proximity to navigable bodies of water. The increasing availability of inexpensive transportation provided the impetus for the growth of the lumber, turpentine, and phosphate enterprises. These extractive industries attracted large numbers of black laborers, but the primary economic activity of this period was small-scale agriculture.

The central Florida economy was perilously tied to the fortunes of the citrus industry in the 1890s. Prosperity abounded for those growers who had responded to the enthusiastic reports of the mild climate and profitable orange crop.² Unfortunately, the

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1. Trusten P. Drake, Jr., "Drake Point," unpublished manuscript (1980), 1-3, Trusten Polk Drake papers, private collection in the possession of Annie MacKay Drake, Ocala, Florida (hereinafter TPDP); Will Allen Dromgoole, *Three Little Crackers Down in Dixie* (Boston, 1898), 11-42; Emma N. Gaylord, *Life in Florida Since 1886* (Tampa, 1965), 1-12; *Leesburg Daily Commercial*, July 12, 1962; E. Peet, "Biography of Henry Holcolm Duncan," unpublished manuscript (1932), in the possession of Carl H. Duncan, Tavares, Florida; Elizabeth M. Venable, *William Adam Hocker (1844-1918) Justice of the Supreme Court of Florida* (Jacksonville, 1941), 18-21.
2. S. C. Reed, *A Picnic in Florida and Glimpses at the Orange Land* (Philadelphia, 1884), 7-32, TPDP, See the entreaty on the title page, "If You Seek Health or Wealth, Read This Book."

citrus boom was short-lived. The depression of 1893-1894 sharply reduced citrus prices, and this downtrend was followed by a catastrophic freeze. On the evening of February 8, 1895, temperatures plummeted, and with them fell the fortunes of the Florida citrus industry. The freeze was so severe that the orange crop was not only ruined but almost all of the state's citrus groves were destroyed.

Nearly all the residents of central Florida were adversely affected by the freeze. Growers lacked a crop to market, railroad and steamship companies lost their freight customers, laborers faced sharply reduced wages and unemployment, and many storekeepers, serving fewer customers, were threatened with bankruptcy. Not surprisingly, the destruction of the citrus industry precipitated a massive exodus of settlers in the mid-1890s. In fact, the collapse of the economy was so devastating and unexpected that some people left without packing all of their possessions. According to Nellie King Wright, an early settler of this period, "The Hanner place [was] one of the nice homes in Bloomfield [and even it] was left fully furnished when the owners went back to where they were from."³

The demise of the citrus industry marked the end of an era in the economic history of central Florida. Some families moved to Jacksonville, Tampa, and south Florida; others returned to Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. The settlers who remained in the area merely struggled to survive. Some citrus men replanted their orange groves, but this option was limited to the few growers who could afford to wait several years until the trees produced marketable fruit. Many farmers shifted to vegetable crops which subsequently diversified the agricultural base of Florida's economy. Emma Gaylord, in her autobiography, notes this development: "The blessing part of the freeze was that up to that time people had been depending on their orange groves for their income. They couldn't live on nothing for four or five years that it would take the groves to recover so they turned to raising vegetables. That was the beginning of our great truck gardening industry. Up till that time there had been no market for any surplus, so farmers only raised enough for their own use.

3. Nellie King Wright, "Narrative of Bloomfield in the 1890s," unpublished manuscript (1969), 3, Nellie King Wright papers, private collection in the possession of Pat Fowler, Yalaha, Florida.

But settlers were coming in like a flood, and markets were further expanded by the invention of refrigerated [railroad] cars in which fresh fruits and vegetables could be shipped as far as New York and Chicago."⁴

The freeze was responsible also for the emergence of the decorative fern industry. The cultivation of ornamental fern became the dominant industry of Yalaha, Florida, and in the period 1900 to 1930, it expanded throughout most of central Florida.⁵ In the process, the industry injected new life into the area's economy as well as the northern wholesale foliage market. Today, the decorative fern industry includes potted and fresh-cut foliage that is sold throughout the United States, Canada, and western Europe.

Asparagus Plumosus Nanus grows wild in many parts of central Florida, although it is not indigenous to the area. It was originally introduced by Cornelia Polk Drake in 1894. Daughter of a former governor and United States senator of Missouri, and niece of President James K. Polk, Cornelia married a former Confederate officer, James Elias Drake of Selma, Alabama, in 1870.⁶ The following year, Major Drake visited his sister, Mrs. Louise Phares, in Yalaha. Her husband, Captain Andrew Jackson Phares, had established a steamship company there, on the south shore of Lake Harris in what is now Lake County.⁷ Three years later, Drake and his family left St. Louis for Florida. They had purchased the Harris homestead adjacent to the Phares property. Drake planted a large citrus grove on the bluff, Drake Point, that still bears his name. In 1875, he founded the St. Johns, Lake Eustis, and Gulf Railroad Company, the first railroad built in south Florida.⁸ The establishment of a dependable transportation

4. Gaylord, *Life in Florida*, 45.

5. Robert D. Manning, "The Interaction of Race, Class, and Nationality: A Comparative Study of Mexican-American and Afro-American Labor Migration to Central Florida (1842-1981)" (master's thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1981), 134-41.

6. Mrs. Trusten P. Drake, Sr., "Life History of Trusten Polk Drake, Sr.," May 22, 1929, 1; Trusten P. Drake, Jr., "Drake Family," unpublished manuscript History of the Polk and Drake Families, 1175-1457 (1957), 87, TPDP.

7. Yalaha is approximately fifteen miles southwest of Leesburg. For a history of this pioneer community, see Manning, "Race, Class, and Nationality," 108-33.

8. Drake, "Drake Family," 87; Drake, "Drake Point," 2-3; D. B. McKay, *Pioneer Florida: Personal and Family Records*, 3 vols. (Tampa, 1959), III, 508-10; for an account of the settlement of Major Drake and Captain Phares in Yalaha, see Dromgoole, *Three Little Crackers*, 1-43.

system and the profitable cultivation of oranges stimulated the growth of the community. By the late 1880s, Yalaha had become an important transportation and distribution center for settlements as far south as Lakeland.⁹

After Major Drake's death, Cornelia was left with the responsibility of raising her four sons and supervising the construction of their elegant home. The Drake mansion was initially built in St. Louis, and was transported in sections to Yalaha, where it was erected on Drake Point in 1885. It was reputedly one of the most luxurious residences in central Florida. In 1888, Cornelia married John Kennard of St. Louis, Missouri, and they continued the development of the Point.¹⁰

Cornelia was enraptured with exotic flora, and in the late 1880s she hired John James, an English horticulturalist, to manage her orange groves and landscape her estate. James was a talented florist, and he established for himself a successful retail business of potted plants and ferns.¹¹ In 1894, Cornelia commissioned the construction of a large, slat greenhouse on the east side of her house, and "Mr. James helped . . . select plants for her conservatory."¹² Cornelia provided James with a lavish budget to acquire a wide variety of plants and ferns, including several *Asparagus Plumosus Nanus* ferns. These plants were purchased from Henry A. Dreer of Philadelphia, who had grown them from seeds imported from Italy.¹³ Cornelia permitted James to take cuttings and seeds from her plants, including her prized *Asparagus* ferns.

There is little doubt that Cornelia was the first cultivator of *Asparagus* fern in Florida, but there is the question of who was the first commercial grower: her foreman, John James, or her second son, Trusten Polk Drake, Sr. This dispute was sparked by the publication of a paper attributing this honor to James. The unsigned article was written by Dr. W. E. Whitt, son-in-law of

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9. Manning, "Race, Class, and Nationality," 121-23.
 10. R. Fennwick Taylor to Cornelia D. Kennard, December 24, 1889, TPDP; Drake, "Drake Family," 77; Drake, "Drake Point," 4.
 11. Manuscript returns of the Twelfth U. S. Census, 1900, Schedule 1, Population, Lake County, Florida, microfilm roll 172, 287; W. E. Whitt, "Pioneer in Plumosus," *The Florists' Review*, XXXVII (September 6, 1928), 37.
 12. Trusten P. Drake, Jr., to Roy Patience, August 29, 1939, TPDP.
 13. Whitt, "Pioneer in Plumosus," 37; "The Fern Industry of Lake County," in William T. Kennedy, ed., *The History of Lake County, Florida* (St. Augustine, 1929), 127.

John James.¹⁴ In a subsequent presentation to the Florida State Florists' Association, Whitt stated that, "My wife's father was the man who started and introduced this [Asparagus] industry to Florida." This article includes several inaccuracies, most notably, the assertion that "Mr. James . . . [was] shipping [Asparagus] seeds to the northern markets . . . about the year 1893."¹⁵ Asparagus seedlings mature in one year, but they require at least two years before they can produce seeds. Hence, James would have had to begin growing ferns in the late 1880s in order to be able to market such a large volume of seed. This is impossible, however, since this date precedes the construction of the Drake conservatory and the purchase of the first Asparagus plants.

The debate even continued after Drake's death in 1928. This is revealed in the correspondence of Trusten Drake, Jr., who managed Drake Point Greenhouses until 1933. Roy Patience, the largest Asparagus grower in central Florida wrote, "The Southern Florist has asked me to write an article about the Plumosus industry since it started in Florida. If I remember correctly, your father was the first grower of Plumosus in this State." Drake replied: "Dr. W. E. Whitt's Early History is a very good paper; however, I feel confident that he has made an unintentional error in stating that Mr. John James was the first man in the state to grow and market the sprays and seed of Asparagus plumosus nanus."¹⁶ Drake referred to a note written by his father: "My Mother's Conservatory contained six large Asp. p. n. plants. I shipped the first Commercial sprays from these plants. . . . When Mr. James and I saw the Commercial possibilities of these plants I sent off for several hundred more plants and planted them under slatted Shed."¹⁷

After examining his father's papers, Drake stated: "Six small Asparagus plumosus nanus plants [were] put in [1894]. These were seeded in 1896 and planted out by Mr. James. My grandmother died in 1895 and my father took charge of her interests that year. . . . I am informed that he shipped these [Asparagus

14. Whitt, "Pioneer in Plumosus," 37.

15. W. E. Whitt, "Early History of Asparagus Plumosus Nanus Industry in Florida," unpublished manuscript (1928), 2, TPDP.

16. Patience to Drake, August 12, 1939; Drake to Patience, August 29, 1939, TPDP.

17. Drake to Patience, August 29, 1939, TPDP; the note, untitled, is also in TPDP.

sprays] in 1896, and purchased the several hundred more plants the same year and planted them in an old shed that my grandmother had pineapples in which were killed in the freeze of 1894-95.¹⁸ Significantly, Trusten, Sr., mentioned that he "began" his Asparagus business in this period.¹⁹

Drake and James became partners, but this relationship was short-lived. Drake bought James's share, and each man established his own company: Trusten founded Drake Point Greenhouses and James, Yalaha Conservatories.²⁰ Unfortunately James lacked the capital to expand his one-quarter-acre slat shed. The commercial cultivation of Asparagus is impossible without some form of shade to protect it from direct sunlight.

In 1901 or 1902, James persuaded an old friend, M. E. Gillett, to join him in a partnership. By this time, however, Drake had increased his acreage of Asparagus and was shipping fresh-cut fern to customers in Philadelphia and New York.²¹ Therefore, James may have been the first grower in Florida to market Asparagus seed but Drake was the first to grow it under slat shade and ship fresh-cut sprays to northern wholesale florists. Consequently, Trusten P. Drake, Jr., dedicated his "PERSONAL NOTE BOOK AND GUIDE" to, "his beloved father . . . the first man to realize the possibility of raising on a commercial scale Asparagus plumosus nanus out of doors in Florida."²²

Trusten Drake, Sr., and John James were the first commercial growers of Asparagus Plumosus fern in Florida, and over the next two decades the other commercial growers— northern greenhouses— were effectively eliminated.²³ Their new method of growing Asparagus outdoors was observed with interest by northern wholesale florists who began planning their own ferneries in Florida. In 1900, the S. S. Pennock Wholesale Florist Company of Philadelphia constructed an Asparagus slat shed near Jupiter. The A. N. Pierson Company of Cromwell, Connecticut, es-

18. Ibid.

19. *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Convention of the Florida State Florists' Association*, 1926 and 1927 (DeLand, 1928), November 16-17, 1926, 170 (hereinafter *FSFA Proceedings*).

20. Whitt, "Pioneer in Plumosus," 37; Drake, "Life History," 1.

21. Whitt, "Pioneer in Plumosus," 37; Drake, "Drake Point," 5.

22. Trusten P. Drake, Jr., "PERSONAL NOTEBOOK AND GUIDE: Asparagus Plumosus Nanus and its Allied Decoratives," unpublished manuscript, n.d., 1, TPDP.

23. W. H. Schultz, Jr., "Asparagus Grower's Problems," *FSFA Proceedings*, May 5, 1922 (DeLand, 1923), 57.

established ferneries in the Pierson area of Volusia County. By 1902, the boom was on. Fern sheds were built in nearby Leesburg and Tavares and soon spread to Altamonte Springs, Fern Park, Maitland, and Auburndale in Polk County. The Florida Asparagus industry grew at a phenomenal rate, from a handful of small growers at the turn of the century to approximately 100 producers in 1921, cultivating "well over 300 acres."²⁴ The vast majority of these Asparagus sheds were small— from one-half to four acres— and they were distributed throughout the state: Altamonte Springs, Apopka, Auburndale, Barbersville, Boynton, Bradenton, DeLand, Jupiter, Leesburg, New Port Richey, Orlando, Pierson, St. Augustine, Tampa, Tavares, Waldo, West Palm Beach, and Yalaha.

In 1922, twenty-six per cent of the Florida State Florists' Association members who specialized in *Asparagus Plumosus* fern were located in Yalaha.²⁵ This is not unexpected since the industry began in Yalaha and its location on the southern shore of Lake Harris protected the fern from winter frosts. As a result, Yalaha quickly established a reputation for dependable shipments during the winter as well as recognition for the superior quality of its fern. In fact, *Asparagus* from Yalaha continues to be the most desired decorative fern in the international foilage market.²⁶

In the early 1920s, approximately one-sixth of all *Asparagus* ferneries in Florida were located in Yalaha. Due to several large producers, Yalaha possessed an even larger share of the national market. These growers, however, exercised little influence on the statewide development of the industry; the Yalaha operators, as a group, were unable to coordinate their own production and marketing decisions. Consequently, the expansion of fern nurseries across the state and the lack of leadership from the Yalaha growers, precipitated a shift in the locus of power of the industry: from its origin— Yalaha— to the area around Pierson and DeLand.

24. Fifty-seven per cent of the *Asparagus* growers in Yalaha (eight of fourteen) are listed in the membership directory of the FSFA in 1922. This proportion is consistent with the fifty-three per cent figure of 1926. Therefore, the estimate assumes that the total number of *Asparagus* growers was about twice the number of fern growers (fifty-five) who belonged to the FSFA.

25. *FSFA Proceedings*, 1922, 3-11.

26. Interview with Diane Farley, Okahumpka, Florida, January 1980.

The Asparagus industry attracted both old and new residents of Yalaha. Early pioneers such as Sandy McEaddy, George Pantley, Rebecca Price, and James and William Morris of nearby Okahumpka entered the decorative fern business. Trusten Drake, Jr., managed the company until he sold it to Herbert Hunter in 1933. John James died in 1906, and his wife successfully operated the firm until her death in 1917. Her two daughters, Mae Morris and Daisey Whitt, then jointly managed the Yalaha Conservatories; their three brothers, Roland, Stanley, and Raymond, sold their shares of the business and constructed their own ferneries. Several newcomers from outside Florida also joined the green "gold rush," including Robert and Andrew Crabb, Bill Hall, Lou Shallar, Ben Snyder, George Webster, and Dr. W. E. Whitt.²⁷

The rapid growth of the Asparagus industry challenged the economic supremacy of citrus in many other areas of Florida. In Yalaha, for the first time, the construction of fern sheds in the early 1920s took priority over the expansion of the orange groves. This was due to the availability of cheap labor— \$1.00 to \$1.50 per day— and the high prices of Asparagus. Drake, who initially packed his fern in "six-band" orange boxes, received \$17.00 per 360 sprays or from \$2.50 to \$3.00 per bunch of fern in the 1910s. These prices varied according to market conditions, which progressively deteriorated in the 1920s, and the quality of the Asparagus fern. Rebecca Price recalled that she received the high price of \$39.00 for a single box, probably a twelve-bunch case, of Asparagus fern in 1916.²⁸

William Morris estimated that it cost \$1,000 to set out one acre of Asparagus seedlings and to build a slat shed over them in the 1920s. This figure excludes the price of land. Morris noted that the annual profit of a well-managed Asparagus fernery was about \$1,000 per acre. John Tischnor, a small grower in this period, claimed that "a man could make a good livin' off two acres of Asparagus and two acres of temples [oranges]." Martha Shallar, proprietor of one of the largest ferneries in Yalaha, agreed

27. Interviews with Herbert Hunter, July 1980; Robert J. Manning, August 1980; William Morris, January 1980; Martha Shallar, July 1980; Jack Whitt, January 1980, Yalaha, Florida. The taped recordings of all oral history interviews cited are in the possession of the author.

28. Drake to Patience, August 29, 1939; interview with Rebecca Price, January 1981, Yalaha, Florida.

that "fern was a very profitable business then [and that] . . . Yalaha had the best reputation [in the nation] for Asparagus."²⁹

By the late 1920s, oversupply and stabilizing demand was discouraging further expansion of Asparagus ferneries. Many growers blamed the depression of the 1930s for their economic woes, but, in actuality, the economic crisis merely exacerbated pre-existing market trends. Frank Durand constructed a fernery in 1937, and over forty years passed before another Asparagus shed was built in Yalaha.

By 1930, not only had the expansion of the industry subsided, but its market structure had also crystallized. In the period 1900 to 1930, the number of producers in Yalaha increased from two to twenty-one. The rapid growth of fern enterprises underscores the enormous expansion of production. The total acreage of Asparagus in Yalaha increased nearly twenty-fold in this period; there were between 200 and 240 acres of Asparagus ferneries in 1930.³⁰

The proliferation of ferneries before 1930 illustrates a fundamental weakness of the industry: the inability to regulate production. In 1926, 102 of the 192 known Asparagus growers were affiliated with the Florida State Florists' Association. Although this is nearly double the number of growers in 1922, it understates the rate of growth of the fern industry. Estimates in 1927 ranged from 850 to 2,000 acres, although 1,200 acres is probably more accurate. The Pierson area of Volusia County, by itself, had over 400 acres of Asparagus fern in 1926.³¹ The rapid growth of the industry continued through the end of the decade. In 1930, the Florida Plumosus Co-operative Association boasted a membership of over 300 growers.³² The available information is incomplete, but probably less than one-half of the Asparagus producers were members of this organization.

The diffuse production structure of the industry and the personal nature of business transactions (fern grower to wholesale florist), hindered the organization of the decorative fern

29. Interviews with William Morris; Shallar; John Tischnor, June 1981, Yalaha, Florida.

30. Manning, "Race, Class, and Nationality," 145.

31. *FSFA Proceedings*, 1926, 15; 1927, 60, 164.

32. W. H. Schultz, Jr., to George H. Pantley, Jr., April 1, 1930, George H. Pantley papers, private collection in the possession of the author (hereinafter GHPP).

growers. Admittedly; many Asparagus operators joined marketing cooperatives during the Great Depression. As soon as economic conditions improved, however, organizational discipline deteriorated, and competition between individual growers again prevailed. As a result, the failure to establish a statewide growers confederation, with the authority to enforce production quotas and quality standards, ensured the doom of the Asparagus industry.

George H. Pantley, Jr., is typical of the small farmer who entered the Asparagus industry. His father, an early settler of Yalaha, had migrated from Pennsylvania in 1876. George, Jr., was born seven years later, and he worked in the family's general store on Lake Harris. In the early 1910s, he became a vegetable grower, and then he entered the more lucrative business of producing decorative fern.³³

In 1920, Pantley began building a fernery next to his home, the Graffius house, on Bloomfield Avenue. Pantley's first fern shed was completed the following year, and he then installed an iron-pipe irrigation system. Asparagus seedlings mature in one year, thus Pantley was a bona fide Asparagus grower when he attended the first convention of the Florida State Florists' Association in 1922.

Pantley's ease in entering the fern business underlies the concern of the Asparagus industry in this period. During the convention of 1922, the main topic was the market: "The marketing of the constantly increasing supply of plumosus is the big problem that all growers must meet. That the market of plumosus has quite definite limitations does not seem to be realized by some of the newer growers . . . it is well to look ahead so as to know how to prepare with a situation of oversupply which is inevitable under the present rate of increase in production."³⁴

The formation of a statewide marketing organization was frequently discussed during the convention. This view, however, was only a minority opinion; most growers opposed any form of cooperative marketing. As a result, a compromise was reached whereby the Florists' Association created an independent wing

33. "Yalaha," in Kennedy, ed., *History of Lake County*, 47; entries in "Working Mens' Time Book," December 1913 to November 1915, 3-11, GHPP.

34. Schultz, "Asparagus Grower's Problems," 57-58.

to organize and represent the interests of the Asparagus growers: "Now that we have a Vice-President that represents the Plumosus industry . . . we can get in closer touch with Asparagus growers of this State and get them organized. Every Asparagus grower in the State ought to be a member of this Association." The importance of the industry was reflected in the status accorded its representative: second vice-president.³⁵

In 1924, the Florists' Association was still the only organization in the state representing the Asparagus growers. It continued to promote educational advertising, and it addressed production problems, such as worm infestations. The primary concern of the association, however, was still marketing, "It is not advisable to wait until the supply of Plumosus is greater than the demand . . . before we make an effort to increase this demand." As a result, members were assessed \$5.00 per acre of Asparagus in order to finance future advertising campaigns.³⁶ A. E. Cline, second vice-president of the association, explained the purpose of the program in 1926: "The time to show Northern Florists how to use more Asparagus Ferns in their work is when business is good . . . in this way we are providing against any over production on our part by increasing the consumption by the ultimate consumer."³⁷

The production of Asparagus increased enormously in the 1920s. In 1926, over 75,000,000 sprays of fern were shipped from Florida.³⁸ The leaders of the Florists' Association realized that the Asparagus market could not withstand this enormous influx of fern without adversely affecting prices. Not surprisingly, efforts to organize the Asparagus industry were renewed in 1927: "The only hope for changing this [poor market] is a Florida selling organization . . . cooperation is the word in the business world today, and it is time that we growers of Asparagus Plumosus climbed on the band wagon."³⁹ Robert Davey, an attorney from Sanford, drafted a proposal to organize the fern growers in 1927. He argued, "Who can measure the distance between . . . blind and ruinous competition and intelligent and mutually helpful cooperation. In every part of the country and in practically every

35. *Ibid.*, 60; C. Lesley Whipp to Pantley, September 9, 1922, GHPP.

36. Schultz to Pantley, October 28, 1924, GHPP.

37. A. E. Cline to Pantley, January 15, 1926, GHPP.

38. *FSFA Proceedings*, 1926,174.

39. *Ibid.*, 1927, 16.

line of business. . . . COOPERATION is the policy of our progressive business leaders. . . . Agriculture cannot afford to remain unorganized in this age of large-scale business organization." The proposed Asparagus cooperative, the Southern Fern Associates Inc., was designed "to Stabilize the Fern Business [by] securing a market and safeguarding the financial interest of the grower [by] . . . finding new markets for ferns and procuring a wider use of them through its agents and by considering advertising."⁴⁰

The foresight of the association's leaders was not shared by the majority of fern operators. Individual growers were reluctant to curtail their shipments when they were inundated with requests for Asparagus. This decision was reinforced by the decline of the fern market in the 1920s. Retail prices remained stable, \$1.25 to \$1.50 per bunch, until 1925 when prices fell to seventy-five cents. The Asparagus market rebounded in 1926, reaching \$1.25 per bunch, but by the end of the decade it had plummeted to forty cents per bunch.⁴¹ Thus, as late as 1926, there was little evidence of the impending collapse of the Asparagus market.

Most small growers, which comprised the largest sector of the industry, remained opposed to cooperative marketing programs even in the late 1920s. As Cline noted, "One of the hardest propositions we have is to get our growers to work together. The little fellow with the one-half acre cannot see why he should spend five dollars for advertising when he can ship and get something anyway . . . many are still in the 'Dark Ages' and afraid of the other fellow."⁴² This situation was particularly frustrating for the large Asparagus growers who watched their market shares and profit margins decline.

In Yalaha, the Asparagus growers refused to support cooperative marketing programs. Trusten Drake, Sr., discussed a large grower who would not join an advertising campaign: "I asked him why not, and he said, 'No benefit for me.' I said, 'In other words, I am paying for the benefits you received.' He granted he would receive it indirectly, but would not come in." The individualism of the Yalaha operators is poignantly illustrated by a proposed membership campaign. G. E. Winter of Leesburg, who

40. *Ibid.*, 53-56.

41. Business account records of George Pantley, Jr., Ferneries, florist payment receipts, 1923-1930, GHPP. For fern prices of each year, see Manning, "Race, Class, and Nationality," 302-07.

42. *FSFA Proceedings*, 1927, 80.

volunteered to recruit local growers, explained that, "There are some very funny folks in Yalaha, especially among the fern growers . . . some of those fellows will get you with a shot gun—O, no, I don't go to Yalaha."⁴³

Northern wholesale florists encouraged the disorganized state of the industry by fostering competition among individual firms. This was accomplished by soliciting fern directly from the growers. The distrust among the Asparagus operators became so acute that most refused to identify bad customers. Ultimately, this policy of systematically soliciting shipments of fern from individual growers undermined the association's efforts to regulate Asparagus prices.

The leaders of the association recognized the ramifications of the solicitation strategy: "We lose in two different ways; if a florist or commission house fails to pay for your greens, you are out dollars and cents. It also enables [them] that . . . got the greens for nothing to pull down the market of his competitors, who are trying to pay you fair prices."⁴⁴ In order to protect its members, the association required potential customers to register before allowing them to contact member growers. This program was administered through a series of credit lists. Cline emphasized the importance of this policy: "It is fully time that we have another credit list issued to protect our shipments, especially as there is a good demand for Asparagus Ferns and some firms are wiring or writing all the growers to 'please ship us as market is good.'" The long-term success of the credit exchange list depended upon the voluntary cooperation of the individual Asparagus growers. In 1926, however, only forty of the 190 participants in the program reported a total of fifty-four delinquent accounts.⁴⁵

Pantley's correspondence is instructive. Although a small producer (two or three acres) by Yalaha standards, he constantly received requests for Asparagus.⁴⁶ Wholesale and retail florists from Boston, Chicago, Junction City, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Princeton, Rochester, St. Louis, and Toledo personally wrote him for shipments of fern. For instance, John J. Coan of J. H. Coan, Inc. of New York City, explained, "We are in need

43. *Ibid.*, 162-64.

44. *Ibid.*, 1926, 160.

45. *Ibid.*, 162; Cline to Pantley, January 14, 1926, GHPP.

46. For a description of the size of the Asparagus firms in Yalaha, see Manning, "Race, Class, and Nationality," 301.

of more good Asparagus. . . . We would thank you to let us handle your [fern] We are sure we can please you both in price and service. . . . Thanking you for a shipment which will receive my personal attention."⁴⁷

These sentiments were echoed by a geographically diverse group of florists. A. L. Randall, president of the A. L. Randall Company of Chicago, stated, "We can use three to five cases per day, on consignment, if you care to make shipment." George E. Boucher of George T. Boucher Flowers of Rochester requested, "Kindly book my order for one dozen bunches of asparagus." Boston's John Jansky of J. Jansky & Sons pleaded, "Will you please let me know if you have any good Plumosus. If you have, please send me one case for sample." Wild Flowers of Chicago asked, "Would you ship us two large cases immediately upon receipt of this letter." William's Flower Mart of Newark explained, "We are in a position to handle large shipments of your Asparagus Ferns every day to good advantage. . . . Trusting that you favor us with a trial shipment . . . we are the largest handlers of Asparagus Ferns throughout the State." Pittsburgh's Duquesne Cut Flower Exchange succinctly summarized these letters, "We are in the position to handle your plumosus on consignment."⁴⁸

In the late 1920s, the greatest fear of the Asparagus industry became a reality, the unrestrained growth of production precipitated a sharp decline in fern prices. Between 1926 and 1928, Asparagus fell eighty per cent, from \$1.25 to twenty-five cents per bunch.⁴⁹ Falling prices were compounded by seasonal fluctuations in demand which increased competition between fern growers and often resulted in price wars. W. H. Bretall, a new customer, sought to allay Pantley's concerns, "During the summer my shipments are naturally cut down, but I try to give each shipper some orders, and at the same prices quoted for the summer season as well as the rest of the year."⁵⁰

47. John J. Coan to Pantley, September 29, 1924, GHPP.

48. A. L. Randall to Pantley, December 11, 1922; George E. Boucher to Pantley, December 12, 1924; John Jansky to Pantley, August 10, 1925; Dorothy D. Mason to Pantley, January 11, 1927; William's Flower Market to Pantley, December 8, 1928; Duquesne Cut Flower Exchange to Pantley, February 17, 1931, GHPP.

49. Records of Pantley Ferneries, receipts, 1926-1928.

50. W. H. Bretall to Pantley, January 4, 1936, GHPP.

Asparagus growers confronted an exaggerated demand for their product. Northern florists ordered, on consignment, more fern than they needed, and they purchased only the fern that was actually sold. The impact of this purchasing policy was especially acute during holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day, and Passover. Wholesale florists stockpiled fern before each holiday and sold as much as they could at inflated prices. After the peak demand passed, the florists sold their remaining stocks at a fraction of the holiday price. In 1926, after a dispute over this practice, Pantley stopped shipping to one of his oldest customers. N. L. Parker, vice-president of A. T. Pyfer & Company, responded, "We notice the reason you stopped shipping was on account of not being entirely satisfied with returns we gave you on shipments you sent Easter week . . . the week ending April 3 . . . five cases sold for \$125.50 [fifty cents per bunch] . . . for the week ending April 10 five and a half cases sold for \$27.75 [ten cents per bunch] which was odds and ends that were left over from stock received the previous week, therefore sold at a lower price."⁵¹

By the end of 1928, Yalaha and the rest of the Florida Asparagus industry was experiencing its first crisis. "At the present time, were it not for the enemies [spiders, worms, and frost] to the ferns, the industry would be in a deplorable state from overproduction as there is no cooperative association among the fern growers, all shipping is done individually . . . if the bunches begin to shed the consignment, or that part that remains unsold, is dumped the shipper stands the entire cost of shipping, packing, etc."⁵² Hence, the Asparagus growers faced declining profits in the late 1920s: lower retail prices due to excess production and higher costs due to producing and delivering unsold fern.

The decorative fern market continued to deteriorate in the early 1930s. In 1933, Asparagus prices fell to ten cents per bunch.⁵³ Many firms, especially those that were founded in the late 1920s, withdrew from the industry. Some growers sold or leased their ferneries, whereas others cleared their land and planted new crops. In Yalaha, only a few firms went out of business in the mid-1930s.

51. N. L. Parker to Pantley, January 24, 1927, GHPP.

52. "Fern Industry of Lake County," 128.

53. Records of Pantley Ferneries, receipts, 1933.

The majority decided to "ride out the storm" in anticipation of the market's recovery. In this period, however, several growers sought to reduce their dependence on Asparagus by experimenting with new products. Trusten Drake and William Morris, for example, produced "pickled" or preserved fern for domestic and international markets. George Pantley augmented his Asparagus sales with leatherleaf fern, while other growers, such as the Crabbs, Hunter, James, and Whitt, expanded their citrus groves.⁵⁴

Product diversification was not the only option available to the decorative fern industry. Many growers attempted to stabilize the market by forming local and statewide marketing associations. For instance, six growers formed the Yalaha Plumosa Organization in 1930 or 1931. The member firms were Yalaha Fern Growers, Inc., Yalaha Nurseries (John Morris), Decorative Foliage Co. (William Morris), J. E. Morris Co. (James Morris), Florida Florists Supply Co., and Lakeside Greenhouses (Raymond James).⁵⁵ This organization, from its inception, was established to overcome the economic dislocations of the Great Depression. Indeed, its objectives were only two-fold: acquiring new customers for members of the cooperative, and minimizing price competition among co-op members. Therefore, the purpose of the organization was to stabilize prices until economic normalcy returned.

It is significant that the Yalaha Plumosa Organization was comprised exclusively of medium and large producers; the cooperative provided the large firms with a mechanism to protect their shares of the market from future competition. In fact, the absence of small firms suggests that these growers distrusted the goals of the organization. Most likely, the small firms feared that the cooperative would restrict their future growth by maintaining the favorable market position of the large growers.

The Yalaha Plumosa Organization achieved only limited success during its four-year existence. The main impediment to its cooperative policies was the blind self-interest of its members. Initially, the Great Depression reduced the resistance of the growers to cooperative programs. The Asparagus operators became unmanageable, however, when the market exhibited signs of recovery. In 1934, with prices at forty cents per bunch, the

54. Interviews with Hunter; Robert Morris, January 1980; Kathrine Crabb Warner, January 1980, Yalaha, Florida; H. Niessen to Pantley, March 31, 1930; H. A. Dale to Pantley, January 22, 1934; GHPP.

55. Interview with William Morris.

organization dissolved, and its experiment with cooperative marketing ended.

The failure of the Yalaha Plumosa Organization illustrates a major weakness of the industry— the lack of strong, capable leaders. Although the industry was founded in Yalaha, these early growers relinquished the responsibility of organizing it. Admittedly, not all of the Yalaha growers absolved themselves from this important task. Trusten Drake, Sr., for example, actively supported a proposed statewide growers association. Roland James, son of John James, became vice-president of the Florida Growers Cooperative Association in 1933.⁵⁶ In fact, almost one-half of the Yalaha operators belonged to the Florists' Association in the 1920s. These growers, however, rarely participated in important policy-making bodies. The resulting leadership void was filled by growers from Apopka, Auburndale, Altamonte Springs, DeLand, Jacksonville, Jupiter, and Pierson. Therefore, it is not surprising that Pantley joined the statewide marketing association in DeLand instead of the local cooperative in Yalaha.

In 1929, W. H. Schultz, Jr., former vice-president of the Florists' Association, formed the Florida Plumosus Growers Cooperative Association in DeLand.⁵⁷ At the time, Asparagus was forty cents per bunch, about one-third of the prices in 1926. This was an improvement over the twenty-five cents per bunch of the preceding year, but even so, the future of the Asparagus market appeared bleak. The supply of Asparagus was still increasing, due to the maturation of previously planted seedlings, and its demand was declining with the onset of the Great Depression.

The objectives of the Co-operative were basically two-fold: increase demand through lobbying and advertising, and reduce supply through strict quality standards and rigid production quotas. Hence, Schultz realized that laissez-faire policies could not be successfully implemented in the twentieth century. In fact, this is a recurrent theme of his newsletters: "Please let us try to regulate the supply of Plumosus."⁵⁸

The Florida Plumosus Growers Co-operative Association, in comparison to the Yalaha Plumosa Organization, was more than

56. A. L. Lewis to Pantley, April 6, 1933, GHPP.

57. Schultz to Pantley, January 15, 1930; Florida Plumosus Growers Co-operative Association Membership Contract (hereinafter FPGCA), GHPP.

58. Schultz to Pantley, January 15, 1930, GHPP.

a conduit for distributing new customers among its members. Indeed, it strove to regulate the quantity and price of Asparagus that entered the northern markets as well as stimulate demand through advertising campaigns. The operation of the co-operative was financed by taxing individual members. Each Asparagus operator was assessed forty dollars per acre, leased or owned, and ten cents per box of fern that was shipped to non co-op accounts.

The collective marketing of Asparagus is detailed in the Membership and Marketing Agreement; "The association agrees to provide means and facilities for handling, sorting, grading, packing, transporting and marketing the plumosus of its members. The association may pool members' products with products of like grade and variety . . . and pay over to the member the full resale price received for the plumosus so delivered, less the cost of operating the association." Those growers who failed to deliver their contracted quantities of fern faced a court injunction and a \$2.00 fine per 1,000 sprays of undelivered fern.⁵⁹

The co-operative successfully obtained new business, at the wholesale level, but it could not reverse the downward spiral of fern prices. Only adverse weather, which reduced the supply of fern, positively affected the market. Schultz repeatedly expressed his concern over this situation: "I think that the marketing problem before us growers is getting to be a real serious one. . . . Shipping is very much less than half of normal [due to a severe freeze] but in spite of this . . . shipments are meeting all requirements. Market prices have gone up a little, [but] only a shipment here and there bringing what it should."⁶⁰

Asparagus prices continued to fall in the spring of 1930, and growers began to panic. Many operators, in an attempt to generate revenue, increased their shipments. Not unexpectedly, the market became overwhelmed with unsolicited fern. This forced prices down even lower: "Any attempt to give Asparagus to the markets faster than it can be consumed is just throwing that much away. All of our customers are reporting to us shipments that they are receiving from growers without orders." Even some co-op members ignored their moral and contractual obligations by shipping unrequested fern. Schultz remorsefully acknowledged this situation, "I regret that some of our own growers are still continuing this

59. FPGCA, "Membership and Marketing Agreement," 1930, 1, GHPP.

60. Schultz to Pantley, January 15, 1930, GHPP.

practice in violation of their contracts." His report concluded with the plea, "Please give us a fair chance to build up some good markets for you instead of breaking them down."⁶¹

Schultz's appeal fell upon deaf ears. The production structure of the Asparagus fern industry was too diffuse to implement effectively cooperative marketing policies. Asparagus growers continued to flood the market, and it finally collapsed in 1932. In fact, the period 1932 to 1933 constitutes the nadir of the Florida Asparagus industry. The retail price fell from forty cents to ten cents per bunch between 1930 and 1933, while net returns dropped from thirty to five cents per bunch.⁶² Thus, when Albert Futterman requested a shipment of fern in 1933, Pantley did not reply even though he was assured "top market prices."⁶³

The national economy began improving in the mid-1930s, and the Asparagus market was not an exception to this trend. Wholesale florists once again solicited fern from Florida growers. The inquiry of New Jersey's Wilkin's Florist Supply is typical of this correspondence: "So kindly let me know if you can supply me with four (4) cases of asparagus immediately." B. S. Slinn, president of Slinn Co., Inc., and Pantley's oldest customer, affirmed the optimism of this period when he stated: "Asparagus Fern is selling for a good price now. . . . Can handle any amount of good stock. Will give you prompt returns and top market price."⁶⁴

In late 1934, Pantley was confident that economic prosperity was returning and, as a result, he did not renew his membership with the co-operative. This decision was based on the belief that the Asparagus market had recovered and his personal dissatisfaction with co-operative organizations. Pantley's sentiments were not unusual for the period, and they reflected the prevailing attitudes of most Asparagus growers.

In the 1930s, several events transformed the character of the Asparagus fern market. These include the enormous growth of

61. *Ibid.*, April 1, 1930, GHPP.

62. Records of Pantley Ferneries, receipts, 1930-1933, GHPP. For the computation of gross and net figures, see Manning, "Race, Class, and Nationality," 164.

63. Albert Futterman to Pantley, September 25, 1933, GHPP.

64. Wilkins Florist Supply to Pantley, December 2, 1933; B. S. Slinn to Pantley, November 30, 1934, GHPP.

fern production, the introduction of west coast foliage such as huckleberry, and the dramatic increase in the cost of labor. The cumulative effect of these developments was the increasing competitiveness of the decorative fern market. Pantley's correspondence once again provides an insight into this trend.

In 1934, H. A. Dale of Toledo, informed Pantley that, "Your price is too high. . . . The present price in Toledo is 1 cent a spray . . . with express added to your price they cost more than the florist can buy them here. . . . If you can furnish same for \$7.50 per thousand [sprays] you can start shipping at once. . . . This price stands market changes." Dale was an astute analyst of the market. Only one week later he reported, "[Wholesale florists] are having a war on plumosa now and today's price net wholesale is 150 sprays for \$1.00." Dale then noted, "That's nice clean competition."⁶⁵

The enormous supply of Asparagus reduced retail prices and increased quality standards. These criteria, however, were subject to the vagaries of the Florida climate. For instance, during the winter of 1935 a severe freeze resulted in a scarcity of Asparagus. According to Bretall, "My customers like Dark grass [Plumosus], and ask that they be all tips. . . . However, at times like this shortage we must all be more lenient in grading, so [I] will make due allowance for variations." Two months later, after the Asparagus industry had recovered from the freeze, Bretall remarked, "I have suddenly been SWAMPED with grass. It seems that everybody has doubled and tripled their fern shipments at once, so I have more than I can handle." The following week Bretall stressed the importance of strict quality standards: "This [inferior fern] would be all right if the shortage was still on, but ferns are now glutting the market, and competition is so keen that I must deliver the BEST quality if I am to hold the trade."⁶⁶

The Asparagus market continued to deteriorate in the late 1930s. Net returns fell below 1930 levels, and, in 1939, they even dropped below the crisis level of 1932-1933.⁶⁷ Retail demand, moreover, failed to keep up with the enormous increase in production. In 1938, Kenneth C. Meehan informed Pantley that,

65. H. A. Dale to Pantley, January 14 and 22, 1934, GHPP.

66. Bretall to Pantley, January 4, February 28, and March 3, 1936, GHPP.

67. Records of Pantley Ferneries, receipts, 1930-1939.

"Plumosa is not selling to good advantage at this writing, and we do not advise shipping us next week."⁶⁸ Alice Pantley, in a consoling letter to her husband, confirmed the poor condition of the Asparagus market, "Sorry to hear about the fern market being stocked up and not bringing in nothing." Mrs. Pantley's letter also reveals the susceptibility of the Asparagus growers to natural calamities, "Sorry to hear about your shed being blown down by the storm." George Pantley, in a moment of despair, summarized the crisis of the industry, "What is the trouble with the prices up there [in New York.]"⁶⁹

The Asparagus market passed its initial boom phase, 1896 to 1926, and thereafter it exhibited alternating cycles of expansion and contraction. By the late 1920s, Asparagus growers were subject to the vicissitudes of the larger capitalist economy; the seller's market had evolved into a buyer's market. In fact, Asparagus prices did not approach pre-Depression levels in the 1930s, reaching a high of only thirty cents per bunch at the end of the decade. In the 1940s, fern prices increased modestly, but they were offset by greater production costs, especially higher wages and new Social Security taxes. In Yalaha, labor costs rose dramatically between 1942 and 1947; the hourly wage quadrupled, from fifteen to sixty cents.⁷⁰ This was due to the mobilization of the United States armed forces, the incorporation of local workers into the national labor market, and the disruption of the one-hundred year migration of black laborers from the upper South to central Florida.⁷¹ Many growers were unable to adapt to these changes, and they sold their ferneries or were succeeded by their sons, many of whom were returning from military service. As a result, the Asparagus industry experienced a shift from first- to second-generation fern operators in the post-war period. These new growers, while more technically skilled and innovative than their predecessors, faced the imposing challenge of a fiercely competitive market and an unstable phase of southern labor relations.

68. Kenneth C. Meehan to Pantley, July 16, 1938, GHPP.

69. Alice Pantley to Pantley, March 10, 1938; Pantley to Frank Laban, November 3, 1938, GHPP.

70. Business account records of Pantley Ferneries, business expense ledgers, book V, 12-53; Manning, "Race, Class, and Nationality," 265-71.

71. Manning, "Immigration, Migration, and Black America: An Historical-Sociological Perspective," paper presented at Conference on Immigration and Black America, Racine, Wisconsin, October 24-26, 1982.