



## EARLY DAYS OF CSSA

Our librarian Noelene Tomlinson has scoured the society records, primarily the old Society journals and similar for our history. Once upon a time the journal was A5 size and called 'The Spine' or 'Spine' and smaller newsletters were called Spinette (whereas now we only have one). Noelene thought it a good idea to share some historical information and anecdotes about our early members and the early days to celebrate our 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

### **Brief summary of Mrs Theo Himmerman's article in 'The Spine' of Dec. 1979, Vol. 28, No. 1:**

MR RALPH FIELD recalled that, before the Society began, he had a collection of cacti and gave numerous plants of cacti and euphorbias to Mr Edward Prescott for lectures to his students in 1920. At that time, Charles Hodgson, Ralph Field and Edward Prescott met occasionally. In 1927 the Society was formed. It went into recess during the war years and reformed in 1947. By 1953 membership was 40, including new member Dr. Aleck Selzer.

### **'The Spine' August 1987:**

Ralph Field (1898 – July 1987) founding member and Patron of CSSA, was born in Kew, attended Auburn State School and Trinity Grammar, and moved to 'Whiora', Tennyson in 1928. Ralph was a pioneer in the importation and growing of cacti and succulents. His son Robert still lives at Tennyson. Ralph's wife Molly died on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1981.

### **In 'The Journal of the Cactus and Succulent Society of South Australia' Inc. of July 1971, Robert Field wrote:**

"A share in the Blossfeld expedition through South America in 1935 promised over 1,000 cactus plants – and so the collection grew rapidly. The bulk of these arrived here in perfect order despite the slow journey by ship, and many specimens can still be seen in the collection today at Tennyson".

### **CLARRIE BORCH gave a talk on the early days of The CSSA at the June 1979 General Meeting of the Society, printed in 'The Spine' Vol. 27 No. 4, Sep. 1979:**

"At our June General Meeting, Mr. Clarrie Borch told us about the early days of The Cactus and Succulent Society of Australia, and how much life then differed from nowadays. Clarrie joined the Society in about 1938, but the Society had been in existence since 1927, making it easily the oldest Society for Cacti and Succulents in Australia. Mr. C. Hodgson was President when Clarrie joined, and the members held their meetings at the Herbarium, as we do today (1979), and had guest speakers – but of course, very few members had cars at that time. Eventually Clarrie got a 1927 Chev, so was able to get to the meetings in great style, with many stops and starts and cranking of the engine!

Sadly, the meetings ceased in June 1941 due to the war and did not start up again until 1946, when Mr. Frank Ward was elected President and Mr. Lex Fuaux, Secretary. Unfortunately the old pre-war records of the Society were lost during the war, and if any member knows anything about the existence today of any of those old records, we could write a history of the earliest years. Any information would be greatly appreciated.

These days it is most difficult to import plants, due to stringent quarantine laws – most necessary to keep out plant diseases and pests – how different it was in the early days! Clarrie recounted how easy it was to import cacti, and at prices that the members could afford. He recounted one occasion when a friend imported two boxes of cacti, these were packed from bottom to top with perhaps a dozen species of cacti, just thrown in until the boxes were filled, there were lumps still clinging to the roots! The smaller plants Clarrie bought for 2/- (20 cents) each, and the larger, perhaps 3 inches high, were 2/6 (25 cents) per plant. In these days you just sent your order and the money, and when the plants arrived you just went down to the docks and picked them up – no quarantine, no red tape of any kind.

Clarrie was President in the years 1950–51. In those days the members started going for weekend trips to the Field's beautiful property at Tennyson – however, not by car as we do today, they went on the ordinary daily bus service that left from Wrights in Flinders Street, all met there at 8 am and spent happy hours travelling up. They stayed at the hotel up there, on Sunday morning all went to the Field's property for the day, then at night returned to the hotel again for dinner, then a social evening, the Fields came and the members saw slides and talked and had a great time. On Monday they all came home in the bus. The cost was minute, the bus fare about \$1.00 each for the whole trip, the hotel accommodation and meals about \$6.00 each.

Clarrie showed us some of the early issues of *Spine*, edited by Mr. Lex Fuaux; they contained many fine articles and photographs and the covers were quite striking and artistic. Mr. Fuaux of Hawthorn was in constant correspondence with many Australian and overseas professors, botanists and scientists, so the members were kept up to date with all the latest discoveries and scientific knowledge to help them grow their plants better and enjoy their hobby more.

Thank you Clarrie for giving us such a fascinating glimpse of life in the early days of The CSSA".

**(Editor of 'The Spine' in 1979-80 was Dr S. Marzuki.)**

Clarrie was a Judge for Society Shows.

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**'The Spine' Vol. 29 No. 2, Mar. 1981 pages 20-21 has a black and white photo of Clarrie, and says:**

"Clarrie has lived at his present address in Cheltenham since 1935 when the area was predominately rural and consisted of market gardens, and flower farms. Clarrie had a poultry farm on 3 acres there, with even a foxes' den just through the back fence. Now the area is built up and is an established residential suburb and Clarrie's residence and cacti collection are sitting on a double building block. His collection is housed in the main 40 x 20 foot glasshouse, which he skillfully built himself, some time ago. Many mature cacti and succulents are also growing outside in rockeries, built and planted in the early days of his interest in cacti.

A few of the plants to be seen are a large clump of *Cereus jamacaru*, some of which are over 20 feet high, a *Euphorbia trigona*, an extra large *Opuntia*, some agaves, and numerous other mature species of cacti both in the ground and in pots. Some of the most unexpected plants like the outdoors, Clarrie advises us and gives us an example of the *Ocotilla*; he had this plant sitting on the bench in the glasshouse for 8 years, but when it was planted outside in a garden bed it liked the outdoors so much that a burst of healthy, new growth followed, equal to the combined growth of perhaps the previous 5 years. *Espostoa*, he says, doesn't seem to mind the Melbourne winters and can also be grown outside in most instances.

Clarrie's large glasshouse contains one of the finest collections of mature plants in Melbourne, with well over 1,200 species of mature cacti and succulents, some up to 40 years old, like the *Astrophytum ornatum*s that were planted from seed whilst the war was on, and now some are 16-18 inches high. Many of Clarrie's plants have been grown from seed, but some of the older ones are from the collection of old friends and were original imports. Clarrie says that one of the satisfactions he obtains from these old plants is the possibility of seeing them bloom. Asked if there was any special method he used to grow his plants he said "no", but to see those fine plants in such good condition, it is obvious that he must be doing something right for all this time.

Amongst Clarrie's favourite plants are some of the South American genera, such as *Copiapoas* and *Sulcorebutias*, but his favourite are what he calls the obscurities such as *Aztekium ritterii*, and another old favourite *Opuntia* (now *Maihueniopsis*) *subterranea*, a rare clumpy little plant about 2 inches high, which each year produces pink flowers. The swollen roots are like bunches of little *Dahlia* tubers and most of the plant grows beneath the surface of the ground.

Over the years he has been to many parts of the country pursuing the interests of our hobby, and in doing so he has viewed many of the major collections and made many friends.

Eight years ago (1973) Clarrie was given Life Membership of CSSA. This was a modest recognition of the participation and contribution he has made during his long association with the Society."

**(Editor of 'The Spine' in 1981 was Mr. T. Prosser)**

**'The Spine' of Sep. 1981 Vol. 29 No. 4 gave a summary of a talk by Mrs Theo Himmerman and Mr Clarrie Borch at the June 16<sup>th</sup> meeting about the early days of the Society.**

Clarrie recalled the annual visits to Ralph Field's collection, when some car owners in the Society gave other members a lift up there. These visits were usually weekend affairs and members would stay at the Hotel in Lockington. In the evening Mr. Field would come along to the hotel, where they all got together, talked, showed Lantern Slides and the like. Another favourite visiting place was that of Sid Lug at Geelong, whose place was landscaped with artificial concrete caves and the like, a very interesting set-up indeed.

Clarrie related also how in the early days importing plants was a lot easier to do and one of the best ways of adding new varieties to your collection. Plants would be ordered usually from the U.S. and one would receive notification in the mail to come and collect them from the wharf. They were usually transported in wooden packing cases, "apple crate size", which would cost around \$10.00. We were also told about a certain member who in the early days after quarantine had been introduced used to beat them by getting his plants sent to someone in Papua New Guinea, who posted them from there to him, at the time there was no quarantine restriction between America and New Guinea, and New Guinea and Australia.

Mrs Theo Himmerman and her husband John joined the Society in 1952-53, when membership rose to 50, including some interstate members. The original Constitution was in use then and all Committee members had to be amateurs, meaning not allowed to sell plants, but the Honorary Secretary was allowed to sell any surplus plants for 2 weeks of the year. Library books were free until some good books went missing, then it was decided that a fee of 5 cents would be charged and 10 cents for the more expensive books. Plants for sale were mainly donated by members of the Committee to try to improve the bank balance, and auctioned. In the early 1950s the use of the Herbarium was rent free to Societies but after a new Director was appointed to the RBG, the Herbarium was redecorated and a rental fee was charged, \$1.05. The Committee meeting was also held at the Herbarium, then moved to my home (Himmerman's) for the next 18 months. It was then decided to rotate, where possible, between the homes of the Committee. Any expensive equipment to be purchased was discussed at the General Meetings, such as the first Gestetner and Projector.

In 1956, the Melbourne Olympic Year, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cactus Show was held in November and the Society was lucky in having the Ambassador or Consul for Mexico, in Melbourne for the Games, consenting to open our Show. He complimented the Society and said that he had never seen so many cacti before. A fee for entrance was not allowed, but a raffle was held. Plants were not allowed to be sold at the Show.

Next year the Show was held in the room at the end of the hall and was nearly a fiasco. Members would not table any plants for a Competition so only a handful of members put up a display. A Show Souvenir was sold in the form of a booklet with short articles on soil, etc. for 20 cents. A list of names of the few people who sold plants was handed out if asked for.

For several years the Society entered a Rock Garden, displays of cacti and succulents at the Royal Horticultural Shows at the Melbourne Town Hall. An Award of Merit was won for the rock garden one year. Still in the 1950s the Society was approached by 'Your Garden' official Mr Lionel Trigg to see if we would be interested in using their stand for display and to help sell their back copies. This was done for a few years but the space got smaller and smaller so a stand was hired on behalf of the Society. This was successful for a short time but assistance for the stand fell to 2 or 3 members only and was finally discontinued.

The membership was growing with members from overseas joining up. In the years 1949-1953 a Bulletin of news and a few articles was printed once a year. In 1954 Max Welten offered to have run off at his school a new edition of 'The Spine' typing and editing. The first copy came out in March and was No. 2, as in 1948 the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of 'The Spine' had been printed.

Then the Society decided to purchase a Gestetner on time payment to have 'The Spine' printed at the home of Mr W. Welten. Prior to this the Committee had used photos of 2 cacti and 2 succulents with information on each plant and the subscription for the photo supplement meant that the subscription would be \$2.10; not all members accepted the supplement, but the subscription remained at that figure decided on at the General Meeting that year.

As 'The Spine' began in March and the yearly subscription began in September, it was finally decided by the Committee in 1957 that a 6 part edition would be printed to bring it into line with the subscription. That was 1957-58, Vol. 2 Nos 1-6. September 1958 saw Vol. 7 printed by the Glen Press at Elsternwick and until a few years ago, when costs arose too high 'The Spine' continued to be printed, growing from 16 pages to 24 with pictures of cacti and succulents.

Visits began in the early to mid 1950s then ceased. In the years 1949 to 1953 approximately, some members travelled by bus to Lockington to visit Ralph and Molly Field at Tennyson. Lockington had the

nearest Hotel for accommodation. Some local folk took some members out to his property on Labour Day weekend and Charles King drove up and took some members out in his car.

It would be in the late 1950s or early 1960s before members began selling their own plants at the monthly meetings and are still doing so.

The attendance at many of the meetings during the winter months in the 1950s was only 15-20 and on at least 2 occasions the Committee had to go home as only 3 or 4 turned up at the Herbarium.

The Society progressed under a succession of Presidents and Committee members with the bank balance being gradually built up. For a few years I only attended the Christmas meetings whilst John (husband) was ill, resuming attendance late in 1977.

**By Mrs Theo Himmerman**

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#### **Lyn and Rudolf Schulz interviewed Clarrie Borch for the Geelong CSS newsletter of Sep. 1988:**

“There was great interest in collecting cacti and succulents before World War 2”, says Clarrie Borch. Clarrie’s history is interesting, as his father died when Clarrie was 2 years old, leaving his mother to provide for him and a younger sister in the days when there was no Government assistance. They lived in Ballarat, Geelong and Melbourne over the years, with his mother being a keen gardener, but not of cacti. His first real experience with cacti came around 1926-27 when he travelled as a young man up to Far North Queensland “just to have a look around”, and was appalled by the extensive invasion of the Prickly Pear *Opuntia*. Around Toowoomba on the Darling Downs, the *Opuntias* lined the tracks as high as a man stands, leaving only enough room for one vehicle to pass. Upon returning to Melbourne, his view of cacti softened somewhat and he began to show his first interest in the plants which he so dearly enjoys.

In the 1930s Clarrie moved to Jarrahdale Street, Cheltenham where he had 3 acres of land and a commercial flock of poultry. Here he obtained his first cacti plants, some of which can still be seen growing outdoors as very large specimens. These were planted next to the original house which was later demolished.

In 1927 CSSA had its beginnings. Edward Prescott, a member of the Field Naturalists’ Society living in Hawthorn was the first President, with Cecil Johnson being one of the early secretaries around 1935. At the time Clarrie joined the Club in 1938, Charles Hodgson was President and members attending meetings numbered around 25 or 30. The Club suspended during wartime, with the last meeting in June 1941 on the night the Germans marched into Paris. After the War, in 1946, the Club started up again with Frank Ward as President. Clarrie served as President in 1950-51, and Theo Himmerman and her husband John joined in 1952-53. CSSA was still not large at this time with the Himmermans becoming member numbers 49 and 50. The original Club members were keen collectors of any new species of cactus and succulent that became available. Large growing species were preferred with many *Cereus* and *Opuntia* types being favoured. Early on most plants were simply exchanged among the members, with little selling going on. In fact it was the policy for some time that no committee members were allowed to sell plants at meetings.

#### **VALE CLARRIE BORCH (Geelong CSS newsletter Nov. 1995)**

It is with regret we hear that Clarrie Borch has passed away at the age of 92. The club has enjoyed his company as a Show Judge, Meeting Speaker, and member since the club’s inception. Clarrie had kept cacti and succulents at least as long as any other person in Australia. Plants were imported from habitat in wooden banana boxes, and Clarrie spoke of coming to Geelong on the train to visit Sid Lugg’s cactus collection in Church Street, Geelong West. Clarrie lived as a schoolboy for some years in Candover Street, Geelong West and followed the fortunes of the Geelong Football Club. He spent time in Queensland and spoke of the prickly pear infestation, was a keen collector of butterflies, and had a native bee named after him by Tarlton Rayment. This bee was collected at the Little Desert during a trip to collect butterflies. Clarrie was a patron of The CSSA.

Farewell Clarrie Borch.

#### **The Society was incorporated in late 1985, with a new Constitution. The Rules were updated in 2006.**

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**Editor’s note:** Ralph Field mentioned above is deceased but his son Robert still owns and runs the farm and the historic cactus gardens which can be visited by appointment. Robert’s talk, “Lifetime of Cactus Culture”, to the 2<sup>nd</sup> National convention in 1970 is available for loan from our library.

Clarrie Borch is commemorated at each Australasian convention with the presentation of a trophy and shield in his honour.