POPULAR CHRONICLES

ORCHID FEVER

How seductive are orchids? Connoisseurs spare nothing for a rare bloom—the issue in a battle between Florida, the Seminoles, and a man with a passion.

BY SUSAN ORLEAN

JOHN LAROCHE is a tall guy, skinny as a stick, pale-eyed, slouch-shouldered, and sharply handsome, in spite of the fact that he is missing all his front teeth. He has the posture of al dente spaghetti and the nervous intensity of someone who plays a lot of video games. He is thirty-four years old, and works for the Seminole Tribe of Florida, setting up a plant nursery on the tribal reservation near Miami. The Seminole nicknames for Laroche are Crazy White Man and Troublemaker. My introduction to Laroche took place last summer, in the new Collier County Courthouse, in Naples, Florida. The occasion was a hearing following Laroche's arrest for illegally taking endangered wild orchids, which he is passionate about, from the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, which is a place he adores. Laroche did not dress for the occasion. He was wearing wraparound Mylar sunglasses, a cotton-blend shirt printed with some sort of scenic design, and trousers that bagged around his rear. At the hearing, he was called forward and asked to state his name and address and to describe his experience in working with plants. Laroche sauntered to the center of the courtroom. He jutted out his chin. He spoke in a rasping, draggy voice. He stuck his thumbs in his belt loops and said, "I've been a professional horticulturist for approximately twelve years. I've owned a plant nursery of my own. . . . I have extensive experience with orchids, and the asexual micropropagation of orchids under aseptic cultures." Then he grinned and said to the court, "I'm probably the smartest person I know."

Laroche grew up in Miami. He says he was a weird kid. This is not hard to believe. When he wanted a pet, he bought a little turtle, then bought ten little turtles, then tried to breed them, then started selling turtles to other kids, then decided his life wasn't worth living unless he acquired one of every species of rare turtle, including a three-hundred-pound exotic tortoise from the Galápagos Islands. Suddenly, another passion seized him. He became immersed in late-Ice Age fossils. Then he dropped turtles and Ice Age fossils and became obsessed with lapidary, and then after a while he dropped lapidary and got into collecting and resilvering old mirrors. His passions boil up quickly and end abruptly, like tornadoes. Usually, the end is accompanied by a dramatic pronouncement. When he was in his teens, he went through a tropical-fish phase, and he had sixty fishtanks in his house. He even went skin-diving for the fish himself. Then the end came. He didn't merely lose interest in collecting fish: he renounced it, as if he had kicked a habit. He declared that he would stop collecting fish forever. He also declared that he would never set foot in the ocean again. That was fifteen years ago. He lives a few miles from the Atlantic, but he has not gone near it since.

Laroche has the conversational manner of a Mr. Encyclopedia. This is not the result of rigorous and extensive formal education. He went to high school in North Miami, but beyond that he is self-taught. In fact, it is almost impossible to imagine him in a classroom. On occasion, he gets wistful about the life he might have had if he had applied himself conventionally. He believes he could have gone to medical school and become a brain surgeon. He would have become distinguished and rich. Instead, he lives at home with his father and has mostly made a living in uncustomary ways. For instance, he once sold to a gardening journal an article he called "Would You Die for Your Plants?" This was after he had spilled granular pesticide into a cut on his hand—an incident that left him with permanent heart and liver damage and the persistent feeling that his experience would make a good and salable story. He is now writing a

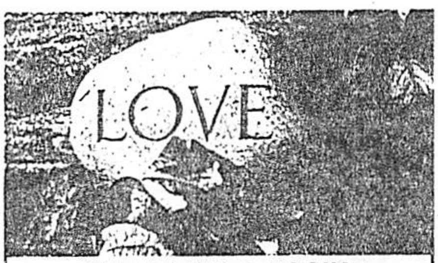
ADIRONDACK ESCAPES

THE POINT
"#1 RESORT IN THE U.S."
". . . formerly the lodge of the Rockefellers; 'there are not enough superlatives' to describe this 'fantastic hideaway' located on Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks, a 'serene' wilderness lodge offering uncommon luxury; it's a 'very special, one-of-a-kind retreat' . . ."
ZAGAT SURVEY

The Point - private, romantic and eminently civilized.
Member Relais & Chateaux.
$775 - $1025 per night, all inclusive.
800-255-3530, HCR 1, Box 65, Saranac Lake, NY 12983

LAKE PLACID LODGE
"PERFECT PEACE"
". . . 22 rooms with that distinct Adirondack spirit. Cedar twigwork by local craftsmen, Native American throw rugs, and carefully chosen paintings by regional artists create a surprising air of elegance."
TRAVEL & LEISURE

Lake Placid Lodge - sumptuously rustic and romantic, crackling fires and deep soaking tubs, exceptional French-American cuisine, sparkling vistas of snow-covered peaks.
Writer's Workshop March 7, 8, 9
with Chris Shaw, Bill McKibben, Sue Halpern.
$150 - $400 per couple, European plan.
518-523-2700, P.O. Box 550, Lake Placid, NY 12946

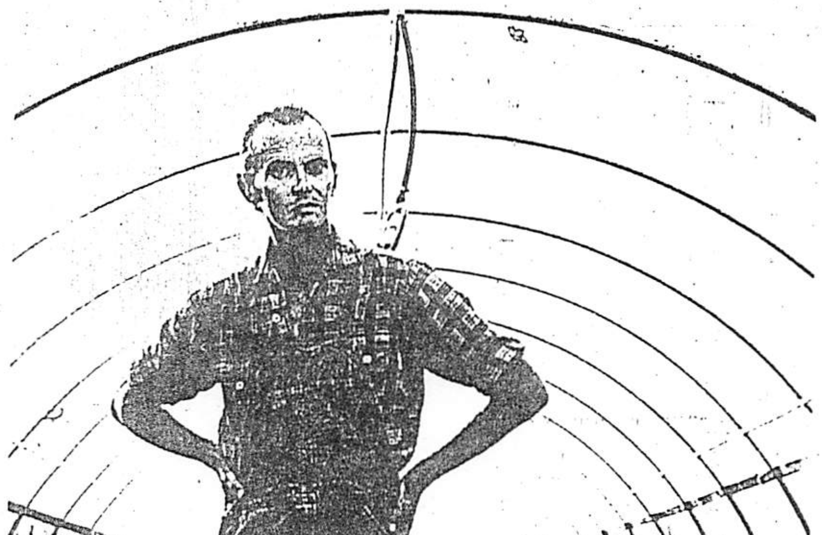


SHE WANTS A ROCK?
GIVE HER A ROCK.
For your Valentine: natural RIVERSTONES™ deeply inscribed with a word or phrase. Choose LOVE. IMAGINE. DREAM. KISSES. HOPE. FOREVER. BELIEVE. REMEMBER. ALWAYS.
SMALL (6"-8")... $55 LARGE (12"-15")... $75
MEDIUM (9"-11") $65 X-LARGE... (by request)
Add $15 per stone for shipping & handling.
Full refund guaranteed.
SEND CHECK OR MONEY ORDER TO
Stoneworks Gallery
P.O. BOX 35-Y • TUXEDO, NY 10987
1-800-STONE-08
CUSTOM ORDERS • FREE CATALOGUE

LONDON FLATS
English Charm with American Standards
Selective Locations & Prices
Weekly and Long Term Lets
FARNUM & CHRIST
800-366-2048 • 615-652-2048

WALK ENGLAND
Travel back in time on our luxury tours of the enchanted villages and spectacular mountains in Wordsworth's Lake District, plus The Roman Wall and Yorkshire Dales. World-class walking and literary/cultural/culinary fun. 12-person groups. Private suites in a Victorian mansion.
ENGLISH ADVENTURES (303) 797-2365
803 Front Range Road • Littleton, CO 80120

guide to tissue-culturing plants at home, which he plans to advertise in *High Times*, the marijuana magazine. The ad will ask for a lot of money for the guide but will neglect to mention that any marijuana grown following Laroche's precise methods will never mature enough to have any psychoactive properties. He defends this by saying that it will earn him money, it will teach kids how to grow plants, it will keep them from actually getting high, and it will give them an object lesson in how crime doesn't pay. The spiral of logic entwining altruism and rule-breaking around a possible financial outcome is a Laroche specialty. Just when you think you've figured out that he's a crook, he reveals an ulterior and principled but lucrative reason for his crookedness. He loves doing things the hard way, if it means he gets to do what he wants and leaves you wondering how he got away with it. He is the most moral amoral person I've ever known.



John Laroche in the greenhouse. New orchids are created or discovered every day. To desire orchids is to have a desire that can never be fully requited.

LAURA WILSON

When he was growing up, Laroche and his mother would hike through the Fakahatchee Strand and other South Florida swamps, looking for unusual things. At the time, Laroche and his parents were living in North Miami. Laroche's father, a construction worker, had broken his back in a fall from a building and was disabled. Laroche was the only surviving child; a sister had died at an early age. "We're a family of ailments and pain," Laroche says. He describes his mother, who died in 1988, as overweight, frumpy, Jewish by birth but serially passionate about different faiths. She doesn't sound like someone who would tramp through sloppy, sweaty backcountry, but that is how she and John spent many days. Sometimes they would tag orchids that were in bloom and come back a few months later to see if they had formed any seeds. For a while, Laroche's passion was to photograph every single species of orchid in bloom in Florida; he and his mother would trudge through the swamp, carrying cameras, for hours on end.

As he got older, Laroche went from wanting pictures of orchids to wanting orchids themselves. He got married in 1983, when he was twenty-three, and that same year he and his wife opened a nursery in North Miami. Before that, he worked in construction but, just like his father, he broke his back in a fall and went on disability leave. He and his wife called their nursery the Bromeliad Tree. (Bromeliads are spiny plants that usually, like epiphytic orchids, attach themselves to tree limbs instead of sprouting in soil. Some of them grow wild in the Fakahatchee.) Laroche's nursery specialized in the oddest, rarest stuff. He had forty thousand plants, including some that were the only specimens of their kind in cultivation. Laroche says that in 1990 he showed up at the World Bromeliad Conference with an astonishing twelve-by-twenty-five-foot display featuring star-shaped bromeliads, Day-Glo paint, black light, and Christmas lights arranged in the shape of actual constellations.

The conference was a turning point for him. He became well known in the plant community and began calling people all over the world for leads to unusual plants; his phone bills were sometimes close to a thousand dollars a month. Lots of money flew back and forth, but he kept almost none of it. Once, he spent hundreds of dollars building a little air-conditioned box for a rare fern he got from a friend in the Dominican Republic. The fern died. Laroche has never regretted the expense. He accumulated one of the country's largest collections of *Cryptanthus*, a genus of Brazilian bromeliad. He had a startling, six-foot-tall *Antherium veitchii* with corrugated leaves that he says was "a gorgeous, gorgeous son of a bitch." He had dozens and dozens of orchids. He particularly enjoyed cloning them and mutating them. He also figured out how to propagate certain species that had rarely been propagated in a lab.

Day and night, people would drop by

VERMONT
Smoked Ham

SAVE
$20.00

now only $21.95

Here's your chance to taste the wonderful flavor of a succulent ham smoked the old-fashioned Vermont way, over fragrant fires of corncobs and maple wood. Guaranteed to be the best you've ever tasted or your money back.

FREE
Order now and we'll include 6 oz. of Aged Cheddar and 1/2 lb. Smoked Bacon - FREE!

HARRINGTON'S
of Vermont
1825 Main St. Richmond, VT 05477
☐ 122-521 Ready-to-Cook Half Ham (6 lbs.) for only $21.95 + $6.95 P&H. Total: $28.90.
☐ Payment enclosed ☐ Charge my ( ) VISA, ( ) MC, ( ) AMEX, ( ) Diners Club, ( ) Discover. (Include card no. and exp. date)
Name__________
Address__________
City______ State____ Zip____
Introductory Offer for New Customers Only.
Limit 2. Good in 48 States Only. Expires 4/28/95.
Not redeemable in Retail Stores.
Charge Orders: 802-434-4444

personal insights on
Türkiye
Yacht cruises & tours of Turkey
Recommended by NY Times & Fodor
Club Voyages 908-291-8228

filmclips
Your monthly guide
to the best films on video
"A unique newsletter for movie lovers."
— great gift idea! —
FREE intro issue 800.395.9344 anytime

Urology & You
The Newsletter of Genitourinary Health Information
Prostate, Bladder, Impotence, and Other Topics
$19.95 4 issues per year • 718-275-7440
Edward Moss, M.D., F.A.C.S.

BRITAIN'S FINEST LUXURY SMALL GROUP TOURS
(Max 12 Clients) of **Cornwall, Cotswolds, Lake District, Kent, West Country and Scotland**
Suitable for adults of all ages. Same beautiful hotel *each* night and outstanding meals.
For brochure call TOLL FREE 1-800-441-2558 to U.K.
LAND *of the* LAKES TOURS *Ltd.*

his house to talk about plants and to admire his collection. People would give him plants in exchange for his leading them on hikes through the Fakahatchee just so they could look at a plant that interested them. One afternoon, while I was visiting him in his office, at the Seminole plant nursery, he began to talk about the amazing adaptability of plants, and mentioned that the plant with the largest bloom in the world, the rafflesia, lives parasitically in the roots of a tree and eventually devours its host. He said that back when he had his nursery many people would call him to talk about plants, but he could tell that they were just lonely and wanted to talk to someone, or that they were competitive and wanted to test their knowledge against his. He said, "I felt sometimes like they were going to consume me. I felt like they were the parasite plant and I was the big host tree."

THE Orchidaceae are a family of perennial plants with one fertile stamen and three-petalled flowers that, depending on the species, can be anything from pale specks to voluptuous masses. Generally speaking, orchids seem to drive people crazy. The people who love orchids love them madly, but the passion for orchids is not necessarily a passion for beauty. Something about the form of an orchid makes it seem almost more like a creature than a flower. Many orchids are strange-looking, and others have bizarre shapes and jarring color combinations, and all orchids are rather ugly when they aren't in flower. Laroche told me that many species are so plain that when he shows them to people they invariably ask him what they will look like when they bloom, and he has to explain that they already are blooming. Orchids have adapted to almost every environment on earth. They can be mutated, crossbred, and cloned. They can take the form of complex architectural structures or of garish, glamorous, luscious flowers. Not surprisingly, orchids have all sorts of sexual associations; few other flowers are as plainly erotic in appearance or effect. Even other creatures find orchids alluring. Some orchids are shaped exactly like the insect that pollinates them; the insect is drawn inside thinking it has found its mate.

Orchid collecting began in Victorian England as a hobby for the very rich—people with enough land for greenhouses and enough money to sponsor expeditions to where the rarest species could be found. The hobby grew so consuming that it was known in Victorian times as orchidelirium, because a sort of mania seized collectors. Many seemingly normal people, once smitten with orchids, become less like normal people and more like John Laroche. At an orchid show in New York last year, I heard the same story over and over—how one orchid in the kitchen led to a dozen, and then to a back-yard greenhouse, and then, in some cases, to multiple greenhouses and collecting trips to Asia and Africa and an ever-expanding budget to service this desire. I walked around the show with a collector from Guatemala. He said, "The bug hits you. You can join A.A. to quit drinking, but once you get into orchids you can't do anything to kick."

Collecting can be a sort of lovesickness. If you begin collecting living things, you are pursuing something imperfectible, and even if you manage to find them and then possess them, there is no guarantee they won't die or change. The botanical complexity of orchids and their mutability makes them perhaps the most compelling and maddening of all collectible living things. There are nearly twenty thousand named species of orchids—it is the largest flowering-plant family on earth. New orchids are being created in laboratories or discovered every day, and others exist only in tiny numbers in remote places. To desire orchids is to have a desire that can never be fully requited. A collector who wants one of every orchid species will die before even coming close.

A CALAMITOUS frost in South Florida in 1989 killed off a lot of nursery stock, including some of Laroche's, and then, in 1991, a bad batch of fungicides killed orchids and other plants in greenhouses all around the country. Laroche had barely anything left. Three years earlier, a drunk driver had run into his car; the accident knocked out Laroche's front teeth, put his wife in a coma for several weeks, and killed his mother and uncle. He and his wife later separated, which he says now was because he realized that she could sit through an entire Grateful Dead album and he could not.

Then, in August of 1992, Hurricane Andrew struck. At the time, Laroche had his remaining plants in three different greenhouses, in Miami and Homestead. In the storm, two of the three greenhouses vanished entirely. The third more or less exploded. When he went to examine that third greenhouse, he came upon a hash that he recognized as one of his plants; it was in the middle of the road about three blocks from where the greenhouse had been. Salt water carried inland by the storm poisoned the rest. At that point, he had been in the plant business for about twelve years. He had been a famous plant person. Laroche decided then and there that he would die of a broken heart if he ever opened his own nursery again.

The Seminole Tribe of Florida, Inc., didn't have a nursery, but the idea of starting one was among many self-help projects contemplated by the tribe. The Seminoles own ninety thousand acres in Florida. Unemployment in the tribe is nearly forty per cent. The Seminoles' plan was to hire a white man with expertise, let him get the nursery going and teach tribe members as much as possible, and then eventually replace the white manager with a member of the tribe. The Seminoles ran an ad in the paper. John Laroche saw it, applied, and was hired by the tribe. Of course, he was temperamentally disinclined to do the job the easy way. He decided to make the nursery something spectacular. He wanted to cultivate exotic things—spinach that grows on vines, pumpkins that can be trained onto a trellis, hot peppers shaped like penises, a hundred varieties of what he calls "weird-ass vegetables." He also wanted to build a laboratory for cloning orchids. He was not interested in corsage orchids: he wanted to cultivate rare endangered species that are now available only on the black market. If he succeeded, he would wreak havoc on the illegal plant trade—a prospect that appealed to him, especially if he could do it by some Laroche-style convoluted means.

After he was hired by the Seminoles, Laroche's new passion became Indian law. He spent hours in the University of Miami law library. He studied the State of Florida's case against the Miccosukee Indians for poaching palm fronds. He learned the tortuous history of the State of Florida v. James E. Billie, in which the government tried, unsuccessfully, to convict Chief Billie, the chairman of the Seminole tribal council, for shooting, skinning, and eating an endangered species of panther. When his research was done, Laroche was convinced he had found a loophole in the state code which exempted Seminoles from laws protecting rare plants.

ORCHIDS first evolved in the tropics, but there are now orchids all over the world, broadcast by air currents. The seeds of an orchid are dark and tiny and as fine as gunpowder; one hurricane can carry millions of them thousands of miles. A strong enough gust and a few seedpods from South America could export enough from corsages to Miami to last until the end of time. Winds blowing into Florida drop seeds in swimming pools and barbecue pits and on highways and shuffleboard courts and hotel parking lots and the roofs of office buildings, and also in places that are tranquil and damp and warm, where the seeds can germinate and grow. Many seeds crossing the Gulf of Mexico probably drop and die along the way, but any that stay aloft and then fall someplace like the Fakahatchee have a chance to thrive. At the turn of the century, the Fakahatchee was filled with so many orchids of so many different species that it was like an orchid supermarket.

The last comprehensive survey of the Fakahatchee's plants was done in 1987. It listed forty-five orchid species. One species, known as the Fakahatchee ladies'-tresses orchid (*Spiranthes lanceolata* var. *paludicola*), was first described in the Fakahatchee. Ten species found here exist nowhere else in the United States—the rattail orchid, the crooked-spur orchid, the dwarf epidendrum, the twisted orchid, Gale's orchid, the false water spider, Harris's tiny orchid, the hidden orchid, the small-flowered maxillaria, and the frosted-flower orchid. Most of these are homely, with skinny roots and spindly leaves and puny flowers. People who like the fat, flamboyant orchids would find these plants enormously disappointing. On the other hand, a real collector—the sort Laroche has come to be and to know—would find them irresistible if he or she were trying to amass a comprehensive collection; they could also be crossbred with greenhouse plants

Travel with Scholars

Summer 1995
3-week programs

Oxford
☐ 26th Annual Oxford/Berkeley Program
24 courses taught by English dons

Paris
☐ 5 courses: Impressionism, History of Paris, American Writers in Paris, The Belle Epoque (all in English), Beginning Conversational French (in French)

Legendary Greece
☑ Myth and archaeology in Athens, Crete & Santorini

London
☐ Inside the London theater scene

Ireland
☐ Myth and literature in Dublin, Sligo & the Aran Islands

Venice & the Veneto
☐ Art & architecture

New Orleans
☐ History & culture (1 week)

FREE BROCHURE:
(510) 642-3112, ext. 11
Or send this coupon with name and address to: Marketing Dept. 11A, University of California Extension, 2223 Fulton St., Berkeley, CA 94720.

UC Berkeley Extension

Free Catalog
Teak and Mahogany Outdoor Furniture

Precision-cut Kits or Fully Assembled

All-weather furniture of enduring beauty and character, handcrafted to last a lifetime. Benches, swings, market umbrellas, tables, chairs, lounges, and more. Available fully assembled, or as kits that are easy and fun to put together.

Wood Classics
Box 5Y04, Gardiner, NY 12525
(914) 255-5599

ARCTIC
Travel to Canada's Baffin and Ellesmere Islands, Greenland, and SIBERIA with specialists on NORTH POLES, DOG SLED, WILDLIFE and CULTURAL Trips.
ARCTIC ODYSSEYS
2000 McGilvra Blvd. E. Ste. Y, Seattle, WA 98112
(206) 325-1977 / FAX (206) 726-8488

PARIS NOTES
The Newsletter for People Who Love Paris
A fine way to stay in touch with the world's favorite city.
History, Culture, Art, Trends, Books, Current Events, People, Fun Facts, Travel and Language Tips, and More.
$36 per year (10x). Sample copy $6. Cheques only.
PO Box 3668, Manhattan Beach, CA 90266
(310) 545-2735 • Full money back guarantee!

to create something never seen before.

The only really pretty orchid in the Fakahatchee is the ghost. When it is out of bloom, the ghost, which is leafless, looks like flat green straps about the width of linguine. Once a year, when it blooms, the ghost is lovely. The flower is as white as paper. In the center is the intricate lip that is characteristic of all orchids. The ghost's lip is particularly pronounced and pouty, and each of its two corners tapers into a long, fluttery tail. The shape, the delicacy, and the quivery sensitivity of these slender tails makes the flower look like feathers or the legs of a ballerina or two little flags. Because it is leafless and grows on trees, and because the root system blends into the tree or rock it wraps around, the bloom of the ghost can appear invisibly suspended, as if it were a creature in flight. The whiteness of the flower is startling against the gray and green of the swamp. The species is temperamental, difficult to propagate, rarely seen in cultivation, hard to find in the wild. Once when I was at the Fakahatchee, one of the rangers got a phone call from a woman in Georgia who will spend whatever it takes to see the ghost orchid in bloom. She wanted to know if the ranger had seen any that were ready to flower. After talking to him, she left work and got on a plane to Florida and rented a car and hiked into the swamp the following day. No amount of money in the world would have made a difference, because the ghost orchid the ranger had seen had by then lost its bloom and was once again just a tangle of roots on a tree. Carlyle Luer, the author of "The Native Orchids of Florida," the definitive guide to the subject, once wrote of the ghost orchid, "Should one be lucky enough to see a flower, all else will seem eclipsed."

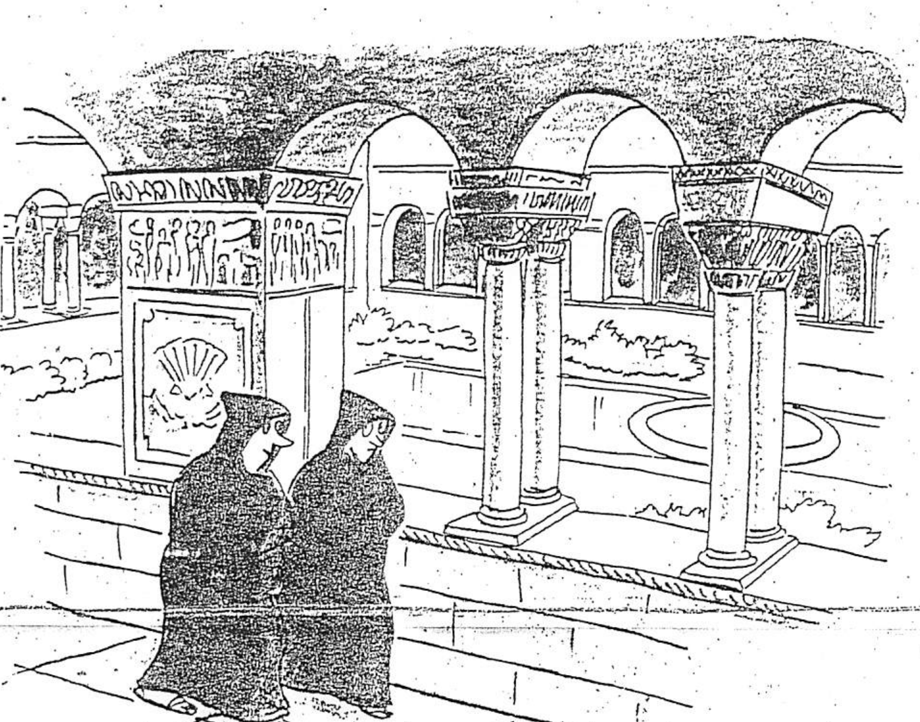
ON December 21, 1993, Laroche and three Seminole men who were working with him at the nursery—Dennis Osceola, Vinson Osceola, and Russell Bowers—went into the Fakahatchee and walked through the long cypress strands, over the bunchy cypress domes, and through the muck to a deep-swamp section known as West Lake. The twenty-first was a muggy day. The men left their van on William Janes Scenic Drive, a gravel road that forks off State Road 29 a few miles south of Copeland Road State Prison. It was an unusual place to park. When a ranger on patrol saw the van, he decided to stop and wait until its occupants returned.

Some time passed. Finally, the four men emerged from the woods. They were carrying several garbage bags and pillowcases. After they were arrested, they opened the bags and pillowcases, so the ranger could tag and photograph what they had taken from the swamp—a hundred and thirty-six plants, including *Catopsis nutans* (nodding catopsis), *Tillandsia pruinosa* (fuzzy-wuzzy air plant), *Peperomia obtusifolia* (Florida peperomia), and dozens of wild orchids. In the pillowcases were crooked-spur, clamshell, butterfly, brown, night, rigid, twisted, and shiny-leaf orchids, and several specimens of the much admired, highly prized, rare white-flowered species *Polyrrhiza lindenii*—the ghost.

The ranger who wrote up the charges and the prosecutor who filed the official report weren't sure whether the Seminoles were working for Laroche or whether Laroche was working for the Seminoles. On the one hand, Laroche had been hired by the tribe to set up a plant nursery on the reservation, but, on the other hand, Laroche was a nurseryman who had lost his own plants and needed new ones. He knew where to find rare plants for free, and he could have been using the Seminoles to circumvent the law. What was clear was that the plants the four men had collected were rare and valuable, and that they had been harvested carefully. The epiphytic species—the ones that grow attached to tree limbs—had been left on their branches. It was also clear that the person who understood the value of all these plants, and knew what to do with them, was John Laroche.

One day after the arrest, I drove to the headquarters of the tribe, which is in Hollywood, on the second-smallest Seminole reservation in Florida. At the north end of the reservation is Santa's Magical Village Holiday Theme Park. Nearby is a statue of a Seminole wrestling an alligator. The sculptor had used an acquaintance of his as a model for the statue, even though the acquaintance wasn't an Indian—the sculptor just happened to think the man had a good Indian-like build. The statue was made in the fifties, and the model was John Laroche's father.

The biggest trailer at the Seminole



"*I hear we went platinum.*"

headquarters, belongs to Buster Baxley, the tribe's director of planning and development. Baxley is a husky man in his early forties. He has brown eyes, silky jowls, and hair the color of a basketball. He took me to Seminole Gardens, the tribe's nursery, which is a few minutes from the tribe headquarters and down the street from the Independent Bible Baptist Chickee Church. Laroche's office is in another flimsy trailer, on the edge of the nursery property. Except for the trailer, nothing had yet sprouted at Seminole Gardens. As Baxley and I pulled into the lot, Vinson Osceola and two other men were standing near the trailer, looking at a pile of metal hoops and nylon netting. There was little else in sight except a stack of sawhorses and cedar planters, and some plastic bags bursting with mulch. Laroche was inside at his desk, reading a postcard he had just received from a friend of his named Walter. He said that Walter is crazy about water lilies, and will travel anywhere in the world at a moment's notice if he hears about a rare one. Sometimes Walter collects the plant, to grow at home, and sometimes he just takes a look at it. The postcard was from Botswana. Laroche held it up and read it. "He says, 'Plants are good. See you soon.' " He put down the card and said, "Walter's pretty crazy."

Baxley stood in the doorway of the office and ignored Laroche's reading of the card. He waved his hand toward the window and said, "John, how're those boys working out?"

Laroche said, "Fine, Buster." He put his feet up on the desk and started rocking back and forth in his chair. He was wearing camouflage pants, a Miami Hurricanes hat, and a Chicago Blackhawks T-shirt.

Baxley said, "Everyone thought John was exploiting those Indian boys so he could do his poaching and set his own nursery up. Well, I was the one who authorized it. I told them to go out and gather what they needed. John brought me the Florida statute he found saying Indians were exempt from the laws about plant gathering, and we thought that the nursery should have some of the wild plants for propagation and a display. I questioned him about it several times, because I wanted to be sure about it, and I put him off for about a month, because I wanted to do the research myself."

Laroche pulled his face into an expression of mock horror and said, "Buster! You didn't believe me?"

Baxley said, "Then, at first, when they were all arrested, we thought it was discrimination against us and against the tribe. Now I think that if those rangers had just caught the Indian boys, they would have let them go. They don't want to mess around with us, with Indian rights. We hold nature close to us! We're not like the non-Indian who strips the land just to make a buck. We don't hunt just to hunt. We hunt to survive! The State of Florida better not mess around with what's my right." He puffed his chest and said, "Otherwise, I'll go in there and take every single thing in the Fakahatchee that's alive."

Laroche stopped rocking in his chair and crashed forward onto the desk. He frowned and said, "Aaaaaw, come on now, Buster."

Baxley looked at him and then looked back at me and said, "The rangers didn't want those Indians. It's John here they wanted to skin alive."

Baxley decided to go back to his office and do some paperwork on a joint citrus-growing venture between the Seminoles and some Japanese investors. Laroche and I went out to his van. Laroche wanted to go visit some plants of his that had survived the hurricane and had then been sold to a nursery called Tropical Paradise. Outside, the sky was gauzy and the air felt like glue. The workmen had staked up some of the metal hoops for potting areas. Vinson Osceola came over to us, carrying a spade. He is a young man with long, glossy hair, meaty shoulders, and a shy, slightly tearful gaze. He and Laroche talked for a few minutes about the construction project. He mentioned that Dennis Osceola had been injured and wasn't doing nursery work for the time being, and that Russell Bowers, the other defendant in the orchid poaching, was currently "off the res."

"I'm not going to talk to you too much," Osceola said to me. "It's not personal. It's the Indian way."

Laroche talked while we drove. "Originally, the Indians just wanted to dig up some stuff on the reservation and sell it. So I explained the nursery business to them. I said, 'You can dig stuff up and sell it, but it's better to propagate.' I explained to them that you can

THE GO EVERYWHERE SKIRT KEEPS GOING

Experience the easy chic of our unbleached muslin pullon dirndl skirt with pushup sleeve t-shirt top. The same pieces also available in fourteen colours of handkerchief linen. Liberty-of-London cotton prints and batiks. As sketched in muslin. skirt $150. top $125.

For catalogue with swatches and other styles & fabrics please call Margo at 1-800-343-3062.

RUTH KISHLINE'S
COUNTRY CLOTHES SHOP
370 12th Avenue South - Naples, FL 33940

Britain
Carefree Countryside Walking Tours...

◆ Medieval footpaths, prehistoric and Roman tracks
◆ Quaint villages, country inns and lovely scenery
◆ Relaxed pace (up to 7½ miles a day)

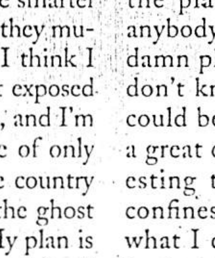
16th year, owner escorted, locally guided walking tours
SCOTLAND • ENGLAND • WALES • NEW ENGLAND

Please send me further information:
Name: ____________________
Address: ____________________
____
COUNTRY WALKING HOLIDAYS LTD. (604) 921-8304
1122-Y Fir Avenue, Blaine, WA 98230

CHESS SET COLLECTOR
WILL BUY ANTIQUE ORNAMENTAL
CHESS SETS AND COLLECTIONS
PLEASE SEND PHOTOGRAPHS TO:
ERWIN H. EZZES
875 FIFTH AVE., NEW YORK, NY 10021
TEL:1-800-CHESS-50 FAX: 212-535-2480

Country Curtains.
At The Red Lion Inn • Stockbridge, MA 01262
CURTAIN CHARM FOR EVERY HOME!
Call Today for a FREE 68-page Color Catalog
1-800-876-6123
Dept. 1165

tissue-culture orchids, clone them, and from one you can get billions. I've always been into propagation. I was big on plant mutation, too—mutating for fun and profit. You expose seeds to radiation or chemicals and you get cool stuff that's never been seen before on earth. It's a great little hobby, plant mutation. You compress the evolution of life into one or two years. I think it's good for the world to promote it as a hobby. There are a lot of wasted lives out there, and people with nothing to do. To me, mutation is the answer to everything. Have you ever wondered why some people are smarter than other people? It's because they mutated when they were babies. I think I was one of those people. I got exposed to something that mutated me, and I'm now incredibly smart. I'm one of only five or six people in the entire country who know how to propagate the ghost orchid in a plant laboratory. My plan is to take some orchids out of the wild, sell some now, cultivate the rest in the laboratory we're building at the nursery, and in a few years have thousands to sell. Right now, there's a black market in these orchids, especially the ghosts, because you can't get them. There's big money in it. They have a huge value in places like Australia, where people love orchids and can't get these varieties. The price would come down on each individual plant, but we'd be able to sell millions of them once we got them into cultivation, so we'd still make a ton of money. My plant friends used to say, 'If John ever gets some land and some money, watch out.' Well, the Indians needed a nurseryman, and I needed some land and some money, and I researched the law and realized that it was really vague about the Indians' taking things out of state preserves. I think the law is messed up and it ought to be changed, because I don't think you ought to have a bunch of Indians just running through the Fakahatchee pulling up plants, but in the meantime someone's going to get the benefit of the law being the way it is now, and I figure it might as well be me."



We drove down a gravel road lined with chubby palm trees. A steamy breeze was blowing past my open window. The sun coming through the palm fronds painted stripes across the road.

He said, "I figured that we'd get what we needed out of the Fakahatchee and at the same time we'd bring so much attention to the law that the legislature would change it. I timed it so that it would be in time for the legislative session. That's what I want to say in court. I want to say that the state needs to protect itself." He raised an eyebrow at me. "I'm planning to protect myself, too."

We banged across some railroad tracks. Laroche turned toward me and said, "I'm working for the Seminoles, but I'm really on the side of the plants. The law shouldn't let anybody go out there and pull up the damn plants. Is what I did ethical? I don't know. I'm a shrewd bastard. I could be a great criminal. I could be a great con man, but it's more interesting to live your life within the confines of the law. People look at what I do and think, Is that moral? Is that right? Well, isn't every great thing the result of that kind of thinking? Look at something like atomic energy. It can be diabolic or a blessing. Evil or good. Well, that's where the give is. The edge of ethics. And that's where I like to live."

At Tropical Paradise, Laroche tried to persuade the owner, Joseph Fondeur, to let him buy back the plants he had sold to Fondeur after the hurricane. The plants in question were huge hoyas with rubbery leaves and long, snaky vines. Fondeur said he was not interested in selling the hoyas back to Laroche. Laroche pointed out that he now had a large nursery on the reservation and was able once again to give the hoyas a suitable home.

"Not interested," Fondeur said, stroking a hoya leaf.

"I'm coming back for them," Laroche said. "Come on, Joseph."

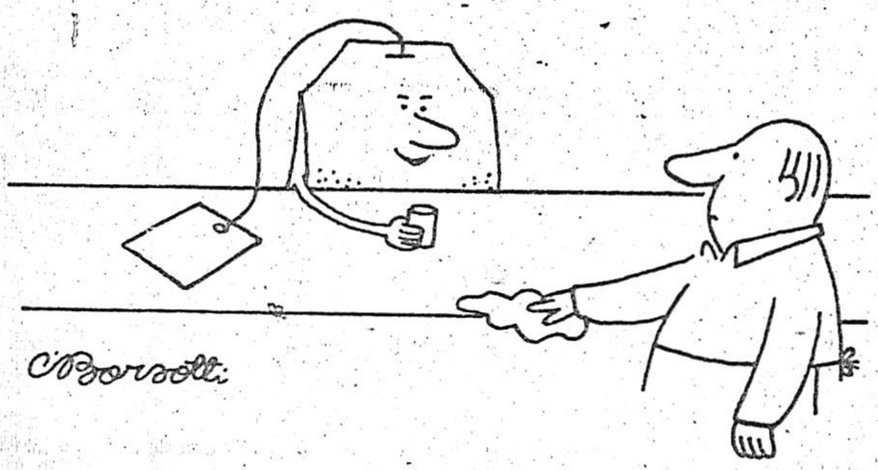
Fondeur stroked another leaf. "No. I love them now. At this point, they're really mine, not yours."

They talked for a moment. Fondeur agreed that when the plants reproduced he would give some of the little ones to Laroche. Then Fondeur mentioned that he likes a wide variety of plants and was keeping the orchid inventory at his nursery to a minimum. "Orchid people are too crazy," he said. "They buy the orchid and they kill it. Fern people might even be the worst, but the orchid people are too—oh, you know. They think they're superior." He looked at Laroche and said, "You collecting anything now?"

"No," Laroche said. "I don't want to collect anything right now. I have to watch myself around plants. Even now, I still get that feeling. I'll see something and I'll get that feeling—I'll think to myself, Jesus Christ, that's interesting. Boy, I'll bet you could find a lot of those."

The American Orchid Society was worried about the orchid-poaching case; if Laroche and the Seminoles were found innocent, it could start a run on orchids growing on public land everywhere. The society's headquarters are in West Palm Beach, just about a hundred and fifty miles from the Collier County Courthouse, down a highway called Alligator Alley. Florida panthers used to wander across the traffic lanes of Alligator Alley. Before Chief Billie shot his panther, the last panther to die of unnatural causes in South Florida had been hit by a speeding vehicle on Alligator Alley. The society has almost thirty thousand members. At the office, you can sign up for an Orchid Society Visa card, which is imprinted with a picture of a yellow *Brassolaeliocattleya* with a reddish lip as full and shapely as a handbag. You can also look at fifty thousand color slides of award-winning orchids, including slides of the most valuable orchids in the world—for instance, a *Phragmipedium besseae* lady-slipper, with slim blood-red petals and a crimson lip. If you desperately wanted this lady-slipper orchid, you might be able to buy one for several hundred dollars; ten years ago, before anyone had propagated it in a nursery, this *Phragmipedium* was extremely rare, and it cost five thousand dollars.

The orchid-poaching case was eventually resolved not on the matter of the orchids but on the matter of the trees, which everyone—Laroche, Baxley, the prosecutor, and the rangers in the Fakahatchee—knew was not the real question but the only clear one left once you sorted out the law. As the law is currently written, Indians are arguably immune from statutes protecting endangered plants anywhere—in state preserves, in private back yards, or on a Seminole reservation. If Bowers and the Osceolas had taken only endan-



"Where can a fellow find some loose tea in this town?"

gered plants, they might have been able to claim complete immunity, and the charges might have been dropped. But most of the orchids Laroche wanted were growing on trees, and he wanted to take them out attached to the branches so their roots wouldn't be damaged. The trees orchids love to grow on—pond apples and common swamp growth—are not endangered. At the hearing, Judge Brenda C. Wilson refused to dismiss the entire case on the grounds of immunity, but the Seminoles were not charged with possession of an endangered species. In that sense, Laroche was right—he had uncovered a basic contradiction in the law. His only mistake was that they had been too painstaking in the way they removed the orchids. A few weeks later, the three Seminoles decided to plead no contest to Florida Administrative Code 16D-2.003 (6), which forbids removal of plant life from state parks, for cutting up trees and taking plants from the state preserve.

Laroche was granted no immunity—the Judge ruled that Indian immunity does not extend to non-Indian tribe employees—so he either had to go to trial or plead no contest to removing both the flowers and the trees. He took the plea. He had to pay a fine and court costs and he was placed on six months' probation, during which he is not allowed into the Fakahatchee Strand. He had won and lost. He had found the loophole in the law but lost the case; found the orchids but lost the right to keep them; and found himself famous but slightly disgraced. He told me that he thought he had been crucified. He seemed animated by the tension of the events, and by the fact that he was right and wrong simultaneously. This put him on the ethically narrow ledge that he considers his favorite place. The one other thing he lost, for now, is the Fakahatchee, which is another favorite place of his.

YOU have to want something very badly to be willing to go looking for it in the Fakahatchee. The Fakahatchee Strand is a preserve of sixty-three thousand coastal lowland acres, about twenty-five miles southeast of Naples, in that part of Collier County where satiny lawns and golf courses give way to wild saw grass with edges as sharp as scythes. Part of the Fakahatchee is deep swamp, part is cypress stand, part is wet woods, part is estuarine tidal marsh, and part is parched wet prairie. Over all, the Fakahatchee is as flat as a cracker. Ditches and dents fill up fast with oozing groundwater. Bumps and wrinkles are easy to see. Most of the land is at an elevation of five or ten feet, and some of it is dead even with the sea.

The Fakahatchee has a certain strange, wild beauty. It is also an aggressively inhospitable place. In fact, the hours I spent retracing Laroche's footsteps were probably the most miserable I have spent in my entire life. The swampy part of the Fakahatchee is hot and wet and buggy, and full of cottonmouth snakes and diamondback rattlers and alligators and snapping turtles and poisonous plants and wild hogs and things that stick into you and on you and fly into your nose and eyes. Crossing the swamp is a battle. You can walk through about as calmly as you would walk through a car wash. In the middle of the swamp, the sinkholes are filled with as much as seven feet of standing water, and the air has the slack, drapey weight of wet velvet. Sides of trees look sweaty. Leaves are slick from the humidity. The mud sucks your feet and tries to keep a hold of them; failing that, it settles for your shoes. The water in the swamp is stained black with tannin from the cypress trees, which is so corrosive that it can cure leather. Whatever isn't wet in the Fakahatchee is blasted. The sun pounds the treeless prairies. The grass gets so dry that the friction from a car can set it on fire, and the burning grass can engulf the car in flames. The Fakahatchee used to be littered with burned-up cars that had been abandoned by pan-fried adventurers. A botanist who travelled through the Fakahatchee in the forties recalled in an interview that he was most surprised by the area's interesting variety of squirrels and by the number of charred Model T's.

Before I left Florida, I went into the swamp with the rangers, who had replanted the orchids Laroche had wanted so badly. Some of the plants were tucked into rock crevices and tree crotches. The sections of branches the ghost orchids were attached to had been wired onto the sides of trees. Orchids are slow to grow and slow to die. It will be some time before anyone can tell which of the purloined plants, if any, will survive. These ghost orchids were not blooming, so I went back out the next day and walked for hours to try to find one that was more than a green strap on a tree. I saw some roots, but it seemed as if the moment of their bloom had passed. I called Laroche to tell him this, and he said, "That's not true. They're out there. I know it. I know where they are." The phone was silent for a moment, and then he cleared his throat and said, "You should have gone with me." ◆

BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

(From Ellen Goodman's syndicated column in the San Francisco Chronicle)

She was the sacrificial lamb who carried the knife around in her own shoot-from-the-hip pocket.