



# Hilo Orchid Society Newsletter

April  
2023

## In-Person Meeting

Note: the meeting scheduled for Sat., April 8, 2023 will be in-person. There will be no Zoom meeting.

Date: Saturday, April 8, 2023  
Time: **1:30** Informal "talk story"  
**2:00** Meeting starts  
Place: Kamana Senior Center,  
127 Kamana St., Hilo  
Speaker: Frank Cervera  
Topic: Orchid Hunting in Ecuador

Our April speaker, Frank Cervera, is an expert on the genus *Phragmipedium*. An ecology professor introduced him to orchids in the 1980s, and he bought a plant of *Phrag. longifolium*. After many years of trying to get a sense of which species were which, and why he was killing so many of his plants, he took matters into his own hands. For twenty-five years, Frank explored the jungles of Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil, studying how *Phragmipediums* and other orchids grow in nature.



This month, Frank will take us along on one of his journeys hunting orchids in Ecuador.

When he's not hunting orchids, Frank works in the financial services industry in New York.

If you'd like to go along on an orchid hunt in the tropical rain forests of Ecuador, be sure not to miss this meeting!

## Pre-Sale Orchid Offer



Our speaker, Frank Cervera, will be bringing orchids to sell at our meeting. *Phragmipediums* and *paphiopedilums* command premium prices, but some of these are plants that slipper orchid growers would kill for, so we are giving you the opportunity to reserve them ahead of time. You should have received an email with details about how to contact Frank about reserving these orchids.

In particular, Frank will be bringing several plants of the spectacular species *Phragmipedium kovachii* (above, one of Frank's \$1000 plants).

*Phrag. kovachii* has huge (7" wide) flowers. It is still rare in collections, and because of its rarity and its spectacular color and size, it commands high prices.

The species was found in Peru in 2002, one of the biggest orchid finds in the last century. Its story involves orchid smuggling, orchid scientists who were deadly rivals, and a federal investigation which ruined reputations and gutted one of the world's premier institutions for orchid identification. For more on the story of *Phrag. kovachii*, see my article on page 2.

## Reminder

Please bring your orchids in bloom to show off on our show table, and if you wish, bring some food for our potluck refreshment table. Mahalo!

# The Scent of Scandal

By Larry Kuekes



*Phragmipedium kovachii* 'Okika', grown by Glen Barfield.

The orchid world is a small one. Craig Pittman wrote a book called *The Scent of Scandal: Greed, Betrayal, and the World's Most Beautiful Orchid*. It recounts a story of orchid smuggling, orchid scientists who were deadly rivals, and a federal investigation which ruined reputations and gutted one of the world's premier institutions for orchid identification, the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida (henceforth referred to as Selby). Whether the orchid involved is actually the "world's most beautiful" is a matter of opinion, but there's no doubt that it caused the biggest disturbance in the world of orchids within my lifetime.

And the thing is, I knew the protagonists on both sides of the issue! I knew the late Eric Christenson when he was a grad student

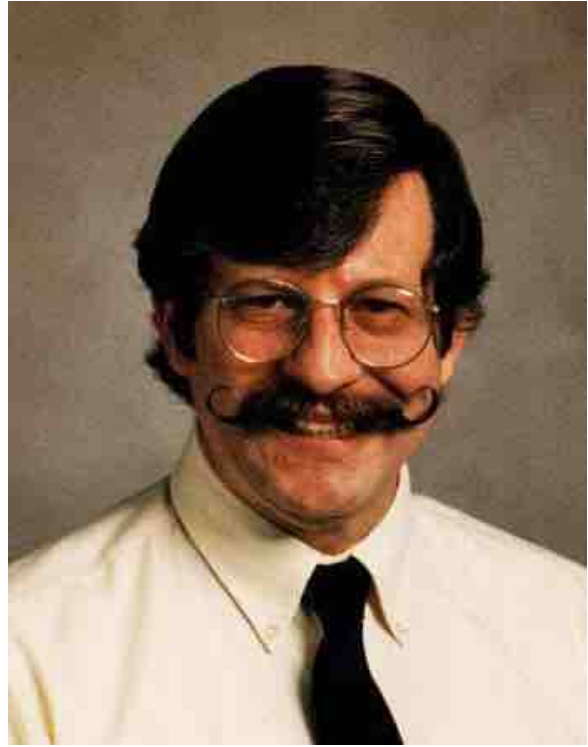
at the University of Connecticut. I was in the Connecticut Orchid Society at the time, as was Eric, before he went on to become one of the world's foremost orchid taxonomists.

And although I didn't know Wesley Higgins, the head taxonomist at Selby, quite as well, he did sleep in my bed. (My guest bed – get your mind out of the gutter!) He stayed overnight at my house when he was a speaker at the Connecticut Orchid Society. I made the mistake of asking him if he knew Eric (this was before the events in the book happened), and received a "yes" so frosty that it could have halted global warming. So I didn't pursue the subject.

Eric was portly and bearded, a great bear of a man. Wes was trim and sported an eccentric big handlebar mustache that looked like it came straight out of the 1890s.



Eric Christenson



Wesley Higgins

Eric was brilliant but unforgiving and had a history of feuding with colleagues. In particular, Eric had worked at Selby in the past but had feuded with them and left. There were many disagreements, but among them, Eric accused other Selby scientists of ethical lapses. In any case, after Eric left, there was no love lost between him and the Selby crew. They hated each other.

In 2002, word was circulating about a magnificent new *Phragmipedium* discovered in Peru, with huge (7" wide) bright pink-purple flowers. This was the biggest orchid find in decades, maybe the biggest of the century. Any taxonomist worth his salt would want to be the one to describe and name it. But there was an additional factor at work. The scientific rule for naming a species is that the name published first wins; any later publication doesn't count. So this wasn't just a competition to name the new orchid – it was a race.

But there was one big obstacle – CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. CITES is an international treaty that the U.S. has signed,

so it has the force of law. It restricts or prohibits importing certain species. In particular, all slipper orchids, including *Paphiopedilums* and *Phragmipediums*, are on the most-restricted list. Since the new orchid was in Peru, and the scientists were in the U.S., and it was illegal to import the orchid, how could a scientist do the examination and illustration of the flower that is required for a scientific description?

Eric solved the problem in an ethical way. He found a scientist in Peru to collaborate with who had access to the flower. Eric wrote up the official description, naming the flower *Phragmipedium peruvianum* after its country of origin and to honor his Peruvian colleagues, and submitted the article to the American Orchid Society's magazine *Orchids*, where it was scheduled to be published in the July 2002 issue, to be mailed out on June 17.

Meanwhile, there was dirty work afoot. Enter Michael Kovach, an amateur orchid grower from Virginia who was trying to set up a small mail-order orchid business. He

comes off in the book not so much as a villain, but as a bumbler who got out of his depth. He became friends with Lee Moore, a smuggler of orchids and pre-Columbian artifacts. On an orchid-collecting trip to Peru in May 2002, Kovach came upon a native selling the fabulous new orchid and acquired a few plants. He confessed to Moore that he would love to have the orchid named after himself. Moore told him what to do: smuggle the orchid into the U.S. "Take the God-damned f\*\*king thing up there to Selby. If you try for a permit, you'll never get a permit."

So Kovach wrapped the orchid in newspaper and hid it in a suitcase with his dirty laundry. He was waved through customs with no problem. On June 5, he showed up at Selby with the flower. Wes Higgins and the other scientists there were intoxicated with the sudden prospect of being able to win the race to describe the fabulous orchid. Kovach asked them to name it after him, and they agreed. Kovach headed home to Virginia. The Selby scientists worked through the night on the scientific description and illustration.

Eric Christenson's later comments on the event revealed his contempt for the Selby staff. "These people are idiots," he said. "Everyone involved knew it was illegal."

In the succeeding days, it became clear, if it wasn't already, that the orchid had been imported illegally. The crucial CITES permit was missing. The Selby staff argued over what to do, but they managed to convince themselves that it would be OK to go ahead and publish. A special unscheduled supplement of their journal *Selbyana* was printed for the express purpose of beating Eric's description in *Orchids* magazine, which they knew would be mailed on June 17. The *Selbyana* supplement was mailed on June 12, naming the orchid *Phragmipedium kovachii* and beating Eric by five days.

Then things started to fall apart. Here I can only gloss over the subsequent events.

The Peruvian government officially complained to the United States government. The U.S. government launched a Federal investigation and grand jury probe. Kovach was convicted and paid a small fine. Selby and Wes Higgins pleaded guilty to receiving and possessing the orchid illegally. It looked like Selby got off with a slap on the wrist (a \$5000 fine), but their reputation was damaged, and their fund-raising dried up as donors stopped giving. They fired their CEO, who ironically had had almost no part in the affair.

Wes Higgins got a \$2000 fine and 6 months of house arrest, but the real bombshell came in 2009 when the new Selby CEO laid him off, along with the other scientists, to save money. Higgins found that no employer would hire him, since he had been convicted of a Federal crime. Having met the guy, I don't think he deserved that fate, even if what he did was wrong. After losing its scientists, Selby could no longer function as an orchid identification center. Orchid identification is now done by other institutions.

Eric Christenson may have been vindicated, but his fate was no better. In April 2011 he died at home, alone and unnoticed. He was 57. His legacy consists of the orchids that he studied and named, and some species and a genus (*Christensonia*) that other scientists had named in his honor.

And what about the scandalous orchid? At the urging of the Peruvian government, the Federal court ordered Selby to petition the scientific authorities to have the orchid's name changed to *Phragmipedium peruvianum*, which would have been its name if Selby hadn't published first with the illegal plant. The petition was denied. The rules of science don't care about governments or Federal judges. The rule is, the first published name wins. So, right or wrong, the orchid will forever be called *Phragmipedium kovachii*, a name that will live in orchid infamy.



1<sup>st</sup> place: *Lycaste* Fire Bird 'Okika', grown by Glen Barfield



Left: 2<sup>nd</sup> place: *Bulbophyllum* species, grown by Jeff Fendenz



Right: 3<sup>rd</sup> place: *Cattleya amethystoglossa* 'Okika' FCC/AOS, grown by Glen Barfield

## Judging Time Change

Starting April 8, the time for AOS judging on the second Saturday of the month is changing from 4:00 pm to 9:00 am. Judging on the 4<sup>th</sup> Friday of the month will remain at 4:00 pm. Both judging sessions are at the same location, the Komohana Ag Extension center in room 203.

## March AOS Awards

Photos by Glen Barfield



Left: *Cattleya amethystoglossa* 'Okika' FCC/AOS, grown by Okika

Right: *Paph. rothschildianum* 'Black Hawk' FCC/AOS, grown by Hilo Orchid Farm



Left: *Paph. Magically Exciting* 'Slipper Zone Tall Brilliance' AM/AOS, grown by Lehua Orchids

Right: *Paph. Pleasure in Pink* 'Slipper Zone SynSation' AM/AOS, grown by Lehua Orchids

# March AOS Awards (continued)

Photos by Jurahame Leyva



Top Left: *Paphiopedilum* Saint Swithin 'OrchidFix Abbondanza' FCC/AOS, grown by OrchidFix

Top Right: *Cattleya praestans* 'Mirtha Isabel' FCC/AOS, grown by Orchid Eros

Left: *Diplocaulobium arachnoideum* CHM/AOS, grown by OrchidFix

Bottom Left: *Cattleya praestans* 'Half Carat' HCC/AOS, grown by Orchid Eros

Bottom Right: *Paphiopedilum stonei* 'OrchidFix Aesir' AM/AOS, grown by OrchidFix



## Hilo Orchid Society Officers and Trustees

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[oliveros@orchideros.com](mailto:oliveros@orchideros.com)

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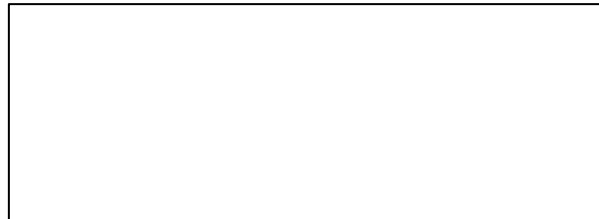
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