

ment Fund are tax deductible by donors. Also bequests, legacies, devices, transfers or gifts are deductible for Federal estate and gift tax purposes.

President Butler on April 30th appointed temporary trustees for the Fund. A number of substantial contributions have been made in cash, stocks and in pledges. We are now very near our goal of a permanent headquarters, but first we must receive sufficient contributions to the Endowment Fund to assure continued maintenance of the garden and for constructing the headquarters building. No definite date has been set for accomplishing this task and for moving headquarters to Masee Lane.

Present and future generations will ever be grateful to Mr. Strother for putting our long held dream of a permanent headquarters of our very own within reach, also to President Butler and many others for establishing the Endowment Fund. With the cooperation of our more than 7,000 members and friends our goal can and must be reached.

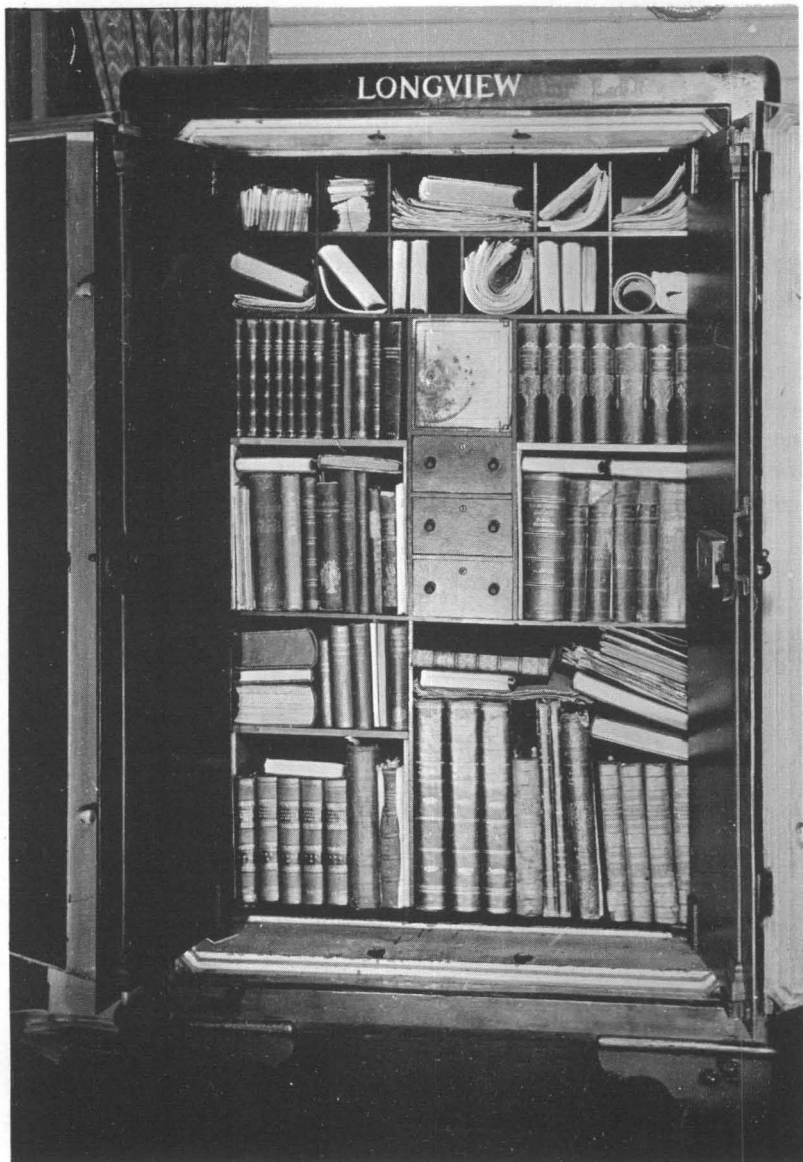
ROBERT O. RUBEL, JR.

. . . *He Has Collected The World's
Finest Camellia Library*

CHARLES L. KEETON
Long Beach, Mississippi

EVEN WITH UNLIMITED FUNDS to invest, it is a virtual impossibility today for an individual to assemble the BEST LIBRARY IN THE WORLD on any specialized subject. Yet this is exactly what Robert Owen Rubel, Jr. of Mobile, Alabama—a man of unlimited energy but limited means—has accomplished during the past half century. That his field of particular interest happened to be the Camellia makes the feat and the library even more remarkable.

Keep in mind that Camellias did not always have such popular appeal that a magazine with a circulation of more than 26 million



Mr. Rubel's safe at "Longview," Mobile, Alabama, showing a few of the 400 rare books on Camellias. The three large volumes in the center are the very rare *Iconographie du Genre Camellia* by Berlèse, illustrated by Jung. Such a set was recently quoted in Traylen's catalogue, an Antiquarian Bookseller in Guilford, England, at £4.850 (\$13,580.00). Mr. Rubel's set should be even more valuable, with the Empress Marie Louise's initials and crest embossed in gold.

copies printed in fourteen languages would publish an article about them (Reader's Digest, Jan. 1966). In fact, when Berlèse's renowned *Iconographie du Genre Camellia* was published in 1841, 1842 and 1843, only 250 sets were printed. Today, because of the rarity of these books plus the widened Camellia interest, a set in good condition—if one could be found for sale would bring a fabulous price. The three volume set was recently offered by a British rare book dealer for £4850 or \$13,500! This is a fair price because the three volumes include 300 beautiful plates by J. J. Jung partly printed in color and finished off by hand. These plates, highly valued as individual objects d'art, have generally brought as high as \$50 each when they could be found. Then too, the glamor of previous ownership tends to increase the value of a set of Berlèse. Mr. Rubel's set was once the property of Empress Marie Louise, second wife of Napoleon, and bears the crown and initials "M L" embossed in gold on each volume. His set, incidentally, is unusually complete, lacking only three of the valuable original plates.

The Berlèse is, of course, the most valuable single item in this or any other camellia library from a monetary standpoint, but there are other books which were equally difficult to locate and purchase. For example, though Mr. Rubel once owned two sets of Berlèse, he was never able to locate more than one copy of the monograph "Les Camellias de Bollwiller" with its 49 plates.

There are about 400 volumes in the library, many rare, and others not so rare. All are fascinating to the camellia lover. The ACS Camellia Journal on page 30 of its September '65 issue, titled "Rubel's Rare Camelliana," mentioned a few outstanding items in the collection. One thing often overlooked, but of which Mr. Rubel is particularly fond, is what the late Dr. H. H. Hume records in his book as the first camellia print in color. It is dated 1745 and shows a camellia, referred to as a "Chinese Rose" in conjunction with a Chinese Peacock Pheasant, a perfect pair.

But this article is not so much concerned with the Rubel library as it is with Robert O. Rubel, Jr. himself. Who is he? Why did he collect this library? And how did he go about finding rare volumes? The answer to this last question lies primarily in the use of his "Wanted to Buy" lists (one of which is reproduced here). These advertisements made bookdealers in every corner of the world aware of Rubel of Crichton (Mobile), Alabama. He spent thousands of hours through four decades in correspondence with these dealers and helpful friends everywhere. That he ended up with perhaps the world's most complete private camellia library is

a testimonial to his ability to "win friends and influence people" as well as to his persistence, patience and good judgment. And even concerning his judgment, Mr. Rubel still has moments when he "kicks" himself for letting excellent volumes get away because the price was too high or the quality not to his standards. He feels that the ability to recognize value and the willingness to pay the price are the key essentials to successful collecting of any kind. But first, of course, there is the difficult job of locating the items which interest you.

Now, as to the man himself. . . . When you meet him, he'll talk of books, camellias, or almost any other interesting subject far quicker than he will about himself. In fact, because of his intense nervous energy and wide interests he's a difficult man to hold on such a dull subject (in his estimation) as himself. As he puts it, "who's interested in an old coot like me?" So, to be agreeable you call him "old man Rubel" as he refers to himself, admit he's an old coot, and don't even disagree when he says he's "just a little hammered down runt." By bandying an occasional insult through the hours of a visit which seem to flit by as minutes, you come to a few conclusions of your own. You become aware that this "old man Rubel" is truly one of the "biggest" men you've ever met—big in heart and mind and big camelliawise. Yes, here is a man as rare among men as the camellia varieties he once introduced were also rare. As you see through and into him, you recognize the heroic proportions of this "hammered down runt." He's truly quite a guy!

"Young Rob" started growing camellias in 1915, and being Southern-born, was no complete stranger to them even before that date. His grandfather in Louisville, Ky. had long before won fame for the name "Rubel" as the South's leading carriage builder. "Young Rob" was a born salesman, one of the rare early breed who instinctively knew, and loved to quote that "anything that can be sold, can be sold by mail." And by mail he sold such diverse things as airplanes, motorcycles, and paint. It was the paint selling phase of his career which brought him to Mobile, but it was camellias which held him there. His Longview Nursery, the natural outgrowth of his love for camellias and mail-order selling was completely unique in the nursery field. He turned down local business with its time-consuming personal selling to stick entirely to selling camellias by mail.

When historians someday do research to find out why camellias began a revival in the 20's and 30's after having been virtually forgotten for more than half a century, the name of Robert Owen

ROBT. O. RUBEL, Jr.

RFD No. 1, Box 137

Crichton, Alabama

WANTED TO BUY

Old horticultural books, magazines, or nursery catalogues, Circa 1790-1880, with illustrated or descriptive text, cultural notes pertaining to CAMELLIA Japonica flowers, and the history of their introduction from China and Japan to Europe or England. Publications in any language desired.

Write giving name of author, title, date, number of pages of text devoted to subject, number of illustrated plates, stating cash price packed for post delivery. All enquiries answered promptly.

DESIDERATUM

Authors, Titles, Dates, etc., as a Guide for Your Search.

American Gardener's Magazine, HOVEY, Boston 1835 and later issues.

Andre, Edouard Francis, PLANTES de TERRES BRUYERS; Paris, n. d. 339 pp.

Baumann, Carl, CAMELLIEN-SAMMLUNG, Bolweller, Mulhouse, 1028, 4 Vols.

Berlese, l'Abbe Laurent, MONOGRAPHIE DU GENRE CAMELLIA, Cousin, Paris, 1837.

Henry A. S. Dearborn, Translation of above, Boston, 1838.

ICONGRAPHIE DU GENRE CAMELLIA, Cousin, Paris, 1841-43, 3 vols. 302 colored plates. Report on any vol. or part of same you may have to offer.

Botanical Register, Vols. XII and XIII, 1826-1827, tab. 983, 1078.

Camello, Georgio Josepho, HERBARIUM ALLIARUMQUE of stirpium in Insula Luzone Philippinarum.

Champion, J. G., THE TERNSTROEMICEOUS OF HONG-KONG, Trans. Linnaeus Society, 1853, Vol. 21, pp 111-116, plates XII-XIII.

Chandler, Alfred, CAMELLIA BRITANNICA, London, 1825, 22 pp., 8 pl.

Chandler, Alfred & Booth, Wm. Beattie, THE NATURAL ORDER CAMELLIACEAE London, 1831, 12 pp., 48 plates.

Choisy, J. D., MEMOIRE SUR LES FAMILLES DES TERNSTROEMICEES ET CAMELLIACEES. Mem. Soc. Phys. et d'Hist. Nat., Geneva, 1855, Vol. 14, pp. 91-96, pl. 1-3.

Cohen, Stuart (C. P. C.), A BASIS FOR TEA SELECTION, BULLETIN JARDIN BOTANIQUE, 1918 Ser. 3, Vol. 193-320, t. 22-31.

Colla, Luigi, CAMELLIOGRAFIA, Turin, 1843, 150 Pp. 2 pl.

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Fontaine, Mile. G., COLLECTION DE CENT ESPECES OU VARIETES DU GENRE CAMELLIA, Brussels, 1845, 100 colored plates.

Flora des Serres, Ghent, issues with text or plates on Camellias. 1845-1880.

Gartenflora, Berlin, issues with text or plates on Camellias. 1852 and later.

Halliday, Robert J.; PRACTICAL CAMELLIA CULTURE, Baltimore, 1880.

Kochs, Julius, UBER DIE GATTUNG THEA UND DEN CHINESISCHEN THEE, Leipzig, 1900, Bot. Jah. XXVII. pp. 577-635, pl. 8.

L'illustration Horticole, Ghent, issues with text or plates on Camellias. 1854 and later.

Le Texnier, LE CAMELLIA, Series "ESSAIS SUR L'HISTOIRE DE QUELQUES FLEURS D'ORNEMENT" Librairie Horticole, Paris, 1911.

Leroy, Louis, Catalogue, Grand Jardin, Angers, France, 1858.

Morren, Edouard; Seconde Notice sur la Duplication des Fleurs et la Panachure du Feuillage a propos du Camellia Japonica La Belgique Horticole, Annoot-Braxckman, Ghent, 1868, Vol. 17.

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A "want list" of Camellia books sent to various book dealers and individuals some years ago by Mr. Rubel in collecting his rare library.

Rubel, Jr. will loom in importance, for I sincerely believe that this modest gentleman did more than any other single person to bring about this renaissance. It was he, above all, who sold the romance of the camellia and stimulated the dream of those who saw his incomparable catalogues that they, too, could grow these blooms so favored by gentility of yore. His 1940 catalogue—titled "Camellias, Floral Gems from China"—a colorful 28 page 8½ x 11 inch sales piece

mailed to 10,000 customers and prospects SOLD camellias as they have never been sold before or since. Proof of the impact of his sales literature, so rich in verisimilitude, is even today clearly apparent when you thumb through the thousands of orders and all the correspondence in the many files he has saved—one complete file drawer for each year he operated Longview. You also see in his customer files a “who’s who” of the camellia world. To me, these files are as important Camelliana as is the Rubel library itself!

Being a naturally thorough man Mr. Rubel from 1915 on had the intense desire to learn more, more and more about camellias and their culture. His search began for books about camellias, and commercial tea plants, as well. He learned that “if you keep the roots happy, the rest of the plant will be happy.” This led him into studying soil chemistry and doing soil analysis. He frequently refused to sell plants to customers until they agreed to have their soil pH and nutrient levels checked. In the case of his own soil, he laughingly admits that the Michigan chemist who made the original tests showed pH to be an approved 5 but reported nutrients “negative” and added, “this is a most remarkable soil and will grow almost anything if you add nutrients.” Needless to say, Rubel added plenty of nutrients when he was producing plants commercially until 1950. Since then a patch of some 4,000 seedlings and his several hundred stock plants which remain have continued to grow well in both sun and semi-shade locations without any attention whatever in spite of growing in a 30-foot layer of “no nutrient” sand and in spite of occasional serious droughts. The stock plants show branches which were damaged in the freezes a few years back but have little scale and bloom well in spite of neglect. “More camellias are killed by over-kindness than by neglect,” says Rubel, and he proves his point.

Possibly the biggest factor in encouraging “Young Rob” Rubel to keep seeking more books on camellias was the fact that so little was known about camellia nomenclature in the early days. He was among the first to see the importance of keeping varietal names straight in a day when camellias were generally sold merely by color. Yet when you suggest that he was certainly one of the early camellia greats who labored to straighten out nomenclatural confusion, he denies it. “Oh, no. I was always too busy running a small business.” If you suggest that his collection of camellia books tends to make a liar out of him and show understanding of how important the books were in helping straighten out early names, he denies further and says he just kept the library and added to it because lots of friends came to use it. And doubtless this was

one reason for building up his library, for it was a rare year that such truly dedicated camelliaphiles as Dave Strother, Arthur Solomon, Dr. Hume and others failed to beat a path to Rubel's door. In fact, it was the late Dr. Harold Hume, an excellent judge of both blooms and books, who was responsible for first referring to the Rubel camellia library as "the world's finest."

In 1950 at the peak of his career "Young Rob" woke up one morning to find out that he had suddenly become "old man Rubel." He had had a stroke in the night and couldn't use his left arm and hand. In time he completely recovered, but having always been an admirer of Mother Nature, Rubel took her friendly warning. He kept Longview, his home and site of his nursery, but sold his container grown plants and quit business. Shortly after starting his retirement he spent seven months in Europe where he spent a lot of time visiting book dealers and camellia people he had previously known only by mail.

Through the past quarter century "old man Rubel" has lived the simple "life of Rubel," a shade fuller than the proverbial "life of Riley." He admits he's been as active as any man alive and today at 76 years of age still is. If you are skeptical about this, the doubt soon leaves as he starts you off on a tour of the Longview that once was, or at least of the 20 acres left of it. It must indeed have been a day of glory "when you could see twenty miles from the doorstep," but as he says, "trees have grown, and I just won't cut down a tree." You find yourself almost at a trot to keep up with him as he leads you into the pine forest to show a buddha, the only survivor of a large and once beautiful Oriental garden which was destroyed by fire twenty-five years back. You zip past the decadence of abandoned greenhouses.

You admire a goldfish pond, and he tells you no digging was necessary to construct it. Deep ruts made by ox-drawn carts traveling the original trail west from Mobile were the beginning, and Rubel merely preserved and beautified the ruts by conversion into a concrete pool.

You note plants of camellia species other than japonica and sasanquas, notably a *C. pitardii* and *cuspidata* grown from Chinese seed planted in 1949. And talk gets onto planting seed. Rubel tells of a time when he imported 142 pounds of camellia seed from Italy, which figured at 400 seed to the pound (his estimate) was about 56,000 seeds. He planted them all, but had little luck with the planting because the Italian nurseryman failed to send them promptly as collected. "But that was good" compared to an equally large shipment from Japan. "Not one seed germinated," and he is



One of the beautiful photographs made by Mr. Rubel, another of his hobbies

convinced, as are other old-timers who bought Japanese seed, that the Japanese at that time boiled their seed before shipping to America to make sure that they would not germinate. Rubel was a great admirer of the old China before the Commies took over. He had many friends in China and even today is holding the Reticulata manuscript of one of them who got lost in the Chinese political change over. This was reproduced in Frank Griffin's "Camellian" volume published a couple years back.

Rubel's taste in camellias has always run to formals and still does. 'TEUTONIA' is the one which comes most frequently into his conversation, though 'BLOOD OF CHINA' and 'ALBA PLENA' were his all-time best sellers.

One little story of Rubel's which I liked because it shows an insight into his character dealt with his visit to a local banker to borrow money to build another greenhouse when money was tightest in 1932. Rubel listed among his chief assets "30,000 camellias valued at 25¢ each." Since most Mobile bankers all understand the rudiments of the nursery business and since this man knew camellias brought good prices, he asked Rubel how he arrived at the valuation. "The cost of the pots," answered Rubel, well knowing that camellias are living plants which must be properly tended to have value. The banker got the point, and Rubel got the money.

In talking of the business side of propagating and selling plants Rubel pointed out that camellias were never the dream plants that azaleas are because camellias must be held so much longer. Because of this there was a time in early years when Longview sold azaleas as a money crop to enable camellias to be held to greater size, but through most of the years he operated Longview he was indeed what he said he was, "America's leading camellia specialist."

One of Rubel's pet dislikes happened to be the late president Franklin D. Roosevelt. When FDR made his final run for office, Rubel did all he could to defeat him. He sent anti-FDR literature in quantity to his 10,000 mailing list and along with the literature enclosed order forms for an "ugly blooming" seedling he named 'ROOSEVELT BLUES'. In retrospect, he says, "the mailing didn't lick FDR, but it sold the entire stock of 'ROOSEVELT BLUES'."

As you walk around Longview with Rubel trying to keep the talk on camellias you realize that you are fighting a losing battle. Directing his conversation is futile effort, but the Rubel charm shines through regardless of the subject matter. He has the sparkling light touch of the well-balanced man who never takes himself too seriously. You find yourself carried off into the world of electronics, another of the Rubel hobbies. Longview currently is a marvel of electronics rather than camellias, for thanks to more than two miles of buried wire it has huge lions which roar, an ersatz parrot which talks, and a buried mosquito which hums even in its grave. All these novelties—and others, his "ghost room," etc.—are provided to please children whom he delights in entertaining providing they are "in groups, with boys and girls at separate times, and none more than fifteen years old." Mr. Rubel never married, probably never having found a woman who could stand the mad pace he leads. And on that word "mad," he makes his proudest boast. "Some of the neighbors are convinced that I'm crazy." Naturally, being the sane, highly intelligent man he is, he does all he can to keep up the illusion.

Rubel, the collector, the camellia expert, the photographer, the electronics wizard, the showman, are all one—all combined in one "little hammered-down runt." But you've only scratched the surface of his hobbies. He collects not only camellia literature but he collects any and every kind of junk which happens to strike him as a bargain. He's reassembled some of his "junk" into a kind of classic Greco-Roman garden, some columns from one wrecking job and granite pieces from another. One of the two baths in his simple little frame home contains what is undoubtedly the oldest bathtub in the Mobile area. It is carved from a block of marble and was

once given by a King of Spain to an early resident when this was under his rule. So it goes at Longview, from the sublime of a Berlèse original to the ridiculous of an electronic mosquito humming in its grave. Yet it all seems, and is, part of this man's full life.

Possibly on page 14 of that Rubel catalogue of 1940, the genuine Rubel who has assembled the world's finest camellia library shows through better than it does in conversation. This was an almost half page ad published on behalf of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society at Rubel's expense. It says, "The above advertisement has been published in appreciation of the many valuable services rendered by their librarian, for research work on Camellias, the loan of valuable books, and other helps gained through my membership in this worthwhile organization during the past fifteen years." I think this suggests the side he strives to keep hidden under the facade of levity. The truth is that R. O. Rubel is a scholar as well as a gentleman and tries to keep the fact hidden. Incidentally, he's loyal as well, for his membership in the Massachusetts Horticultural Society has now extended over 38 years, and he has also long been a fellow in Britain's Royal Horticultural Society. His membership in the Mobile Kiwanis Club dates from its beginning in 1919. And concerning his long membership in the ACS he has this to say: "The ACS annuals alone are each worth twice the \$6 dues, figured at the price books bring today."

This article is intended only as a "once over lightly" for a fine gentleman and scholar who has lived, and lives, a wonderfully useful life, a man of widely diverse interests, but who for more than fifty years has had camellias and camellia literature and camellia people at the head of his interests. There isn't space enough for the "depth" to do him justice. Actually, as I see it, this is but one of the many articles which will be written about Robert Rubel because I believe that his importance in the camellia world is not understood and will not be fully understood for years to come. Meanwhile, if you can lay your hands on one of the Longview catalogues or any other Rubeliana, save it. Like the Camelliana Rubel has collected, it will gain value with the years.