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# the TROPICAL GARDEN

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(L-R) Jim Dorsett and his father Palemon H. Dorsett with the movie camera in Java.  
Photo: Courtesy FTBG Archives and Library.

# Dr. David Fairchild: The Motion Pictures

By Javier Francisco-Ortega, Ph.D.; Marianne Swan;  
Diane Wunsch; Carl Lewis, Ph.D.; and Brett Jestrow, Ph.D.



## New Historical Discoveries

Our recent historical research projects on Dr. David Fairchild's botanical contributions have led us to perform studies outside the unique collections of the Garden's Archives.

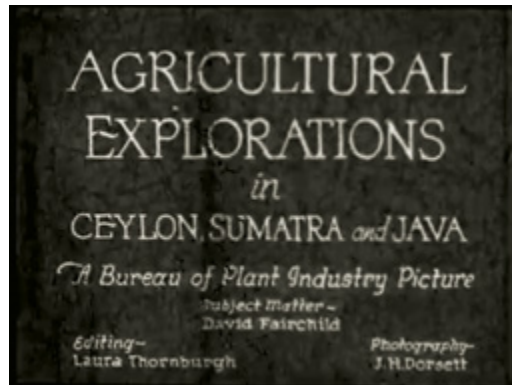
They have resulted in three new discoveries. The first is the earliest color photos of Dr. Fairchild,

located in the University of Montreal and made by Brother Marie-Victorin, a member of La Salle Catholic Congregation who founded the Botanic Garden of Montreal. The second is a previously unknown set of superb photos of the research yacht *Utowana*, which is housed at the Special Collections of the USDA's National Agricultural Library (NAL). The third is a two-volume, 902-page, fully illustrated travelogue of Dr. Fairchild's 1931-1932 expedition to the West Indies and Guianas. The travelogue was prepared by USDA botanist and plant collector Palemon H. Dorsett, and is located at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

These three historic findings have already been presented in *The Tropical Garden* or in the research journal of the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, *Huntia* (Vol. 17: 5-35, 2018). The late Larry Schokman, one-time director of the Kampong National Tropical Botanical Garden and advocate for South Florida green spaces, was instrumental in developing several components of this previous research, and this article pays homage to his great legacy and influence on tropical botany and horticulture, particularly in our community.

## Dr. Fairchild and the USDA Plant Explorers in Movies

Our findings provide novel perspectives on Dr. Fairchild's plant-hunting expeditions. Research at NARA, NAL, and the Garden's Archives has revealed that motion picture films were made during at least



Title shot of the motion picture made during plant exploration activities in SE Asia.  
Photo: Courtesy U.S. National Archives and Record Administration.

three plant-hunting endeavors led by Dr. Fairchild or his colleagues from the USDA's Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction.

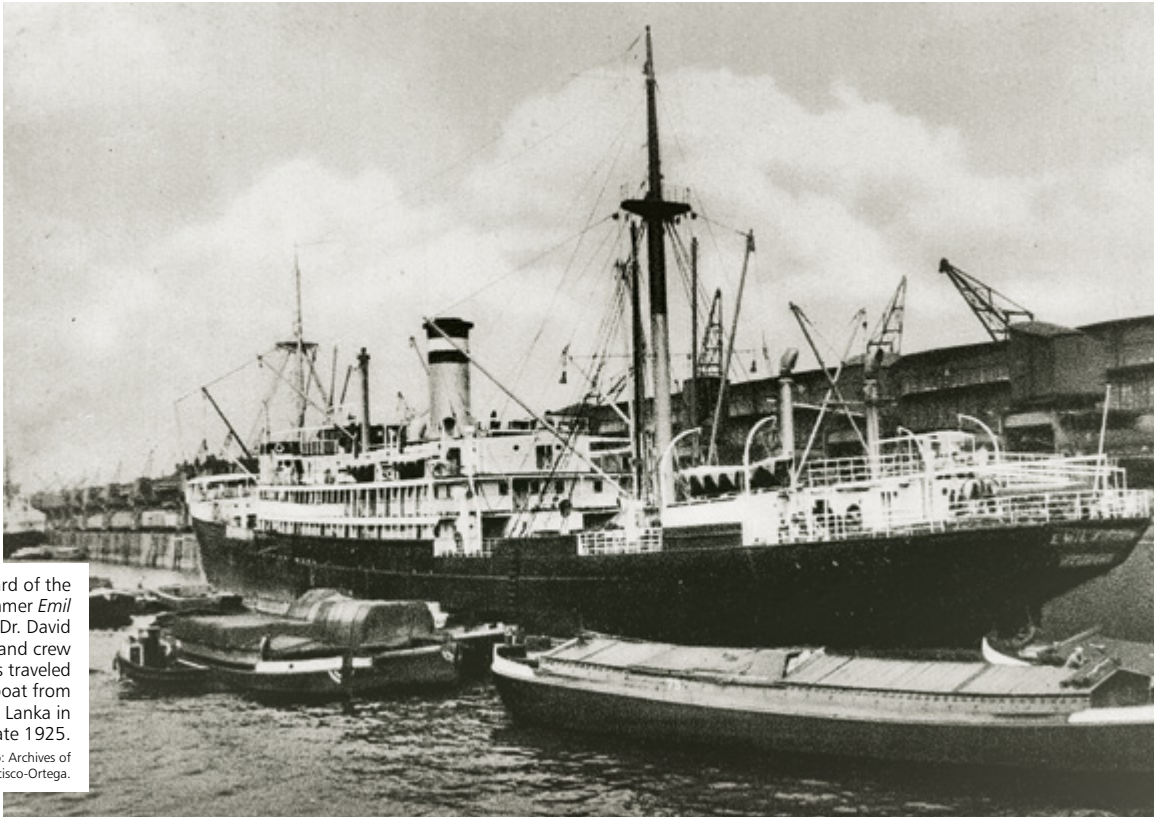
Documents found in the Garden's Archives support that one of these movies was made during the first official plant exploration enterprise sponsored by our Garden: the *Cheng*

*Ho* Expedition, which targeted Indonesia and the Philippines in 1939 and 1940. Unfortunately, this film has not been located and it is uncertain if it still exists.

The illustrated travelogue of the 1931-1932 USDA trip to the West Indies and Guianas provides a record of a movie made during another one of Dr. Fairchild's expeditions. During this voyage "1,200 feet of motion pictures" were filmed in 12 spools, it notes. They included images of daily life on *Utowana*, and also of gardens, plants, and landscapes of Dominica, Martinique, Guyana, and Surinam. The travelogue reports that the last of these 12 reels documented the "unloading of plants from the yacht *Utowana* while she was tied to the wharf [sic] in the harbor of the Navy Yard." (The Navy Yard is located in Washington, D.C.) The whereabouts of these 12 films are unknown; clearly, finding them will be a major contribution to the history of plant exploration in the Caribbean and to our knowledge of how Dr. Fairchild and his colleagues performed fieldwork for the USDA. This movie, according to the travelogue, also shows images of Dr. Fairchild and of Allison V. Armour.

## The U.S. National Archives and Records

The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration and the Special Collections of the National Agricultural Library have the only known motion pictures of Dr. Fairchild's trips as a plant collector. Indeed, we are not aware of any other cinematographic evidence of him. One silent film,



Postcard of the steamer *Emil Kirdorf*. Dr. David Fairchild and crew members traveled on this boat from Italy to Sri Lanka in late 1925.  
Photo: Archives of Dr. Javier Francisco-Ortega.

copies of which are housed in these two archives, presents details of his December 1925 to June 1926 visit to East Asia (Java, Sri Lanka, and Sumatra) during the 1925–1927 Allison V. Armour Expeditions for the USDA. These expeditions were largely performed on *Utowana* and targeted Asia, West Africa, the Canaries, Portugal, and the Mediterranean Basin. Armour was a wealthy businessperson who owned *Utowana* and sponsored several of Dr. Fairchild’s expeditions. However, the trip to East Asia did not take place on *Utowana*, but on the German vessel *Emil Kirdorf*, because Armour’s research yacht was out of service during this time. Interestingly, details about this historical movie were included in the travelogue for the 1931-1932 expedition to the Caribbean and Guianas. The film was shot by Jim Dorsett, son of the travelogue’s author, Palemon H. Dorsett.

The final movie was entitled *Agricultural Exploration in Ceylon, Sumatra, and Java* (Sri Lanka was then called Ceylon), and was released by the Office of Motion Pictures of USDA in 1932; Laura Thornburgh of that office edited it. Dr. Fairchild clearly appears in five scenes of the movie, in Sri Lanka. One of these scenes shows him surveying “little-known fruits and vegetables” in “village markets.” He is also spotted examining “King Coconuts,” a cultivar that is regarded to be the “best milk-producing coconut on

the island.” In another shot he is eating a grapefruit relative: *Aegle marmelos* (common name bael). The last two scenes have him tasting “the famed edible husk coconut,” also known as “Nawasa coconut,” and learning about the “801 uses” of “The Palmyra palm” (also known as the wine palm, *Borassus flabellifer*) in Tamil villages off northern Sri Lanka. A short note published in *The Miami Herald* (April 26, 1932), reported that Dr. Fairchild himself showed this movie during a “free illustrated lecture” delivered in the “Grove Theater” on April 27, 1932.

The National Agricultural Library recently conserved and digitized its copy of this unique movie, and has made it available online. An introductory article about this historical finding was written by Kim Kaplan for the ARS-USDA digital publication *Tellus* (December 2018). The Garden’s Archives have two photos from Java that are complementary to the actual film. One of these photos shows Jim Dorsett and his father with the camera; the second is of Jim Dorsett filming a dance known as “the Wiang of Hobby Horse Knights.” The actual footage that he captured of this dance appears in the motion picture. Labels on two of the pages of Dr. Fairchild’s photo album provide additional reference for this movie. This first reads: “The Sultan of Solo’s Wiang Orang. Performing in the Zoological Garden at Soerakartja before a moving picture machine.” The second reads: “Performance of



Jim Dorsett  
filming the Wiang  
of Hobby Horse  
Knights in Java.  
Photo: Courtesy FTBG  
Archives and Library.


the Sultan of Solo's Wiang Orang before Tusillo Adams movie camera in the Sultan's zoo in Soerakarta."

Research undertaken in the Garden Archives turned up additional details on "Tusillo Adams movie camera" – it appears that the name of the owner of this camera was misspelled in the photo album. It should read "Tassilo Adam," a German ethnologist who spent many years in Indonesia documenting its people and culture through photography, including motion pictures. It seems that Dr. Fairchild and crew met him during this expedition and used his camera to make at least part of the movie. There are a few references to Adam in Dr. Fairchild's *Utowana* address book, including one in which there is a note to order some of Adam's photos.

The Garden Archives also has a copy of a report sent to W.A. Taylor (chief of the USDA Bureau of Plant Industry) by Palemon Dorsett from China in 1926, in which there are details of the Sri Lanka–Sumatra–Java expedition. This report has two photos of the Dorsetts with a film camera. Its last page includes the following statement: "We have quite a lot of motion picture film and hope

to be able when we get back [sic] that a motion picture is not only an important but also an essential part of the equipment of a foreign agricultural explorer."

## Coming Historical Research Activities

Subsequent research in the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration turned up three additional relevant movies. One of them, called *Bamboos—The Giant Grasses of the Orient*, was directed by Dr. Fairchild and focuses on the versatility and economy of bamboo as a building and manufacturing material. The second film, *Persimmon Harvesting and Storage in China*, came from the 1924-1926 plant exploration enterprises of the Dorsetts in China; however, Dr. Fairchild did not join this expedition. The last of these three films, *Naturalized Plant Immigrants*, provides an overview on the plant introduction program of the USDA. Our next historical research steps will involve digitizing, posting online, and interpreting these three additional movies. 

View Dr. Fairchild on film at [www.fairchildgarden.org/url/Fairchild-on-Film](http://www.fairchildgarden.org/url/Fairchild-on-Film).

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