Today, the Virginia Orchid Society reflects and celebrates its seventy-plus years of existence. Not unlike many other organizations, the actual beginnings of the VOS were spread over several years, while the growth and maturation of this organization continues to this date (June 20th, 2023). The first and seminal meeting was a gathering in the garage/potting shed of Mrs. J.G. (Guy) Palmore (Evelyn) business woman and daughter of Granville Herndon, printer and publisher, Richmond, VA. Evelyn Palmore had grown orchids for a number of years in her backyard greenhouse in Richmond’s “Northside”. This get-together was initiated by Henry S. Spencer, a first-year medical student at the Medical College of Va. Henry was born and raised by a family of physicians and landholders in Lee County, Virginia (bordering Tennessee). Henry had been associated with the McDades of Rivermont Orchids (TN) and was a promoter/sales person for the New Jersey orchid firm, Harold Patterson & Sons’ Orchidhaven. A number of persons in Richmond, known to be interested in orchids were invited to the gathering at Palmore’s including Mr. Barron Howard, counsel and business manager, WRVA radio station, and Rev. W. Leigh Ribble, pastor of Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. A steering committee was formed: Mrs. Palmore, Dr. Spencer, and Rev. Ribble.

This small group of enthusiasts decided to continue to meet, organize and expand membership to other orchid growers. Early participants in this fledgling group included Rev. W.W. Norfleet, I.O. Keeton (Ira), owner of the “hot” night-spot WIGWAM (Rt. 1, north of Richmond); Mrs. Vanderhoof, wife of Dr. Douglas Vanderhoof, Professor of Medicine, Medical College of Virginia; Mrs. William Thalhimer, wife of William B. Thalhimer, owner of Thalhimers Department Store (6th and Broad Streets, Richmond): Dr. Safrit, Principal, Richmond Public Schools; Mr. & Mrs. C.T. Benjamin (Ann & Charlie), owners of Timberlake’s Auto Garage; Dr. & Mrs. H.A. Woolridge (Dr. Woolridge was a practicing general dentist); Mrs. Jean Wright (Rianhart), loan officer State Planter’s Bank & Trust; Mr. and Mrs. R.P. Eagles (Robert was an officer - A.H. Robins Corporation); Mr. Percy Carr, Richmond executive; Mr. & Mrs. L.F. Penny (Frank and Emmie Lou) (Frank was an employee - Massey Coal Co.); Mr. Wilbur Cross, Vice-President Bank; Dr. & Mrs. Manfred Call (Dr. Call was senior internist, Stuart Circle Hospital, Richmond) - and others.
From this listing of early participants, it may be realized that the Virginia Orchid Society was not a proletarian group. Rather, the aura of elitism was in part the consequence of the cost of orchid plants and of the construction and maintenance of glasshouses. Practically speaking, orchid growers in the Richmond area did not grow on windowsills or under lights in the fifties and sixties. More relevant to the elitist nature of the society, membership was by invitation only, and the society officers deliberated the “suitability” of prospective invitees. Membership did expand from the original dozen to about two dozen during the first decade of the VOS. Initially meetings were held in the member’s homes, except during the summer, when members were either “at the rivah” or “on tour”. Later meetings were held in public places such the Maymont Nature Center, or in The State Planter’s Bank & Trust Co. (Summit & Broad Streets branch), and subsequently in the 1980’s in one of several local garden clubhouses: Richmond Council of Garden Clubs, Hermitage Rd., and West End Community Center. Since then, the VOS has met in various other establishments: The Science Museum of Virginia, Strange’s Garden Center, Belmont Recreation Center, and currently, the Kelly Education Center at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden. In the mid-sixties, the VOS numbered more than thirty persons. By the early nineties, this number was about one hundred. This increase in persons interested in orchid growing did not index a proportional increase in the number of greenhouses in the community.

Although the character of the members’ collections changed with time, VOS members lagged behind other grower-areas in the diversity of types of orchids collected and grown. The Cattleya collections became more diversified with Cattleyas sharing space with a myriad of other genera and of varieties of Cattleyas. “Odd balls”
and species of other genera, along with miniature Catts became popular. These were more easily accommodated on windowsills and under lights culture (fluorescent first, high-intensity later). The composition of the VOS membership changed from growers of essentially all Cattleyas in greenhouses (large and small), to a majority of members growing an array of genera, species and hybrids, in greenhouses, under lights, or on windowsills.

When the meeting site shifted from a visit to members’ homes to a public meeting place, members brought to the monthly meetings their “blooming prizes” for show. Again, it was a rare sight to see other than a “standard” Catt in the fifties, but by the seventies, meeting attendees were treated to a delightful array of many new and “different” orchids. Even the standard white, white with colored lip and lavender/purple Catts were being replaced by a spectrum of colored flowers - yellows, sunset hues, reds, spotted and splash-petaled beauties, and even greens and “blues”. The stalwart Catt growers were responding to the availability of wondrous variety of orchids that could be grown under different conditions.

It would seem as if we human beings need to feed when we meet. Members of the VOS were no exception. Refreshments at members’ homes were succeeded by spreads of great variety of foods and drink at the monthly meetings. Early-on, the VOS held an annual banquet, celebrated in formal attire (evening gown & tie-tails or tux) at one of the area Country Clubs. These were sometime held at the Wigwam Club (noted above). Formal wear was shed as the Society became more democratized. A picnic became an annual event outdoors (sans parasol and pinafore). The annual business meeting in the merry month of May has been celebrated with an indoor picnic or “covered dish” affair. Midwinter special dinner meetings have been held at hotels, private clubs, and on several occasions, at the Officers Club, Fort Lee, Virginia.

The nature of the regular meetings of the VOS has evolved away from a casual social get-together to structured programs with speakers on a variety of subjects. For a period of time, the monthly display table was judged and critiqued for the attendees with some attempts towards educational information. Table entries were tallied and prizes awarded at the end of each year in a number of categories. A class for entries by “novice growers” - those beginners with a few plants - became a part of the showing process.
Early in the first decade of its existence the VOS worked to expand educational benefits of the regular meetings in the public view through society sponsored shows and displays. At first, only a few “outside” speakers came during a year of meetings, but later, as the number of members and resources of the society grew, more speakers were invited to VOS meetings. By the late eighties, each regular meeting featured a knowledgeable speaker, even occasionally from another part of the USA. Meanwhile, the annual dinner and the May luncheon meetings included a special presentation from a guest speaker. In summary, the VOS evolved from a small group of orchid hobbyists, gathering more for social and less educational aims, to an organization dedicated to self as well as public educational goals.

As to the guidance and governance, the needs of the VOS have changed from several officers: President and Secretary-Treasurer, to an Executive Board: President, Vice-President, Secretary (Recording & Corresponding), Treasurer; and a cadre of committees, each with chair-persons. What could be easily administered by an oligarchy for the few now mandates involvement by many persons to carry forth the goals and objectives of the society. In this respect, the VOS is not different from the metamorphosis of much of human endeavor.

The VOS has been guided by a number of very dedicated persons, several of which must be singled out as outstanding members. Founder, Dr. Henry S. Spencer, moved to Washington, D. C. in 1953 to pursue his chosen field of medicine: radiology. Barron Howard served as Secretary-Treasurer for a number of years. Mrs. Jeanie Wright (Rianhart) served for many years of meetings in her employer’s bank. She also provided liaison for the Society to hold public shows at the bank. Mrs. Helen Woolridge served as President (1962-1964) and as Secretary (1959-1976). Many other members have served the VOS, and for extended periods of time.

Back to the beginning, the name: The Virginia Orchid Society was chosen after deliberation, which has since escaped recollection, however it is fair to say that prior to 1950, there were no other named orchid groups in the State of Virginia. The nearest association was the National Capital Orchid Society, Washington, D.C., which was founded a few years earlier in 1947. Subsequent to the organization of the VOS, orchid societies were formed in Roanoke (Blue Ridge Orchid Society, 1953), in the Tidewater area (Tidewater Orchid Society, 1966; Peninsula Orchid Society of Virginia, 1978), Charlottesville (Charlottesville Orchid Society, 1975); and Winchester (Lord Fairfax Orchid Society). On March 9, 1953, the Virginia Orchid Society was formally affiliated with the American Orchid Society, Inc.

The VOS joined with other societies in the creation of The Eastern Orchid Congress at Longwood Gardens in 1956 and continued to support the EOC, sponsoring the Fifth EOC meeting in Richmond in 1960. This event was held with an orchid show in a unique venue - the basement of the Carillon Memorial Building in Richmond’s Byrd Park. In September 1971, the VOS cosponsored, with the EOC, the Fiftieth Anniversary of the American Orchid Society in Colonial Williamsburg. A report of that meeting is found as centerfold in the American Orchid Society Bulletin Vol. 40, No. 9, September 1971.
number of its annual shows in the lobby of State Planter’s Bank & Trust on Broad Street; in the Virginia Center Commons Mall (US Rt. 1, North); at The Science Museum of Virginia on West Broad St.; Strange’s Garden Center in Short Pump; and at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden.

The VOS continues to participate in the orchid shows of other societies and in local horticultural and nursery events. After several years of not sponsoring an orchid show, the VOS held a public Event and Show at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, June 2006. In February 2007, the VOS held its first AOS-accredited judged show at Strange’s Garden Center; these annual shows continued until the Covid-19 pandemic, with the last show held here on February 21-23, 2020. These events signal a renewed enthusiasm and energy for the promulgation of orchid interests by the Virginia Orchid Society.

Besides the shows which were American Orchid Society accredited and judged, the VOS has staged public displays at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts “Fine Art and Flowers” (N. Arthur Ashe Boulevard), at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, and at several commercial nurseries’ open public events. As sister orchid societies held shows, the VOS has participated, both as a society and by individual VOS members. Likewise, neighboring orchid societies have participated in the VOS shows.

The future of The Virginia Orchid Society is secure and looks bright. In the year 2000, the VOS, the Tidewater Orchid Society, and the Peninsula Orchid Society cosponsored the Eastern Orchid Congress (EOC) and the annual meeting of the American Orchid Society Trustees, October 20-22 in Williamsburg, VA. At the close of this EOC meeting, the governing board of the EOC voted to disband the EOC organization. The assets of the EOC were distributed by action of that board with each participating Virginia society receiving a portion of the EOC’s assets (said to be upwards of $5,000). Several factors entered into this decision. It was thought that one of the original purposes of the EOC - to provide programs of authorities and knowledgeable speakers that would not otherwise be available to smaller local societies - had “served its day” and was no longer an essential contribution. Many of the EOC affiliated societies were by the late nineties able to afford and attract speakers, independently of the EOC. Another, more critical factor, was that it had become (for whatever reason) more difficult to schedule hosting (and site provision) by affiliated societies of the ongoing

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EOC meetings. It is entirely possible that this was the natural consequence of the metamorphosis of orchid societies from small elitist bodies of affluent growers (with spare time to devote to organizational activities) to larger groups of hobbyists with less spare time from competing daily activities. Also, fatigue from repetitive utilization of the few people that had spare time may have entered into the picture.

Of significance to the continued evolution of the Virginia Orchid Society, in 2005, a small band of longtime VOS members became disenchanted with “the way things were going and disagreement of how to utilize the monetary gift from the EOC” and formed a new, independent organization - The Richmond Orchid Alliance. Some of these former VOS members discontinued participation in the VOS, while other persons allied with both orchid organizations. Each of these organizations strived to appeal to new members and that broadened the opportunities available to people interested - at whatever level - in orchids. As of 2007, the VOS embraced approximately one hundred individual and family members. The Richmond Orchid Alliance disbanded in 2017.

The VOS continues to hold nine monthly meetings - September to May - and for several years (September 2012 through May 2015) met at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond. The meeting venue switched to Strange’s Garden Center in Short Pump (September 2015 through February 2020) until the Covid-19 pandemic hit. After a period with no meetings, meetings soon were held at Belmont Recreation Center in Henrico County, both via zoom and in-person, until they returned to Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in September 2022. This venue continues to provide increased exposure of the VOS activities to the general public interested in plants and horticulture as well as provides an excellent location in the conservatory for our annual orchid shows.