



Writing the next chapter of the citrus story

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There are two big citrus anniversaries this year: the centennial of the founding of the Citrus Research and Education Center (CREC) and the 50th anniversary of the publication of “Oranges” by John McPhee.

McPhee is a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, and he knows where to find a story. He figured out that part of the citrus story was at the CREC in Lake Alfred, and he returned there at least a dozen times in the 1960s.

You’re invited to Lake Alfred to experience the CREC story yourself at our 100th anniversary celebration. It’s scheduled for Nov. 29 at the center’s Ben Hill Griffin, Jr. Citrus Hall.

McPhee visited with then-director Herman Reitz and told him about a photo of a man in California picking oranges from a basket on a mechanical arm like a utility lineman.

“That,” Reitz told McPhee, “is a seven-thousand-dollar ladder.”

FINDING NEEDLES IN HAYSTACKS

In another account from McPhee, a pair of researchers at what was then known as the Citrus Experiment Station went searching for a Persian lime seed. They needed it to research a virus.



Philip Reece and J.F.L. Childs cut up 1,855 limes and found not a single seed. They went to a concentrate plant and got two dump-truck loads of pulp discarded from the making of limeade. Then they went through it all by hand. They got their seed, and even a second.

These amusing stories illustrate the ethos of the center that survives today.

The no-nonsense deadpan of Reitz is echoed by our research faculty, who are judicious in not rushing headlong toward every potential advance. There’s some Reece and Childs in the researchers who take thousands of shots on goal in greenhouse and grove as they try to breed a better orange, including one resistant to HLB.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

In the 50 years since the publication of McPhee’s book, the center’s name has changed. An entomologist

not yet born when the book debuted now leads the center. Agricultural biotechnology has emerged as a promising tool for solutions since McPhee last visited.

The CREC is still at the center of the citrus story. If McPhee were writing a sequel, I believe he’d head straight for Lake Alfred. It’s where he’d find a familiar partnership among growers, government and university scientists continuing to make citrus history.

I invited McPhee to Florida last year to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the initial publication of “Oranges” as a series in *The New Yorker*. I got a handwritten reply: “You people are wonderful and I wish I could send you a positive response to your amazing invitation — 50 years after my wanderings in the citrus groves.”

Now in his mid-80s, he politely declined, citing the need to save his energy for teaching and writing another book.

That pretty much rules out the sequel. Together, we’ll write our own sequel with science.

THE CITRUS SAGA PERSEVERES

Some suggest it’s a requiem we’re working on. Don’t believe it. The threat to the industry perhaps makes the story more dramatic than we’d like it to be, but the chapters will continue to unfold.

University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences researchers hope to write one on the demise of HLB as a threat to the industry’s existence.

I find comfort that we have a century-old institution dedicated to solutions. We want to celebrate the history we share with you, so this year’s citrus field day will double as a 100th birthday party. Bring your photographs and memories.

Don’t miss it, because the following day, we’re back to what we’ve been doing for a century: writing the book on the future of citrus. 🍊

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