



George W. Holsinger

# *The First Fifty Years*

*By: George Holsinger*

*George W. Holsinger was born August 4, 1874 in Rosedale (in Kansas City, Kansas).*

*He entered the nursery business about 1898 with two brothers, doing business as Holsinger Brothers Nursery. In 1915 they were joined by Laurence E. Wilson, and the name of the business was changed to Holsinger Nursery Company. He died in Nov, 1944.*

This year (1940) we nurserymen join the ranks of three veteran trade associations who have reached the half century mark, celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> annual meeting here in Kansas City. Like the Western Retail Implement and Hardware Association and Southwestern Lumbermen's Association, these annual meetings here have made us all feel that we're very much a part of this community. We wish it were possible to have with us today representatives of each of the 17 firms which made up the original Western Association of Wholesale Nurserymen.

Those men would undoubtedly remember the early day Kansas City as a thriving little river town, with a lunging cable car whose uncertainties made a ride "uptown" a thrilling experience. They could recall for us the days of fine horses, and tallyho carriages when the Blossom House, Centropolis, Coates House and Midland Hotels were centers of the town's social life.

Unfortunately, records of a first meeting, sometime in 1890, are not in existence. We know, however, that such a meeting was held because of a reference to the "absence of elected officers"

when a second session was held January 6, 1891, in the offices of Blair and Kaufman, located at what is now 9<sup>th</sup> and Grand.

In those days this location must have been on the very outskirts of town as most trade was centered "on the levee" close to the river's edge – streets being literally carved through a series of rocky bluffs. The present New York Life Building was, in those days, the town's skyscraper.

Decided changes have also taken place in men's apparel. Early day photographs show prominent members of the association in long frock coats and three inch collars

topped with bow ties. There's a particularly good shot of George Marshall with a handlebar mustache, looking very debonair indeed. But whatever the changes in customs and fashions in men's clothing, here was a close-knit friendly little group which has never grown too large to know each other's problems intimately and to value highly the friendships resulting from the Association.

At this second meeting, following the appointment of a temporary chairman, the following officers and executive committee were elected to "revise the constitution and enlarge the membership":

Of these founders, only W.P. Stark is with us today. On our invitation, he's coming back to help us celebrate this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary together with Missouri's Governor, Lloyd C. Stark, who served as president of the Association in 1916.

Membership in the Western Association, then as now, was by invitation only, each applicant firm being investigated by a membership committee. At one of the early meetings plans were made to invite leading nursery firms in all states west of the Mississippi to participate. How thoroughly this was accomplished is shown by current registration lists

which include representatives from Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, Indiana, North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Illinois, Ohio, California, and Oregon.

The early organization, known as the Western Association of Wholesale Nurserymen, had as its objective the "exchange of information on volume and condition of nursery stock, the regulation of prices, and the development of new processes for protecting and improving stock."

Each member, in those days, was required to submit a complete proposed pricelist for the ensuing six months together with a list of his growing stock. These lists were then tabulated by the Secretary and distributed to all members as an index of the available stock and probably prices. Certainly these firms had large scale operations.

**President** ~ H. T. Kelsey, St Joseph

**Vice-President** ~ R. H. Blair, Kansas City

**Secretary/Treasurer** ~ Frank Worcester, Fort Scott

And an **Executive Committee** composed of:

D.S. Lake, Shenandoah, Iowa

G.J. Carpenter, Fairbury, Nebraska

A.C. Griesa, Lawrence, Kansas

W.P. Stark, Louisiana, Missouri

A. Ambrose, Nevada, Missouri

The fertile Kaw Valley seems to have been quite a fruit growing territory, early reports showing records of large plantings of apple, cherry, pear, quince, peach, mulberry, plums, and gooseberries as well as a large number of grape vines.

Something of the large scale operations of individual firms is shown in the report of a single firm in 1905 which showed:

**One early report, issued in 18976, showed the following volume:**

Apple Grafts Planted	8,057,000
Apples 1 year	4,712,000
Apples 2 years	963,000
Cherry Seedlings	1,025,000
Cherries Budded	708,000
Cherries 1 year	608,000
Standard Pear 1 year	264,000
Standard Pear 2 years	190,000
Peach Seedlings	3,500,000
Peach Budded	1,923,000

**Stock of a single firm in Kaw Valley, 1905:**

Apple grafts and budded	3,000,000
Apples 1 year	1,000,000
Apples 2 years	50,000
Cherry Seedlings	3,000,000
Cherries 2 years	50,00
Standard Pear Grafts and Budded	200,000
Peach Seedlings	1,000,000
Peach 1 year	500,000
Gooseberries	95,000
Grapes	1,380,000
And many other items	

root piece controversy over methods of grafting: the importation of infested stock from California, with ensuing agitation for more rigid and uniform inspections laws. Freight tariffs, and the condition and supply of nursery stock, then as now, were basic considerations.

Firms represented at the 1891 meeting constitute the best available record the Western Association has of its original membership. Included in this group were the:

- **Hart Pioneer Nurseries,** Fort Scott, Kansas
- **Kelsey and Company,** St Joseph, Missouri

Except for occasional references to weather conditions or the development of new grafting processes or

treatments, the early day programs were very similar to those of today.

Much discussion evolved around the whole-

- **A.C. Griesa and Brothers,**  
Lawrence, Kansas
- **D.S. Lake**  
Shenandoah, Iowa
- **Taylor Brothers,**  
Omaha, Nebraska
- **James A. Bayless,**  
Lee's Summit, Missouri
- **Blair and Kaufman,**  
Kansas City, Missouri
- **G.J. Carpenter and Company,**  
Fairbury, Nebraska
- **Youngers and Company,**  
Geneva, Nebraska
- **Blair and Tippie,**  
Kansas City, Missouri
- **Lewis Williams,**  
Parsons, Kansas
- **Bush and Meissner,**  
Bushong, Missouri
- **A.H. Griesa,**  
Lawrence, Kansas
- **John Mentch,**  
Winfield, Kansas
- **J. Bagby and Sons,**  
Newhaven, Missouri
- **William Cutter and Son,**  
Junction City, Kansas
- **Taylor Peters and Skinner,**  
Topeka, Kansas

Of this original group four firms are still in business today: Kelsey and Company: A.C. Griesa and Brothers: D.S. Lake, now known as the Shenandoah Nurseries: and Taylor, Peters and Skinner – now Taylor and Skinner.

One of the early day practices which would not be tolerated today, was the exchange of credit information through what were known as P A Y Lists. These lists were published regularly for many years, each member being required, by constitutional provision, "to furnish the secretary with a list of deadbeats, kickers and other parties not worthy of credit." Failure to supply such lists forfeited the right to exchange P A Y information.

As the Western Association continued its steady growth, annual meetings were moved successively from the old Centropolis Hotel at 5<sup>th</sup> and

Walnut to the Savoy, Victoria, and Coates House, where they were held for many years.

It was at the Coates House that the Association was served the first of its annual luncheons and overindulgence, it seems, was as common then as now. In 1905, we find the following reference in the minutes of the secretary: "Through the courtesy of the Coates, the Association was provided with an elaborate course dinner at the hour of their choice – 1 p.m. This pleasant indulgence unfitted many for immediate business and it was 3 p.m. when the president took the chair."

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what Pete said was serious, but he never failed to see the humor in a situation, talking at at least one annual meeting on, "Snuff, Calmel and Sour Cherries."

During his membership, Pete at one time or another, served on practically every committee ever organized, assuming the presidency in 1905-6. His annual address delivered

enterprising nursery firm ready to assist and encourage the new settler to make his surroundings fruitful and beautiful. Through the influence of the nurseryman the plains of all the western states have changed from a treeless waste to a land covered with trees, shrubs, vines, adding value, comfort and beauty to entire

presented him with a gold watch as a token of their affection, and in 1906, after he had found other employment, elected him to honorary membership. Other secretaries who have served the Association are A.C. Griesa of Lawrence – elected in 1891; Frank Worcester, 1892; and E.J. Holman of Leavenworth, who served from 1901-1915.

The devotion and loyalty of such men... has made Western Association what it is today – a trade association with a membership of 65 firms whose combined efforts have been responsible for most of the fruit, shrubbery, trees, and other planting west of the Mississippi River.

With increased interest on the part of state highway departments in highway beautification and aroused public sentiment for conservation, the nursery business should logically enjoy a healthy revival.

at the close of this term, called attention to the part nurserymen have played in the settlement of the west. At this time he said: "I always feel as if the nurseryman was a missionary in a new field peculiarly its own. When a new section of our country is opened up, you will find with the first settlers the advance agent of some

districts that were formerly barren fields."

Equally well known and loved was Col. U.B. Pearsall, who served as secretary of the Western Association from 1893 to 1901. In 1896, when financial reverses forced him out of the nursery business, he attempted to resign but his associates declined to accept the resignation,

As most of you know my present extended term of office began in 1916.

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Whatever the future may bring however, you members here in Kansas City – Chandler Landscape and Floral Company, Cloverset Flower Farm, Jackson Landscape Company, J.C. Nichols Company, R.G. Minnich Nurseries, Williams and Harvey, the Blue Ridge Nursery, and my own firm appreciate your loyalty to us.

It has been a privilege to entertain you each year and to watch our membership grow. I'm sure your meetings have been a source of satisfaction to us all and my Kansas City associates join me in extending our hearty congratulations on this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

*George W. Holsinger*  
*Secretary*

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