The Ralph F. Perry Wood Collection

A solitary cabinet stands against the east wall of the lecture room in the Arnold Arboretum's administration building in Jamaica Plain. The one hundred-plus drawers comprising this cabinet are each 1½ inches high, 6½ inches wide, and 13½ inches deep. The drawer fronts attract the eye because each has a distinctive wood pattern, and the total effect of the patterns creates a pleasing design. It also arouses one’s curiosity.

In late October of 1972 a group of sixth graders from Quincy visited the Aboretum to do bark rubbings of some trees on the grounds. Each student was equipped with five or six grades of paper and fists full of crayons. Before beginning their endeavors on the grounds, the students were brought by their teacher into the building where they assembled in the lecture room to look at the photographs on the walls, the slide display cases, and, perhaps most importantly, to discover the wooden cabinet.

I happened to be in the room at the time solely to observe the children’s discoveries. Investigating the cabinet, they were surprised and pleased to find bark and wood specimens in the drawers. Obviously old enough to have acquired some knowledge about plant names, the youngsters attempted to locate, let us say, an oak, a birch, and a maple specimen.

After the Quincy questers left for the grounds, I sat down in front of the cabinet and selected some of the drawers at random. I studied the wood specimens and the information in each of the drawers I examined. Before I realized it, I was knee deep in drawers and records.
The Ralph F. Perry Wood Collection cabinet is arranged alphabetically by genera; a generic index, common name index (both in lists and charts), and a card catalogue allow for locating particular drawers. The sheer amount of research entailed and the information compiled, let alone the labor and craftsmanship required to organize such a collection, motivated me to learn more about Mr. Perry.

Ralph F. Perry lived in Watertown and was an electrical draftsman for the Cambridge Gas and Electric Company. His job kept him outdoors a good deal as he was present during tree removal at construction sites where he collected specimens of the felled trees.

In the early 1950's after his retirement, Mr. Perry worked constantly on further collections for, and construction of, his wood cabinet and the preparations of the specimens and the information to be contained in each drawer. His hobby demanded long hours, determination, and devotion. His efforts and meticulous work gained him a goodly amount of recognition. He lectured, appeared on television, and established a wood exchange program with people in foreign countries. One arrival, from a contact in Africa, was a shipment of small wooden blocks. Unfortunately, Mr. Perry's health was on the decline at the time, and he was unable to do any extensive research on these blocks. His great-grandchildren use them as toys today.

Even with sorely failing health, Mr. Perry was a perfectionist. By reading a portion of the printed explanation that accompanies the collection, one gains a better understanding of his personality and his execution of the project.

"Let us answer a few questions before you ask them. No dye, stain, filler, or other coloring material of any sort has been used on any of these wood specimens. After careful examination of wood specimens in a dozen of the best museums in the East and consultations with the curator staffs, the method of treatment that leaves them in the most nearly natural color and texture and still assures the least change thru what is called ageing over the passage of years has been chosen.

"After very careful and thoro (sic) sanding to produce a smooth and flat surface all of the specimens in the wood trays have been treated with two coats of the finest quality of clear white shellac, each coat very carefully sanded. That is all. This is the process used by the Furniture Museum, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"The FRONTS of the trays and the Veneer Panels have re-
ceived the same treatment as above, then three coats of the highest grade, clearest varnish has been applied, the first two carefully rubbed down with very fine sandpaper, the final coat rubbed with pumice stone and water, then with rotten stone and oil, approximating the finish of fine furniture.

"The NAME at the top of the card is the common name most generally accepted; the second line is the botanical or scientific name. Following that is the original home of the tree, the weight of a cubic foot of the wood and its specific gravity, and finally a very short condensed story, giving a description or interesting facts.

"The WEIGHTS and specific gravities, so far as the trays are concerned, are for these individual specimens, computed very accurately by laboratory methods. While they follow fairly well those given by authorities, there are differences; many of them being a little heavier. Every piece of wood here has been seasoned, aged, or cured, whichever you desire to call it, for twelve months or more from the time of cutting, in (a) dry, warm storeroom, before being finished up as specimens. In reweighing it has been found that some of the specimens will gain or lose as much as two per cent in weight with the variations in prevailing humidity. The weights and specific gravities of the Veneers are those credited by the best authorities, because they could not be derived from these very thin pieces.

"The PIECE in the lower left corner of the tray is 'quarter-sawed' and shows the wood perpendicular to the grain; the piece in the lower right is 'slab-sawed' showing the wood parallel to the grain or nearly so. The square immediately below the label is a cross-section; the upper right is the bark, showing that part of the tree that we all may see as it is growing . . ."

Upon examining the collection at the Arboretum, one will discover that each drawer front is a piece of wood of the same type as is found in the tray. This explains the varied tonal pattern of the whole cabinet front. The visitor also can absorb a great deal of information from the cards in the drawers. Each drawer has a portion or all of a 3 x 5 index card glued to the bottom, while all the wood specimens are rivetted to the bottoms of the drawers. Mr. Perry clearly intended his collection to survive any mishandling!

Someone browsing through the cabinet can locate a grass that is used for water pipes, wood that is used for shuttles in textile mills and golf club heads, and note drastic differences between the wood and bark of a street grown Ash (Fraxinus) and a park grown Ash. Further looking will reveal a sample of a
tree that grows in salt water, wood that is most prized for musical instruments, and (without opening a drawer!) the foulest smelling wood in the collection.

Other information on the cards includes interesting historical facts. Some, relating to plant names, tell us that Magnolia, Halesia, and Wisteria were named for the 17th century botanical professor, Pierre Magnol, the English botanist, Stephen Hales, and the 18th century physician and anatomist of Philadelphia, Caspar Wistar, respectively. In addition there are references to trees with significant associations in religious history, those that serve as state trees, and a dozen other items of interest.

Donated by Mr. Perry's family in 1968, the collection of cabinet specimens and the separate collection of wood veneers, are a comprehensive source of historical, sociological, and economic information illustrating the importance of the plant world. Above and beyond that, the cabinet is impressive to look at and a skillful and thorough creation. The Arboretum is most fortunate to have received this gift.

HARMONY C. SPONGBERG