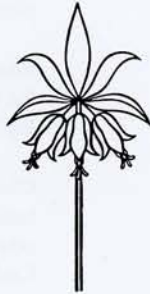


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## Wilson Popenoe, American horticulturist, educator and explorer

Elizabeth R. Woodger

Fort Myers, Florida  
July 27, 1913

My Dearest Mother:

Having divested myself of my superfluous garments, as Cox and Box say, I will sit down and write you a few lines to express my disapproval of the climate and this town and this hotel. Not that it is hot; the real estate agents assure me that the temperature is fully 5 degrees lower than in any other place in the United States, but I am unfortunately addicted to the habit of perspiring profusely when the thermometer gets about 95°, and am right now vitiating Knowles' [Ryerson] pleated shirt at a very rapid rate . . . Went in to the restaurant this noon, and picked out several dishes, ordered them, but the waiter said they had none of them today. I tried several more and failed as dismally and then when I ordered chili con carne & found that they hadn't even that, I got up and walked out to the nearest fruit stand, where I invested in a 15¢ pineapple & died happy . . . I am certainly doing a lot of traveling

Your devoted son,  
Wilt<sup>1</sup>

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS, especially his wit, shine in Frederick Wilson Popenoe's letter to his mother. Written shortly before he embarked for Brazil to gather field data on the mango, it is one of the more than 10,000 letters in the Popenoe papers, now housed in the Archives at the Hunt Institute. Included in these letters are not only the exchanges of his family at the turn of the century and the love letters between his parents, but also an account of his work. During his many exploratory trips from 1913 through the 1930s for the United States Department of Agriculture, Popenoe cor-

responded regularly and at length. Among his correspondents and friends were a Secretary of the USDA and Vice President Henry A. Wallace, as well as numerous major and minor botanists and horticulturists of this century.

Frederick Wilson Popenoe, who later preferred to be called simply Wilson, was born 9 March 1892 in Topeka, Kansas, the second son of Frederick Oliver and Marion Bowman Popenoe. The Popenoe ancestry dates back to a French Huguenot by the name of Jean Papineau, who came to this country in the 17th century. His descendants spread over the continent, and Willis Parkinson Popenoe, Wilson's grandfather, chose Topeka as his home. There Frederick Oliver and subsequently his son, Frederick Wilson, were born. For most of Wilson's childhood, Frederick Oliver traveled throughout Central America in search of gold; but, despite these frequent and protracted separations, it is evident from their correspondence that they exhibited a love of home and family, as well as a shared interest in horticulture.

In 1905 Wilson and his family moved to Altadena, California, a suburb of Pasadena. The avocado seeds which his father brought back from a trip to Central America started Wilson on a life-long study of that and other tropical fruits. Wilson kept a careful record of each avocado find, noting its strengths and weaknesses, and helped develop the hardiest and best-tasting specimens. He



also wrote numerous articles for professional journals, extolling the virtues of the avocado. Thanks in large part to his enthusiasm and research, this fruit is now a popular and common item at America's produce stands.

In his travels to the West Indies and South and Central America in search of avocados and other fruits, Wilson encountered a variety of people that both fascinated and delighted him. Accounts of these trips — the geography, the people, the villages — are preserved in Wilson's letters to his parents and sometimes run to 12 pages. The letters describe every facet of his travels and are rich with botanical, historical, sociological and anthropological observations. They are also filled with examples of his sharp wit, including numerous jibes at his brother, Paul, who was the founder of the American Institute of Family Relations in California and was writing similarly long and detailed letters during that same time.

In 1914, at the age of 22, Wilson joined the USDA and began work under David Fairchild as an agricultural explorer. Fairchild, whom Wilson called "the chief," provided Popenoe with friendly, sympathetic guidance, constantly admonishing him to stick to his work and not get distracted by women who could easily "catch" him as good husband material. Their friendship lasted until Fairchild died in 1954.

Wilson's experiences gave him so much first-hand and previously unknown information that in 1920 he published his *Manual of tropical and sub-tropical fruits*, which quickly became the standard reference on the subject. On 13 July 1921 he wrote from Guayaquil, Ecuador:

So Calvino is going to publish my photo along with his review of the book? All right. — Glad to note Coit's review. — Rorer says that Tropical Life of London published a good one, and he showed me one in

the bulletin of the Imperial Institute; it was pretty good. They only had two criticisms to make, first, that I did not include *all* the tropical fruits, and second, that I did not have a ruler showing in the photographs, so they could tell how big the fruits were. I might remark that if they [*sic*] will refer to the text they will find they dimensions of all the fruits, and that I do not intend to spoil the artistic value of my photos by sticking a yardstick in one side, like H F Macmillan does. That yardstick business is all bosh.<sup>2</sup>

Through his 1920 publication Wilson attained professional recognition, but that year also brought personal tragedy with the death of his mother at the age of 58. His usually flippant letters acquire an occasional note of sadness and seriousness. Popenoe wrote to his father on 8 May 1921 from Quito, Ecuador:

Since a year ago I have been unable to love my darling mother, and write to her to that effect, though I love her memory more than I can possibly express to you, and I think of her very, very often, and long for her. On the trail from Cuenca to Huigra, when I was asleep in my hammock in that dirty little hut at Santa Rosa, I dreamt of her, and then I awoke, and the realization came to me that it was only a dream, and that I would not be with her again in person, as I had imagined myself to be; and I tell you, the tears rolled down my cheeks.<sup>3</sup>

In 1923 Popenoe met and married Dorothy Hughes, an immigrant from England who had made her own contribution to the botanical field with research on African grasses. Wilson and Dorothy had five children (see family tree): Peter (1924), Nancy (1926), Hugh (1929), Marion (1930) and Pauline (a.k.a. Sally, 1932). After the marriage, Dorothy dropped formal botanical study in favor of motherhood and the restoration of a nearly-destroyed Spanish colonial house in Antigua, Guatemala, which eventually became their home. The restoration project was so meticulously and faithfully accomplished that the house became a local tourist attraction as well as a point of interest for students of architecture. Several newspaper and magazine articles and Louis



Figure 1. The young Wilson Popenoe, exploring in the Andes.

Adamic's *The house in Antigua* related the story of the Popenoes' architectural efforts. The house also earned an entry in Verle Lincoln Annis' *The architecture of Antigua Guatemala, 1543-1773*.

Wilson left the USDA in 1925 and became an employee of the United Fruit Company of Boston. He and Dorothy moved to Tela, Honduras, where Wilson helped to establish the Lancetilla Plant Experimentation Station. A prominent representative, he advanced not just the Company's horticultural research but its local image as well. He acted as an unofficial diplomat between the Company and its Latin-American employees. Wilson was also a strong advocate of diversity in Central American fruit cultivation, rather than dependence upon only the banana crop. He felt that diversification would be economically sound both for the United Fruit Company and for the countries whose lands were being developed.

Wilson preferred the slow pace and, as he found it, congenial atmosphere of Latin



Figure 2. The elder Wilson Popenoe, retired and relaxing at his home in Antigua.

America. Although he retained his United States citizenship and visited frequently, he resided the rest of his life in Central America.

Dorothy died in 1932, apparently as the result of a tropical infection. The children were sent to relatives and boarding schools in the United States, and Wilson exchanged frequent letters with them. It was not an easy way to raise and communicate with his children, but family bonds remained strong despite the miles between them. In 1939 Wilson met Helen Barsaloux, an authority on Spanish art and architecture. She came to Antigua at that time to visit his famous home, and ended up marrying the owner. She loved the house and Wilson's way of life, and she became a prominent local hostess.

Wilson spent most of his remaining career with the United Fruit Company, although he was occasionally "lent" to the USDA for assistance on special projects in Latin America. During World War II, for



instance, he was an adviser for USDA experiments dealing with cinchona and rubber. He also fielded many queries received by mail from other botanical investigators.

In 1941 Samuel Zemurray, then president of the United Fruit Company, asked Popeño to help choose a site for a tropical agricultural school which would train young Latin-American men in modern farming techniques. Zemurray's plan called for free tuition and carefully screened, disciplined students. He was convinced that the need for such a school existed and that the United Fruit Company, which had profited greatly in the area, was morally obliged to help found one. Wilson found a site in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, known as "El Zamorano" in honor of the Zamorano family who once owned the property, and he supervised the construction of the buildings. His hard work made him the obvious choice for director of the school; he took on the Escuela Agrícola Panamericana (EAP) as his new "baby." Although the administration and politics of the school were sometimes burdensome, Wilson was dedicated to the project and ruled over the school with paternal pride.

During the 1950s Wilson's daughters all married: Nancy became Mrs. Robert Guillou, Sally wed Edmund Hally, Jr., and Marion married Richard Hatch. By the mid-1960s Wilson had 11 grandchildren, contributing substantially to the post-war baby boom.

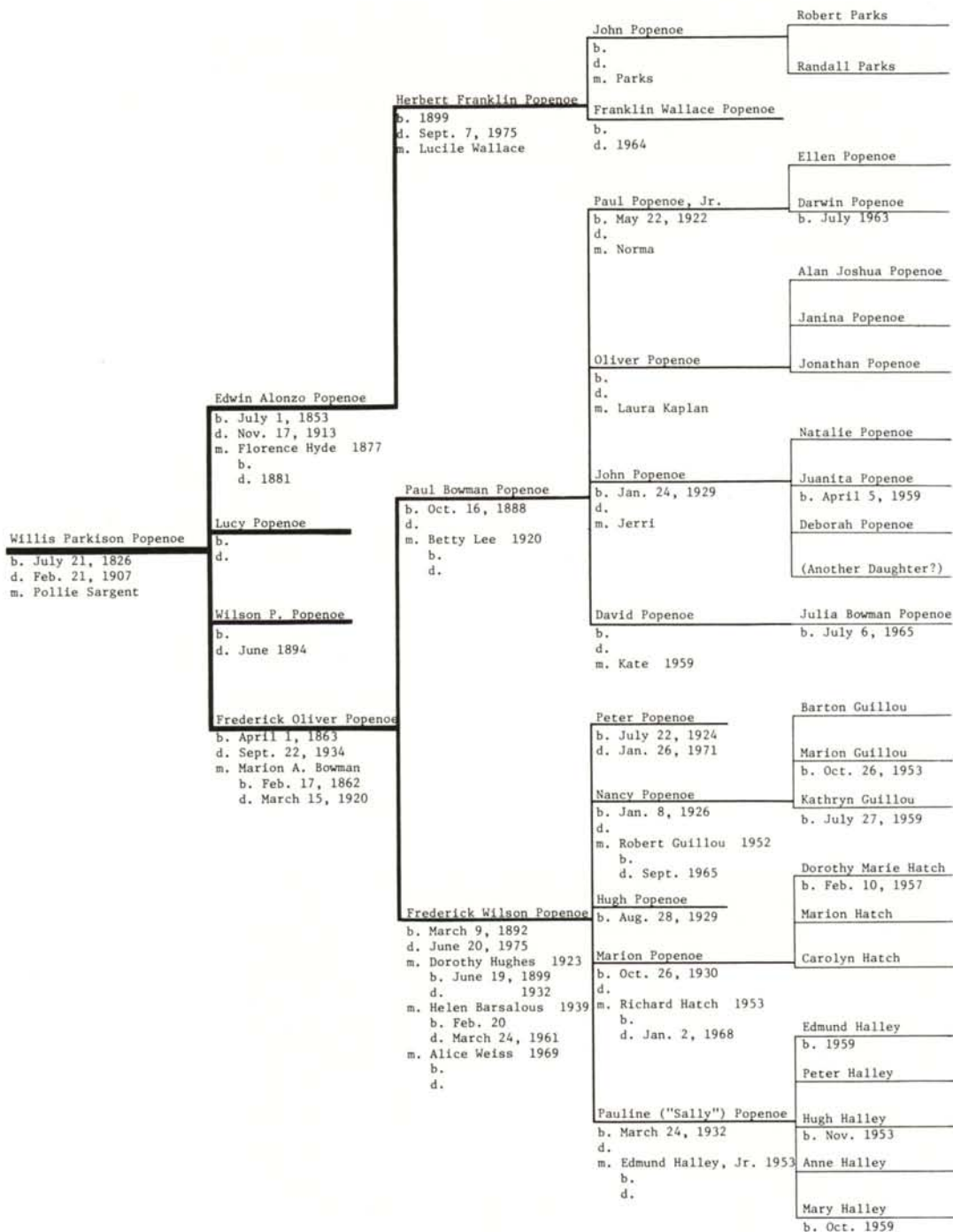
In 1957, at the age of 65, Wilson formally retired as head of the Escuela, but he continued to attend conferences of the Board of Trustees and was frequently consulted on administrative and personnel problems. The school was successful — perhaps too successful in Wilson's opinion — and at the time of his retirement there was talk of issuing degrees, offering complicated math-

ematical and scientific courses and charging tuition. Wilson fought these measures. Many of his letters during the last two decades of his life were attempts to arbitrate conflicts between established administrators, the "old guard" he called them, and the rising new leaders of the school.

After his retirement Wilson traveled extensively with Helen, and two of their favorite attractions were Spain and Israel. In both countries he established contacts with young hard-working horticulturists whom he admired a great deal. He loved Spain second only to Central America. During these years, although his age slowed him down somewhat, Wilson remained active. He and Helen entertained numerous guests, including prominent public figures such as Richard Nixon, who was then Vice President. Their house was open on a limited basis to touring groups and individuals interested in Spanish colonial architecture. Wilson sometimes conducted these tours personally, and often received notes of gratitude and admiration in return for his hospitality.

The tranquility of his semi-retired existence, however, was interrupted on 24 March 1961, when Helen died after a massive stroke. For the third time in Wilson's life, a woman close to him had died suddenly. Helen had been a major support, and now, having to face professional and family stresses alone, Wilson was drained. He was hospitalized in June of that year for gastro-hepatic trouble. After his release, he went to live with his son Hugh in Gainesville, Florida. There, a little more than a year after his hospitalization, he was in a car accident that further drained him.

During the next year and a half Wilson slowly regained his strength. He maintained a large volume of correspondence and found



that botanical subjects could still absorb him, keeping his mind away from depressing thoughts. Gradually also, he recovered his spirit and sense of humor, and in 1964 he moved back to Antigua.

During the same decade two of Wilson's sons-in-law were killed: Bob Guillou died in an automobile accident in 1965, and Dick Hatch was killed when a helicopter maneuver failed during a 1968 mission in Viet Nam. But the period did have its good times as well. Wilson received honors and awards for his contributions to horticulture and cultural goodwill from a variety of groups and individuals, including presidents of several Central-American countries. He received heartening reports of scholastic and social progress from his many grandchildren, visited them frequently, and was able to get to know them better. With just as much pride he welcomed letters from former EAP graduates who had achieved success in their chosen careers. Most importantly, in 1969 Wilson remarried. Alice Weiss was a long-time friend and she knew and understood his family. He found it a great relief to have the friendship and support of a spouse once again.

For the last five years of his life, Wilson was more restricted to his home. He still

traveled, but only every now and then, to EAP board meetings in New York and to visit family members elsewhere in the country. Also he continued to assist others in botanical and Central-American historical matters. Despite his protests that the work was outdated and needed a complete revision, he still continued to receive requests for copies of his *Manual of tropical and subtropical fruits*. With Herbert Wolfe, Wilson had managed to complete a preliminary revision before he died on 20 June 1975 at the age of 83.

### Acknowledgments

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### Notes

1. Letter to Marion Popenoe (1913) from HI Archives #204, Box 15, Folder 252.
2. Letters to Frederick Oliver Popenoe (1921) from HI Archives #204, Box 17, Folder 260.
3. *Ibid.*

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Figure 3. The Popenoe house in Antigua — an interior view.