



Leeman Russell Moore

February 23, 1937 - March 19, 2019

Tampa Bay Times

By Craig Pittman

03/22/2019

Oh, Florida! Farewell to a plant hustler who was no shrinking violet. Lee Moore called himself “The Adventurer” and often went out of his way to prove it — but he never smuggled orchids. He said.

I just got word from his sister that Lee “The Adventurer” Moore died at age 82. Knowing Lee, I am a little surprised his departing soul didn’t write the news across the sky in glittering letters 50 feet high so everyone would see it. Lee was that kind of guy.

Lee, who lived in a Miami suburb, was in some respects the quintessential Florida man. Not the lunkheads you hear about most often — like the Palm Beach County man who recently stole \$30,000 worth of rare coins and ran them through a CoinStar machine to collect a bounty of just \$29.30. No, Lee was the savvy, sharp-eyed hustler type of Florida man, constantly working the angles and willing to try just about anything to turn a buck. He knew how to spin a yarn, too.

I met him while working on a story about an orchid-smuggling case that led to federal charges against Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota. (Yes, people smuggle orchids — this one was worth \$10,000 a plant.) I once made the mistake of calling Lee an orchid-smuggler. He was quick to correct me.

“I never smuggled orchids,” he said indignantly. “I used the orchids to hide what I was really smuggling.”

If you read Susan Orlean’s bestselling book *The Orchid Thief*, you met Lee in those pages. Explaining his nickname, he told her, “Adventure and excitement will follow me the rest of my life... It is in my blood to explore it all.”

“We were always smuggling something,” Lee’s Peruvian-born wife, Chady, told Orlean. “We had more going on, more situations than Indiana Jones! Oh, my God!”

Leeman Russell Moore Sr. was born in Georgia, but his father, who oversaw civilian airports during the Eisenhower Administration, moved the family to Miami in the mid-1950s because he got a really sweet deal there. In exchange for steering \$5 million in federal aid to the Miami airport, airport officials paid to completely redo his kitchen — in Maryland. It became quite a scandal after he sold the upgraded house for double what he’d paid for it, then took a job running the Miami airport, to which he had steered all that money.

For Lee, the move was life-changing. His new home was at the edge of the Everglades, and while his classmates were going to football games and school dances, he’d be out in the Everglades with a flashlight hunting snakes or interesting flowers.

He went to forestry school but wound up working construction. Then, during a camping trip in South America, he discovered he could pay for the trip by collecting exotic-looking flowers and selling them. He started working as a full-time collector of orchids and other plants, and soon he was finding species that no one had discovered before. That meant they would now bear his name — for instance, the *Cattleya mooreana*, which he found in the Amazon in 1956.

This is where he built his swashbuckling reputation. He traipsed through jungles discovering more species. He repeatedly cheated death. Once, after a plane he was supposed to be on crashed, his family mourned him for two weeks until he turned up. He also repeatedly dodged the authorities. At one point, according to Chady, the couple was on Mexico’s 10 most wanted list.

That’s because he had figured out he could make more money selling artifacts found in the jungles than he could selling orchids.

“I used to smuggle out pre-Columbian art in my orchid boxes,” he told me. He boasted he was one of the top five dealers in the world, selling priceless artifacts to well-heeled collectors and the less scrupulous museums of Europe and North America. He enjoyed a six-figure income and owned a plane and a pair of Lincoln Continentals. The Miami News described him as “an urbane, polished adventurer, equally at home in luxurious mansions and galleries and in the humid, dangerous jungles.”

His biggest coup — one he told me about more than once — came in 1968 when he helped dig up and smuggle out of Mexico an entire wall from a Mayan temple. A whole wall! Even he seemed amazed by the audacity.

He and his cohorts flew it to a buyer in New York, who offered it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art — which not only rejected the offer but also notified Mexican authorities. The wall is now on display at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

“I went to the museum when I was a kid and they tell about how two bandits trying to remove the wall were never caught,” Lee’s daughter Cindy, an Ocala photographer, told me. “I was tickled pink sitting there listening, thinking if they only knew I was the daughter of one of the bandits.”

But then U.S. laws changed and Lee’s risk of getting busted in his home country grew too great, so he went back to handling plants. That’s how he wound up in the middle of the orchid-smuggling case I was researching. Somehow, out of all the people involved, Lee was the one who never faced any charges, even though several people told me they were convinced he was the mastermind behind the whole thing.

You might think Lee would lay low and avoid discussing the case, but you would be wrong. He not only talked to me for my stories, but when I wrote a book about it (*The Scent of Scandal*), he showed up for my book signing in Miami and signed copies too. He told me more than once he hoped Hollywood would turn it into a movie.

“And who would play you?” I asked.

“Me!” he replied. “Of course!”

Mr. Moore is survived by his children: Cynthia Moore Diaz, Leeman Moore, Jr. and Mark Moore, Sr. Siblings: Phillips Moore Sr (deceased), Georgia Moore Warren (Sister) and Carol Moore Beledo (Sister) and Grandchildren: Mark Moore Jr., Jake Diaz and Jessie Diaz

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Events

APR **Celebration of Life** 01:00PM - 02:00PM

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Bullis Bromeliads

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Comments



“ My dear brother, it was a good journey growing up with you. You will be with me in my heart forever. Sleep well and I will be with you again. Love Georgia

Georgia Moore - March 25 at 02:26 PM