

Howard and Peter are main attraction

By STEVE HOUSTON
Staff Reporter

When people walk into Markham's Plant Paradise to browse, chances are they'll spend a lot more time in the spacious aisles and greenhouses than planned.

They'll probably spend some time with Howard and Peter, the resident parrots. They may bump into Caesar and Cleo, the Great Danes of the Greenhouses. Or they might watch a peacock fan his feathers in unconscious conceit.

"There's never a slow moment here," said the man behind Plant Paradise, Gary Van Dorp. "Everyone is pretty happy with this set up."

Tucked below Irving's Plumbing on Woodbine just south of Hwy 7, Plant Paradise offers plant lovers everything from annuals to orange trees.

"There's nothing better than a colorful plant out front to catch a person's eye," Mr. Van Dorp said. "That's enough to bring in some traffic."

And he said that once in the store, customers are usually impressed with the variety and originality of the Plant Paradise concept.

"We get customers of every description," he noted. "Some come in for a 99-cent plant and others will come in for a \$1,000 one."

The idea to open a plant store occurred to Mr. Van Dorp in the '70s when driving an 18-wheel tractor trailer. He was in Florida without a load and ended up hauling a trailer full of plants. Noting that he had some botanical background — his father was a gardener in Holland — and that he used to help him at work — he decided to give it a go.

In 1977, Plant Paradise became a reality in a deserted basement below Irving's Plumbing.

"When we first started in here it was just an empty store. We did pretty well everything ourselves," he said. "It's taken a lot of work to get it to where it is today."

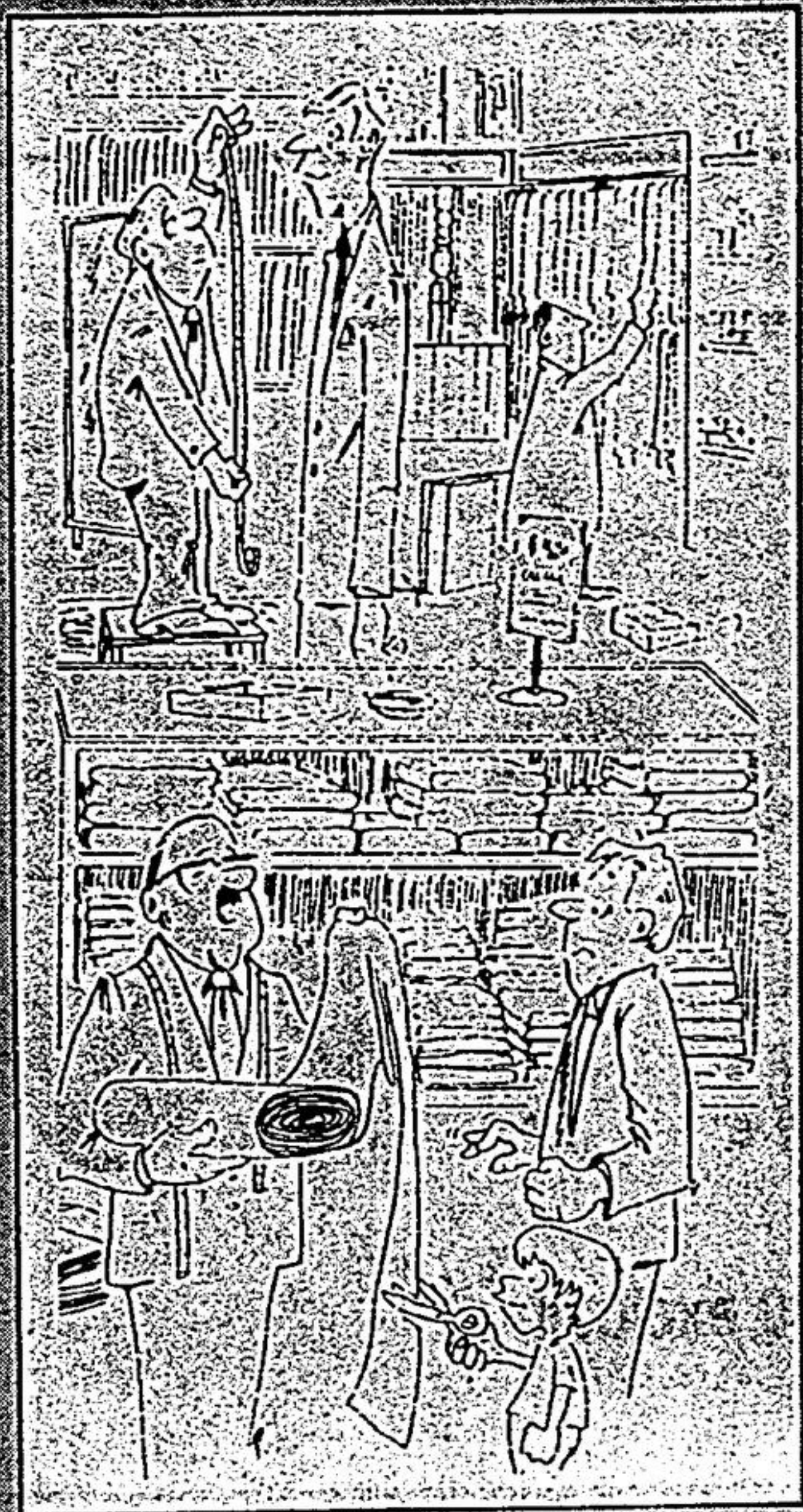
Plant Paradise now boasts an 8,000 square foot floor area and five greenhouses behind the store. With the introduction of the parrots, doves, peacocks and dogs, Mr.

Van Dorp said the store has established a bit of a following.

Today, school children are given tours of the facility to learn about plant life and meet the animals. Mr. Van Dorp added that mothers like to bring in their children while they browse for plants.

"The kids go around the back to the greenhouses and see the animals. They really enjoy it. At least they're getting out of school," he noted.

He added that the plan for Plant Paradise is to offer something for the beginning gardener to the real green thumbs.



Lynne Holmes, who's in charge of quality control at Plant Paradise on Woodbine Ave., checks one of the plants in the hothouse.

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