

Old Flower Gardens

In early autumn, 1846, a lowly covered wagon left Strykersville, New York. That wagon contained my grandfather, grandmother, and mother to be in future years. Besides the little family and their household goods, the capacious wagon carried a variety of shrubs, such as lilacs, spirea, flowering cloves, and snowballs, roots of blush roses, bulbs of tiger and corn lilies, catalpa pods, and other seeds. It was sentiment methinks that mothered the desire to make the new home like the old.

First in Indiana and later in Iowa (1850), these shrubs and vines took root and flourished. Joseph Lawrence and his son Alpheus were remarkably successful in leaving with their homesteads a heritage of sentiment and beauty for their descendants. The catalpa seed multiplied in abundance. The lilies spread, the roses grew luxuriantly, and the lilacs developed into huge bushes. From the old farm in Bennington Township, Black Hawk County, roots and bulbs have been transplanted in the gardens of many friends, not only in that community but as far and wide as former neighbors have gone to dwell. Back in Strykersville, to this day, the old lilac bush and white and yellow roses still live on the Lawrence family homestead. Only last September they gave promise of surviving many more years.

From the very first, floriculture was a part of the active work of civilizing Iowa, but it was not until the period of greater stress was over that the flower garden became an integral part of the average homestead. Gradually through the years our mothers and grandmothers added to their collections of old fashioned flowers until round about the house and in the yard a riot of color prevailed all through the summer. Zinnias, marigolds, larkspur, fever-few, strawflowers, hollyhocks, lady's-slippers, snowballs, bachelor's-buttons, spirea, and lilies — corn lilies, tiger lilies, spider lilies — not to mention the morning glories and the "California rose" that bloomed so freshly and peacefully at the kitchen windows. Each flourished in its own way, lending color and fragrance to the neighborhood.

But when this informal beauty had attained its finest expression, evil times fell upon the land. About 1900, in both town and country, a period of wholesale eradication of vines, shrubs, and bushes began. Lawns must be continuous in town. No longer the dividing line of "this is mine" and "that is yours". Down came the lattice and picket fences, out came the hedgerows. "Let the sunshine in" seemed to be the slogan of the hour, and merciless was the slaughter.

And why? The little towns were growing into modern cities. No longer obstreperous cows on their way to pasture or fractious steers being driven to the

slaughter house chopped up the lawns. From the rear of residence lots no longer came the grunt of the pig which ate the garbage and would next winter fill the family larder. No longer were the vines and shrubs needed to screen the "horse lot", where Dobbin was wont to kick up his heels after a day's work. Alas, Bidy and her companion, Chanticleer, seem to be the sole survivors of those days before the decay of home production for home consumption which once existed on every village street. But now a reaction against unplanted yards is gaining popularity.

Probably the elimination of live stock has even contributed to this result. And the automobile which has brought the whole country within the range of everybody's vision, is another potent factor. What person who sees a beauty spot beside the highway does not wish to emulate or reproduce some special phase of that beauty? It is the power of suggestion.

"Flowers" was always a topic of conversation, summer or winter, among the pioneer women. To every corner of Iowa they brought flowering plants from the South, from New England, and from Europe. These they cherished, and to their own familiar stock they added others that their neighbors brought.

The bay, or bow, window was a conspicuous part of the house. That window, with its shelves of plants, was the pride not only of the women but of every member of the family. Especially were these flowers a

pleasure to the women on the farms. When the family went visiting on Sunday, or when the housewife slipped away on a summer day through the back pasture to see her neighbor, she carried home not a score card and bridge prize, but a few "slips" carefully wrapped in a bit of moist cloth and newspaper. If perchance she brought a geranium slip, she sometimes slit the stem of the plant when she "set it out" and inserted a grain of wheat or an oat, to better insure growth. To exchange slips or flowers was to establish a bond of friendship, and the proud possessor delighted in telling who gave this or that.

In the immediate vicinity of my childhood home there were five distinct types of flower gardens. Each was typical of the nationality of the owner. One grew true to old Holland. Tulips, hyacinths, and those charming little Johnny-jump-ups grew, not in a separate garden, but in beds in the vegetable garden.

Nathan B. Choate, of Canadian culture, had a very different idea of planting. The lawn proper contained a long, somewhat narrow, piece of ground. Sweeping up in a semicircle on either side were rows of blue spruce. This left a large open space where the young people played croquet or dancing games at summer parties. The house was entirely hidden from the roadway. Curiosity to know "who was passing by" certainly was not a prominent trait of this family. Behind the screen of trees at the low front stone doorstep,

white lilacs, spirea, and yellow roses grew. At the back of the house, in the yard, Jacob's-coat, live-for-ever, and striped grass were planted in round beds around the trees. There bloomed the shasta daisies, poppies, and pansies — pansies, yellow and purple, with faces "as large as saucers". If guests were invited to tea during the summer there was a frosted "real blue glass" slipper filled with pansies for the centerpiece of the tea table.

The garden of Joseph Schenk, our German friend, was one most frequently enjoyed. In shape it was round, and inclosed by a picket fence. It was not placed in the lawn or yard proper, but in a spot between the house and barns. The "nigger head" smoke house and vegetable garden were near by. In this garden, the family was wont to gather, in truly German style. There was a small table and several benches. Here were read the letters that came from over the sea. These letters, no matter what the hour of their arrival, were never opened until the entire family was assembled. This was a puzzling ceremony. If guests were present the letters were read and translated for ears unfamiliar with the language. In the middle of the garden was a round bed of perennial moss roses, with a towering centerpiece of cypress. The intricate web of string which supported the red star-covered vine fascinated us children. Humming-birds sipped nectar from petunias and four-o'clocks.

The English garden of William Palmer was perhaps the most unique. It was a replica of an English estate. The grounds were spacious and inclosed by a hedge row, with latticed archways over the entrance gates. Around the house were vines that grew on racks and trellises. The Osage hedge was most attractive with its large green balls which grew where the hedge was untrimmed. Amid the strawflowers, cockscomb, and honeysuckles was, wonder of wonders, a fountain. This was, I believe, the first fountain in Black Hawk County. The water came from a storage tank high up on the tower of a windmill near by. Proud peacocks strutted about this beauty spot and rent the air for more than a mile with their shrill screams. They were weather forecasters. The neighbors planned their work according to Palmer's peacocks. On the opposite side of the house was a grove wherein deer and antelope were kept.

But our own garden was naturally the most familiar. Here mingled the old South and the Yankee East. The entire grounds occupied several acres of land. In profusion grew groves and ornamental trees and bushes, with stone flower beds, or "rock gardens", scattered here and there. At the front gate stood grandfather's famous catalpa tree. What fun to sit beneath it in June amid a shower of fragrant blossoms. A long pathway lined with shrubs and flowers led from the front door of the large house on the knoll to the white gate with its heavy boxed posts. On either side grew sweet-

briar roses and purple and white lilacs. Down that long path grew corn lilies, spider lilies, tiger lilies, spirea — all brought from York State in the covered wagon — day lilies, pink lilies, lilies of the valley, snowballs, bouncing-betsey, fireball, and the French lilac bush.

Scattered about the lawn were blush roses, cinnamon roses, flowering almonds, flowering currants, and the yellow clove bush. Here the Seven Sisters and Prairie Queen graced their trellis, there the climbing red rose and white rose, while yellow and white tea roses and the moss rose with its thorns were everywhere. A huge trellis bore a trumpet vine brought from the ancestral Wilson home in Mount Nebo, North Carolina, and fire-cracker flowers grew beside clematis, both purple and white. The Black Knight and American Beauty rubbed petals with the bleeding heart and phlox.

Half way down the path were two lilac bushes which formed the gateway to the flower garden. No tongue can tell of the riot of flowers that grew in beds, row after row. The paths between were carefully swept. The old-fashioned New England flowers — hollyhocks, touch-me-nots, tube roses, begonias, nasturtiums, sweet elysium, sweet peas, bachelor's-buttons, four-o'clocks, geraniums, acacias, cactus (old hen and chickens, of course) — grew beside the flowering maple, elephant ear, fairy roses, and beds of tea roses and gladioli.

The gladioli were of five kinds — “large improved varieties”, they were called. The colors were salmon,

pink, red, white, and a deep rich cream with lavender markings. To-day, blended into a harmonious unity those gladioli are one — one beautiful, glorious, red, glad gladiolus. It is known as "Wilson-Schmidt" and may be seen in dozens of yards, as well as in the gardens of Iowa State College. What a beautiful inheritance that flower has been. The original bulbs were purchased forty-two years ago.

But the love of flowers was not confined to cultivated kinds. My father, William Alexander Wilson, was particularly partial to native plants. The wild rose dared to venture through the fence into his garden, and a plot of prairie sod has been kept undisturbed "that the hand of man shall never mar this beauty nature gave". But, alas, this sanctuary of prairie flowers may soon be doomed, for the highway builders have surveyed a sweeping curve that will substitute cement and speed for grass and beauty.

One day in 1893 a shot-wounded crane was found on the farm. That incident confirmed my father in his belief that some place would have to be provided to shelter the birds and game driven from their native haunts by hunters. And so a wild life refuge was set aside on the Wilson family homestead of four hundred acres, originally purchased from the government. It is a great white pine grove, in the opinion of a United States forestry expert "the finest planted pine grove in the Mississippi Valley".

A few weeks ago dozens of birds were singing and nesting happily, safe from the hunter, in this white pine grove. The oriole was swinging in her nest, while the blue herons were cramming the gapping mouths of their young. Red squirrels, flying squirrels, woodchucks, and rabbits scurried beneath the trees. Berries abound and a black cherry grove planted more than forty years ago with the thought of food for the birds, as well as wood for the kitchen stove, keeps the birds from being destructive to crops. Woe to a hunter if he be found within this sacred confine. The world passes by this natural paradise, but to those who know and understand it is an unproclaimed memorial.

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