

EVOLUTION OF TRI-STATE ROSE SOCIETY OF CHATTANOOGA

By: Ted Mills

Did you ever stop and admire the beauty of a butterfly in flight? Its majestic wing spread reflects brilliant colors that almost hypnotize you with indescribable beauty. When we think about it, these creatures were not always blessed with such brilliance. They had to evolve into this gorgeous state. First it was the egg, then the grub stage, and finally the beautiful adult stage evolves. This metamorphosis patterns the journey that the Tri-State Rose Society of Chattanooga traveled. Let's talk about it.

Although roses are as old as time, the mention of them in the Old Testament proves that statement. These beautiful flowers have been admired down through the ages. The Roman Empire made great use of them. Their ladies of royalty were joyfully stricken by their fragrance and beauty.

As to the beginning of our local society, it was a trail of starts and stops along the way. Fortunately, the foundation of what we are today was blessed with people who really loved roses. These individuals are the real saviors of the hobby we all love. Although these early leaders are now deceased, their instruction has lingered on in a state of permanence.

Strangely, our society was not always blessed with male members. A group of dedicated women brought rose growing to Chattanooga. The beginning started in the most unlikely period of despair. The great depression of the 1930's was rampant in the area. It was a time when the economy suffered most in its history. Millions of Americans were unemployed. A small band of dedicated women sought a ray of sunshine to alleviate the pain of a depressed populace.

Coinciding with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inauguration, plans were made to organize a local rose society. Just being in the talking stage in 1931, it was not until March 3, 1932 that the Chattanooga Rose Society came into being. In the prior year the renowned J. Horace McFarland came to the City to assist in the Society's formation. At that time he was serving as President of the American Rose Society, (ARS). One of ARS's chief awards is named in his honor.

Mrs. Terrell Clemons was the first District Director. She was the driving force that established the City's first rose organization. The first president was Mrs. T. C. Betterton, followed in order by Mrs. Clemons, Mrs. O. L. Mitchell, and Mrs. W. G. Oehmig. Over 100 ladies made up the group. It was a distinguished group that led the Society in its infant years.

Interest in the group was so encouraging that a project to establish a municipal rose garden prompted the interest of all ladies present. With the expert assistance of Mr. J. F. Brizzie, referred to as the godfather of the Municipal Garden, a small group gathered to make plans for the planting. Invited to this meeting was the aforementioned Mr. McFarland. City fathers became interested and in 1938 an original planting of 700 bushes was made. The bushes were donated and funds were raised to maintain the garden. The City looked with favor on the garden and a full-time gardener was hired. It was not long until the entire City took great pride in the bountiful display of roses in the heart of Chattanooga. As in Pasadena today, roses became a featured display in downtown parades. With 3,000 bushes in bloom, the citizenry soon forgot the pangs of the deep Depression. The rose garden was Tennessee's first and soon enjoyed AARS designation. The garden made Warner Park take on a more inviting appearance.

The all-lady Chattanooga Rose Society continued as wives of industrialist, bankers, physicians, and City leaders eagerly participated in the work of the garden. During the 1980's the demise of the Society took

place. It literally became a social event with afternoon teas, etc. Reason for its folding was the advanced age of the members and declining health of some. Then too, another vibrant society entered the scene.

At the conclusion of World War II a small group of very interested men showed great interest in growing roses. To its credit the group formed the Men's Rose Society of Chattanooga. Initially the organization was men only. The year was 1947 and soon the Society grew in number. Affiliation with the American Rose Society was accomplished. The members began to stage rose shows. Just two years later, in 1949, ARS held its rose show in Chattanooga at Memorial Auditorium. It was at this show that the beloved local Rosarian, Lester Smith, won ARS's top award, the coveted Nicholson Bowl.

It was only natural that the ladies scrambled to join the Society. Husbands experienced harsh prodding by persistent wives. It was not long until the men capitulated and allowed women to join the ranks. In January, 1958 this change in by-laws occurred. With this action the Society decided to change the name to include female designation as well. After much discussion the current name, Tri-State Rose Society of Chattanooga was chosen. It was natural since it includes the three states, Tennessee, north Georgia, and north Alabama. Society members lived in these three bordering States.

Shortly after the name change, ARS conducted a drive to have Congress establish the rose as the national floral emblem. In 1986, after much persuasion on the part of ARS leadership, President Ronald Reagan, by proclamation, effected this designation. It is something that all rosarians cherish.

It would be risky to enumerate the early pioneers who played a great part in establishing a rose society in the Chattanooga area. However, it is essential that we memorialize those who are now departed but did much to create our hobby in an organized fashion.

Although she was not the first president of the Chattanooga Rose Society, Mrs. Edna Thomas stands tall in performance among her peers. My research kept running across the name of this active lady. She was undoubtedly the guiding light for all rosarians. Her rose culture knowledge placed her at the pinnacle among local rose growers. Her daughter, Marianne inherited her mother's expertise and still remains a member of the local society. Although her health prohibits her being active, she still remains a star with fellow members. Her mother is truly the "matriarch" of all rosarians in the Chattanooga area.

To list the men who were the guiding force in the early years would be a monumental task. However some were super stars and their names need special mention. Deserving recognition are these past leaders who have gone on to that garden in the sky. They are George Hudson, H. O. Hastings, Reese Bull, Jerry Perry, Dr. W. K. Butts. Grady Long, Jimmy Paul, Eldon Lunsford, and Jimmy Chamberlain. These were truly the pioneers of the hobby we now enjoy. However, in my humble experience with rose growing, no person has touched my life and the lives of many living rosarians as the beloved Lester Smith. Many rose enthusiasts have benefited from the unselfish instruction of this quiet man. Being one of the Men's Rose Society's original members and later a member of the Tri-State Rose Society, he gave countless hours of instruction to his students. His knowledge of rose culture was superior. Although he has passed on, his dedicated leadership in rose education stamps him well as Chattanooga's "patriarch" of roses.

It is evident that rose growing as a hobby is waning in popularity. It adversely affects the youngsters who are bombarded with all types of recreation. We, as dedicated rosarians, must do everything in our power to blunt this urge to abandon the hobby we love. It would be remiss to allow the work performed by the rose pioneers to have been done in vain. Moreover, it would be a disaster to see our hobby fall into oblivion.