

Edmund Mills' New York Legacy: Syracuse Rose Society and the E.M. Mills Memorial Rose Garden  
*by Lois C. Stack*

Here's a look at a key figure in SRS history, Dr. E.M. Mills, who appears in many of our historical records merely as "a Methodist minister in Syracuse."

### Early Years

Born in Ottawa, Canada on July 17, 1848, to a Scottish father and mother of Vermont pioneer stock, six-year-old Edmund moved with them to Los Angeles, CA, where he grew up. He was sent east to Wesleyan University in Connecticut in spite of his two-year campaign to attend Yale instead. He graduated in 1872 and soon after, entered the Methodist ministry.

### Methodist Ministry in Central New York

When he arrived in LaFayette and Apulia, NY to assume his first pastorate in 1872, one of his first acts was to help build his own parsonage of local logs for him and the young local lady he planned to marry, the daughter of a Fabius, NY physician. (No record could be found of her probable subsequent death.) From 1874 to 1877 he built up Brown Memorial Church in Syracuse while simultaneously studying for the Ph.D. degree in geology which Syracuse University awarded him in 1878. The next year, he demonstrated his apparently wide-ranging interests by offering a public lecture in Brown Church's new building on "Court and Camp of Charles the First" ("Tickets at door for adults 20c"). Nine years later, Wesleyan University accorded him the Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) degree; and Syracuse University conferred the Doctor of Letters (Litt.D.) in 1918.

Over his 52-year ministry in Central New York, he served many parishes around Syracuse and beyond to the south and west (Wolcott, Penn Yan, Ithaca, Elmira, Tonawanda). During this period his responsibilities within the Methodist Church expanded from minister to regional superintendent to ever-increasing committee charges in the national Methodist ministry. In 1899 national recognition within the church came when he was named Secretary of the Twentieth Century Thanksgiving Offering to raise \$20,000,000 for missions, a figure that made people gasp in those days. When all the returns were in at the end of 1902, the commission had met its goal plus an additional one million dollars. Among many other responsibilities for the church at large, he was a delegate to the Methodist ecumenical conference in London in 1901 and in Toronto in 1911.

### Ministry of the Beautiful

Busy though he was in the Methodist church, he always had time for roses. In his Syracuse garden of 1911, he grew about 400 plants of 129 varieties. In an article about his garden (Mills, 1917) he listed plants bought from Peter Lambert in Germany, Pernet Duchet in France and others from England, Ireland and the U.S. "I have another rose bush from Lyons, France—a Mrs. Edmund M. Mills. She stands out in a favored spot in the garden in her great coat of excelsior

to protect her from the chilling blasts. And I have another Mrs. Edmund M. Mills, from Ohio, called 'Brownie' for short, who makes my home happy and bright this stormy winter's day!" . . . [When in his garden he caught the breath of some old rose, he said it brought him memories of his] "mother, who taught me to love and grow roses . . .and I am again a little boy by her side! (Mills, 1917, p. 73)". In the article above, he shared his recipe for successful rose growing by quoting "good old Dean Hole [S. Reynolds Hole, Dean of Rochester Cathedral in England] . . .He who would have beautiful roses in his garden must have them in his heart. He must love them well and always (1917, p. 72)." He was thoroughly aware of Hole's accomplishments in England: several books on roses, the first national rose show in 1858 and the National Rose Society in 1876. His own ministry in New York was leading him down the same path as Dean Hole and many other clergy of past and present whom he listed in another article, "Roses—Clergy—Churches (Mills, 1921). There Mills described some local clergy as missionaries of both the gospel and the rose: "Within a radius of some fifty miles from where this article is written are as many ministers, in country and village, who have from a score to a hundred rose bushes. . . . They are . . .leavening the communities where they live with a knowledge of and love for the rose [p. 22]." He described six villages with rose-embowered houses and rose gardens. Some of the gardens boasted fine rose bushes because rose-loving clergymen lived there. In one, "Nearly two-score years ago in that village lived a Roman Catholic priest and his next-door neighbor, an elder in the Presbyterian church, . . . enthusiastic rose growers. A friendly but robust rivalry existed between them. They had no Hybrid Teas, except possibly La France. They did have Hybrid Perpetuals and Moss roses and the Tea rose, White Maman Cochet (each had a hundred White Maman Cochet). They made that village a veritable rose garden (Mills, 1921, p.22-23)".

### Syracuse Rose Society (SRS)

As a minister, Mills saw the value of people organizing themselves to achieve common goals and to better themselves and their communities. On February 7, 1911, when he was 63 years old, he gathered 20 people to a meeting at which seven agreed to establish the SRS with him as their first president. The new club began to build excitement in the community. First, a double-page spread in the April 16, 1911 Sunday magazine section of a local newspaper announced the club's intention to make Syracuse the "Rose City of the Empire State."

Just four months after its founding, the new club dazzled Syracuse with its first "Annual Rose Show" in the Onondaga Hotel on June 15-16. The schedule listed Class One for Amateurs, Class Two for Gentlemen (Private) Gardeners, and Class Three for Professional Gardeners. Top prize was 100 rose bushes.

Public rose gardens were an important facet of the new society's planning for its "Rose City." On May 9, 1911, Syracuse set aside three acres in Kirk Park for roses. Superintendent of Parks David Campbell oversaw the planting of 2500 rose bushes in the northwest corner of the park; later more rose plantings were added on a nearby street (Avery Avenue leading to Burnet Park).

Three years later, with the cooperation of Chancellor Day of Syracuse

University, the society moved the Kirk Park garden to a new location on the campus. They planned “54 beds with from 25-30 bushes per bed, 100 different varieties” for the oval in front of the library. This garden lasted from 1915 to 1922, when the College of Forestry appropriated the property to grow trees for student instruction.

In its first three years, the SRS had grown from the initial seven members to 300 who, among other activities, had given three rose shows and planted two public gardens. Mills’ *1916 Annual* article cites several other achievements of the fledgling group: “Now there are a hundred men and women who can give an instructive and illuminating address on rose-growing, where five years ago it was impossible to have a meeting without outside help. At least a dozen addresses on rose culture have been delivered [to community organizations] during the past year in the city. . . . Hundreds of people who do not belong to it have rose gardens because of it. . . . There are single blocks in Syracuse where more roses are now grown by amateurs than were grown on any whole street in the city when the Syracuse Rose Society was founded. In the block where the writer resides the man who does not grow roses is the exception and not the rule. “

#### Edmund M. Mills Garden, Syracuse

As he was assuming ever-larger roles within the ARS (See companion article), Mills’ Syracuse role was diminishing. In 1922 Dr. Mills was seriously ill and away from Syracuse. The city had acquired a very large, picturesque, old estate abutting the university campus and proposed to convert it to a public park. Because the campus no longer had room for its rose garden, SRS’s 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President Griffin Lewis met with city officials about moving the garden to the new landscaped tract named “Thornden.” Mayor John Walrath, an SRS member, authorized a two-acre site near the park’s entrance. SRS members led by Mr. Styring began developing plans for the new garden’s layout, design, and planting. They decided to name the garden in honor of their absent founder and president of 11 years, Dr. Mills. Mrs. C. E. Bikle (1924) has detailed the garden’s design and planting by the SRS.

On July 2, 1924, Dr. Mills was beginning his second year as ARS President. Back in Syracuse his rose society had planted the major part of the new garden named for him. It was in full bloom with 200,000 blooms when Dr. Mills came for the dedication.

A year later, Syracuse was ready to dedicate the new gazebo in the Mills Garden. The dedication ceremony was incorporated into a national ARS convention held in Syracuse in July, 1925. City officials also took part in the dedication, and the National Guard band played. Dr. Mills addressed the assembled crowd on “The Ministry of the Beautiful”. Following the convention, Dr. Mills began a year as President Emeritus of the ARS.

#### Retirement to California

When he became ARS President, in July, 1923, at age 75, Dr. Mills announced his plans to leave Central New York. After his work as secretary of the general conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church was done, and he had finished

raising \$500,000 for the retired ministers fund, he would leave Syracuse for the warmer climate of California, where his roots lay (Post-Standard, 1923). Later a Syracuse newspaper editor reminisced over Mills' years in the city (his last residence was on Comstock Avenue near the University and the present-day E.M. Mills Rose Garden). "The church leader's duties took him to all parts of America and into several foreign countries, but he acquired the taste for travel early in life. His home in Syracuse was a veritable curiosity shop of souvenirs he brought home from out-of-the-way places. . . .He was known for his love of roses and for his two other favorite pursuits: swimming and fishing. For many years he held the long distance swimming championship of central New York. Annually during his residence here he made it a point to swim across Cazenovia Lake. Hardly a day passed that he didn't participate in distance trials in the YMCA pool." (*Herald*, 1933) In 1913 he swam over four miles in two hours and 35 minutes. Every year he increased his annual total in the pool—100 miles at age 69. One fall when he was 70 years old, he swam two miles across a choppy Cayuga Lake.

In his California retirement, he continued to correspond with his Syracuse and ARS friends. He grew a fine rose garden at his home in Santa Ana and visited rosarians and gardens on the west coast.

In early 1933 he suffered two strokes and was critically ill for several weeks in February. Syracuse newspapers reported his death on March 15, 1933. As he lay comatose near death, his bed shook several times due to an earthquake in Santa Ana, but he had no knowledge of it ([Syracuse Herald](#), 1933). One is tempted to say that the earth shook as this very strong man was leaving us. He was survived in California by his wife Sadie, three sisters, and two brothers, and buried in Fair Haven Cemetery, Santa Ana, CA.

The rose society which he founded in Syracuse will celebrate 100 years of continuous operations next year by hosting the 2011 ARS National Miniature Rose Convention June 24-26. The 87-year-old Mills Garden will be in full bloom then with many new miniature rose beds.

#### References

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75<sup>th</sup> Birthday.

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