

Thornden Park: A Historical Review

by Jim Wagner

For both Thornden Park and the Syracuse Rose Society rose gardens, the early to mid-1920s were a time of major change in their respective histories. In 1921, the City of Syracuse became just the third owner of a substantial plot of land in the university area known as Thornden Park. Shortly thereafter the Syracuse Rose Society was looking for the third home for its rose gardens.

Thornden Park

PRIVATE OWNERSHIP

In 1854, James R. Haskins, a successful salt mining businessman, purchased 76 acres of prime farmland in the area that is now known as Thornden Park in Syracuse, NY. This served as his and his family's home until tragedy and an untimely death struck the family.

In 1873 the property was acquired by Major Alexander Davis, which he named Thornden. This name most likely came from the hawthorn, a common native tree both in Britain and America, a species that was and still is present on the Park property. Major Davis, though born in America, was very proud of his English heritage and named the estate Thornden in the British tradition of bestowing distinct sites with descriptive place-names. His head gardener, David Campbell, was responsible for planting a wide variety of shrubs, and adding extensive perennial plantings that were complemented by a sunken formal garden.

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP

Then, on December 13, 1921 the City of Syracuse purchased the unoccupied American countryside estate, Thornden, from the English heirs of Major Davis and dedicated it as parkland, describing it as a "park ready-made, a mature landscape of informal groves and picturesque water features and land forms."

Subsequently, plans were initiated for adding a rose garden in the southwest end of this park. Adjacent to and a short walk from the rose gardens is an annual and perennial garden with an attractive lily pond and waterfall. Thornden Park also includes a 50 meters long, six-lane outdoor pool with a capacity of 499 bathers, an amphitheater, a multi-purpose athletic field, tennis courts and basketball courts, and a new playground for children. Near the park's Madison Street/Ostrom Avenue entrance is a rare and magnificent weeping beech, planted in the 1880s, a source of great pride to park

neighbors.

Some of the finest views of Syracuse, including sunsets overlooking Onondaga Lake, can be seen from atop the park's resident drumlin, its highest point.

This Park's significance as an historic landscape was recognized in 1989 when it was designated a local protected site by the City of Syracuse. In 1994, the park was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places as an historic designed landscape. The gardens' symmetrical layouts follow the Beaux Arts style popular in America in the early decades of the 20th century. These formal gardens contrast with the planned informality of the existing landscape.

E. M. Mills Memorial Rose Garden: An AARS Public Display Garden

MUNICIPAL ROSE GARDEN PROPOSED

Subsequent to the City's purchase of Thornden Park, the beloved president of the Syracuse Rose Society and then president of the American Rose Society, Dr. Edmund M. Mills, a local Methodist minister and Syracuse Rose Society founder, was seriously ill and away. In his absence from Society activities, it was proposed that a municipal rose garden to be named for Dr. Mills to commemorate his services to American rose growing.

Within the Syracuse Rose Society, a committee was appointed to assume the responsibility of such a rose garden. A letter was sent to Syracuse Mayor Walrath requesting the City's favorable consideration of a rose garden in the development plans for Thornden Park. The Mayor promptly promised his approval and cooperation. Alexis N. Muench, Chairman of the Department of Parks, was equally encouraging, and a committee from the City Hall met with the Syracuse Rose Society (SRS) first vice-president, Dr. G. Griffin Lewis, and a committee of his choosing, to decide upon the exact location for the rose garden.

ROSE GARDEN SITE SELECTION & PLANNING

A site was chosen, about two acres at the southwest entrance to the park (near Syracuse University). With the site determined, a Mr. Styring prepared a tentative plan for the arrangement of the rose garden – a circular plot of turf in the center to be the site of a pillared garden-house (now known as the gazebo). From it, like spokes from an axle, eight paths were to radiate. Four of these would be spanned by arches 10 feet wide upon which climbers were to be trained. The other four spokes were to be bordered on each side by a row of pillar and standard roses, planted about 6 feet apart. These eight spokes (still four with arches for climbers and four that are open walks) are now the brick covered paths within the rose gardens.

Plans for a pergola and garden-house were drawn. Initially, only climbers and standards were to be paid for out of the SRS treasury, but later it was decided that all of the rose bushes should be the gift of the Rose Society or of its friends. During the latter days of 1923, a letter was sent to the Post Standard, a local newspaper, requesting help in the funding and obtaining of plantings for this garden. The response, both locally and the country over by admirers of Dr. Mills, were far greater than expected. Although the final plans called for over 5,000 rose bushes the actual number planted at that time is not clear - one source indicates about 6,000 bushes were planted then.

E. M. MILLS GARDEN: THIRD SRS ROSE GARDEN

The present E. M. Mills Memorial Rose Garden site in Thornden Park is actually the third rose garden planted by Syracuse Rose Society members. The first, with 2500 rose bushes, was planted in 1911 in Kirk Park. In 1915, the garden was moved to Mt. Olympus, its second location, behind the old library and the chemistry building at Syracuse University. In the early 1920s, the land for the Mt. Olympus rose garden, was being acquired by Syracuse University for its School of Forestry. After considerable planning and effort, the third SRS rose garden became a part of Thornden Park and was dedicated as the E. M. Mills Memorial Rose Garden in 1924. The 1925 American Rose Society Annual reported the dedication of these gardens on July 2, 1924. The dedication was an especially significant event in that Dr. Mills, the person to whom the garden was being dedicated, was still alive and took part in the actual dedication. In 1931, a lower garden (across from the present garden) was dedicated, but later abandoned (possibly 1940).

DEDICATION OF PAVILION (GAZEBO) IN 1925

On June 22, 1925 a Pavilion in the center of the Mills rose gardens was dedicated in memory of three prominent Syracusans, Hendrick S. Holden, James M. Gilbert, and William Nottingham by their respective widows (three sisters), Mrs. Luella Stewart Holden, Mrs. Bertha Holden Gilbert, and Mrs. Eloise Holden Nottingham. Participating in this event were the American Rose Society in convention (annual meeting) in Syracuse, the Syracuse Rose Society, and the City administration. Mayor Walrath accepted the gift in behalf of the City of Syracuse. The presentation program included remarks by Dr. Mills entitled "The Ministry of the Beautiful" and songs and poetry about roses. According to the newspaper account of this event, there were 200,000 blooms on 6,000 rose bushes that had just been planted the prior year. At the ARS meeting here, Dr. Mills, ARS president for two years, was made president emeritus.

BRONZE PLAQUES IN GAZEBO

In the center of this gazebo is an upright granite stone with two plaques on it. One honors Dr. Mills with the name of Edmund M. Mills Rose Garden; reference to the Syracuse Rose Society and the date of 1924. On the opposite side is a plaque showing that the Pavilion was given in 1925 in memory of the persons named above by their respective widows (see above).

ALL-AMERICAN ROSE SELECTIONS (AARS) DISPLAY GARDENS

Each year these gardens receive and display the finest new rose varieties that will be introduced to the public the following year by All-American Rose

Selections (AARS). The Mills Rose Garden is one of ten AARS accredited public display rose gardens in New York State.

The All-American Rose Selections is a non-profit association of rose growers and introducers dedicated to the introduction and promotion of exceptional roses. Every AARS winning rose sent to the Mills Garden already has completed an extensive two-year trial program where it's judged on everything from disease resistance to flower production to color to fragrance. During this evaluation period, each specimen is assigned only an official AARS number, not a name. AARS has been testing roses since 1938 and has about 25 Official AARS Test Gardens throughout the United States – one in Buffalo and one in Old Westbury, Long Island within NYS. The Mills Garden is not a test site but one for display of the successfully tested varieties.

During the spring of 2004, SRS members planted 75 AARS roses (four new AARS varieties that will be available to the public in 2005).. The Society also planted 113 other roses this year including 10 each of Moonstone, Elizabeth Taylor, Rio Samba, and Crowd Pleaser that we never had before. As near as we can determine, presently there are about 4,025 rose bushes in these gardens. These include about 29 classes of roses from species and old garden roses to modern types including hybrid teas, shrubs, floribundas, miniatures, and climbing roses that comprise about 385 different varieties.

CARE OF THESE ROSE GARDENS: A COOPERATIVE EFFORT

In 1970, a cooperative agreement was made between the Syracuse Rose Society and the City of Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth Programs

Currently, the City Parks Department helps pay for additional roses and supplies needed for the gardens; provides general care for the grounds; and assists in some of the heavier labor intensive efforts including moving truckloads of mulch in the fall to be spread on the rose beds for the winter protection. Many costs associated with enhancing or expanding the garden are covered by memorial gifts to the Syracuse Rose Society and by grants obtained from various sources.

Most of the ongoing labor-of-love care of the roses is done by SRS volunteers who work at these gardens on Wednesday mornings from 8:00 – 12:00. This on-site volunteer effort usually starts in mid-April and continues through mid-November.

Although not scheduled this year, in the past, the Society scheduled one Saturday work day in the spring for helping in the removal of winter protection, spring pruning, planting new roses, etc. and another Saturday workday in the late fall to help prepare the roses for the winter. For the year 2003 there were 2,500(+) volunteer hours of work in these gardens. About 40 members participated at various times with an average of around 18 to 20 (give or take 3 to 5 on any given day) volunteers that show up for most of the workdays. Of course, additional help is appreciated at any time.

Over the past third of a century or so, some of those in leadership roles at the Mills Garden have been Lydia Winters, Lena and Anthony (Tony)

Domachowski, O. L. VanValkenburg, John Messerly, Dan Magaro, Fred Wetherell, and Dorothy Storms.

ENJOYMENT, EDUCATION, AND CAMARADERIE

Except when the gardens are reserved for special events such as weddings, photo taking, etc. these gardens are open daily free of charge for anyone wishing to enjoy the roses. There are several benches where people may sit and relax while enjoying the roses. In mid-June there is an Open House to which the public is especially welcome. A couple of times a year, students from Elmcrest, a local school that reaches out to troubled and disadvantaged children, enjoy a field trip to these gardens, helping out for a couple of hours or so while they are there. Questions from the public can be answered Wednesday mornings or during pre-announced Rose Clinics at the Garden.

And probably one of the greatest sources of enjoyment and education is the camaraderie that grows amongst the volunteers while working in the gardens and at the mid-morning coffee break when discussion of almost any rose or other garden subject may take place.

CHALLENGES--MOTHER NATURE AND HUMAN NATURE

Nature does not always provide nice warm and sunny days when volunteers plan to work nor when spraying is scheduled nor moderate winter weather that is best for the survival of most roses. As a result, some things do not get done as planned and sometimes disease and insect problems become serious when sprayings cannot be done as scheduled. When work gets behind, volunteers are sometimes asked to come on an alternate day. Fortunately, response in such cases is reasonably good. Unfortunately, when we have a severely cold and windy winter without adequate snow cover all season like we had in the winter of 2003-2004, roses in this garden suffer and need major extra spring pruning.

Although not normally a major problem, there are some elements of "human nature" that do not seem to appreciate the efforts that go into maintaining these gardens. Almost every year, some of the rose bushes just disappear, name plates/signs become damaged or are taken, and last year one of the new benches that were added through a grant, disappeared over the winter or in early spring even though it had been bolted and welded to its footings. These acts are discouraging to the City and to the Society and especially to those who work so hard to make these gardens a place of beauty to enjoy.

Note: Information in this article includes data from "A Brief History of Thornden Park", a walking tour and guidebook; from the Thornden Park, Syracuse Rose Society, All-American Rose Selections, and Centers for Nature Education, Inc. websites; from 1923 through 1925 American Rose Society Annuals; from Onondaga Historical Association; from Steve Jones, ARS Vice-President; and from discussions with members of the Syracuse Rose Society and from both historic and current information provided by SRS members.