



The Legacy of Léonie Bell

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If you were growing old roses on either side of the Atlantic during the last quarter of the 20th century, you've undoubtedly come across the name of Léonie Bell. This remarkably gifted, sometimes controversial woman played a major role in sharing both rose information and varieties with the public.

Léonie began her career in the world of plants as a botanical illustrator when she was barely out of her teens. She was working in the early 1950s with the writer Helen Van Pelt Wilson, drawing the plates for *African Violets* and *Climbing Roses*, when the duo envisioned a unique long-term project. They would attempt a book on fragrance in the garden, much along the lines of Louise Beebe Wilder's *The Fragrant Path*. The Wilson-Bell book would follow flowers and plants outdoors and in the house through the months of the calendar year. The two insisted they would grow and personally experience everything that would go into the book. Their opus, *The Fragrant Year*, was published in 1967. Lavishly illustrated with Léonie's drawings, the book was well-received by the public. The longest chapter, "Just Roses," was Léonie's work alone: a fresh look at rose history with much useful information on the antique types available in the 1960s. In preparing for this, she had purchased all the heirloom roses then in commerce. She



OPPOSITE: Léonie Bell's illustration of Bella Donna from *The Fragrant Year*. ABOVE: Léonie Bell in 1971. RIGHT: Photo of Bella Donna by Ron Robertson.



In this collection of ancient plants, the ever-active bees do their work and many hips form in spite of diligent deadheading. Two years ago Dennis Whetzel, assistant nursery manager and curator of collections, found a particularly beautiful seedling in a batch raised from the Musk Rose. A clean semi-double white rose, generously scented, low-growing, everblooming, with disease-free foliage, it has proven to be Musk x Seagull, another of Léonie's finds. In 2007, the decision was made to register this new rose, now planted at the west entrance to the garden, as Souvenir of Léonie Bell. I knew her well, my mentor and friend, for half my life and I know she would approve.

also traded with collectors across the nation. Ultimately she imported what could no longer be found stateside. This was the start of a long correspondence with the then-manager of the English firm Hilling & Co., Graham Stuart Thomas.

The Fragrant Rose became Léonie's stepping-stone to a lifetime of old rose projects: regular articles for *The American Rose Annual* and later for the Royal National Rose Society. She wrote prodigiously for *The Heritage Rose Newsletter* and eventually served as its editor for a number of years. Early on in her research, Léonie began to notice the many inaccuracies in nomenclature in the nursery trade and in rose literature. She then made it her mission to untangle the snarls and to provide correct identifications for the gardening public. She immersed herself in Redouté-Thory—plates and text; I with my college French did the translating. She got to know British and American writers, and the nursery catalogues that supplied 19th-

century U.S. gardens. One might not always agree with her conclusions, but one could not fault her methodology.

The first nomenclature tangle she tackled was with the Damasks in the trade in the 1950s and 60s. This was a necessity for writing *The Fragrant Year*. Which was the true type used in the perfume industry? The nurseries were selling a TRIGINTIPETALA (30-petaled) and a KAZANLIK (named after the Bulgarian epicenter of attar-making). But both were the same rose, so double that the petals pushed the sepals apart long before the flower opened. The same rose, sold here as “BLOSSVALE PINK” and *Rosa centifolia*, was a regular find in Pennsylvania farmyards and cemeteries. Léonie wondered what it could really be, and after much detective work in old American literature determined that the name BELLA DONNA appeared the most likely candidate. She eventually found it listed in a circa 1830 garden diary from Wyck, an ancient homestead in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. This was the only Damask on the old list and it is still the only Damask on the property today. A mystery was apparently solved.

Léonie was furious about the so-called Musk rose sold from the '50s, '60s, and '70s. Hadn't anyone read Gerard, Parkinson, or Redouté on this? Didn't they know *R. moschata* was a shrub and not a giant climber, that it bloomed in the summer and autumn, not just in the spring? She sent pages of quotes from the old writers to Graham Thomas and it was her research and persistence that would spark his celebrated rediscovery of the true Musk in 1963. If you enjoy the Musk rose today, if you grow SPRAY CECILE BRUNNER rather than the bogus BLOOMFIELD ABUNDANCE, or MARCHESA BOCCELLA rather than the mis-named JACQUES CARTIER, you have benefitted from the careful research of Léonie Bell. She challenged the sometimes shoddy scholarship of the rose world's status quo. This won her many friends, but also some significant foes.

Léonie lived and gardened in Conshohocken, just north of Philadelphia. She and husband Louis, a successful banker, raised their seven children in a renovated 19th-century farmhouse that sat on several acres. Of course, there were rose gardens. At first the bushes were nursery-bought,



OPPOSITE: Souvenir of Léonie Bell. Photo by Kent Krugh. RIGHT: Léonie Bell's illustration of Nastarana from *The Fragrant Year*.



ABOVE: Climbing Old Blush. Photo by Ron Robertson. RIGHT: The Léonie Bell Noisette Garden at the Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants, Charlottesville, Virginia. Photo by Kent Krugh.

but later the wide beds and borders held her “found roses” (a term she coined), those collected from old sites. A separate area held the plants she imported from England and Denmark that were still under quarantine. All eventually were propagated under mist, and the resulting “rose babies” were shared with collectors across the nation. She was diligent about giving significant finds to The Huntington in San Marino, California, to Virginia Hopper and Joyce Demits and their fledgling nursery in Fort Bragg, California, and especially to Joe Schraven at the Pickering Nursery in Canada. Rose lovers in the United States owe this lady so much for getting so many favorites back into circulation.

When Léonie died in 1996, family and rose friends began discussing a fitting memorial and how best to preserve her more important finds. At the time of her final illness she had been sharing roses with the Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Center, or CHP, was established in 1987 to preserve, propagate, and distribute ornamental plants important to U.S. gardens before 1900. Located on Tufton Farm adjacent to Thomas Jefferson’s home Monticello, the CHP grows and sells plants and

seeds at the Visitor’s Center and via mail order to carry on our third president’s great interest in gardening.

Thomas Jefferson was a true Renaissance man with deep interests in science, the classical world, architecture, music, and with a special passion for horticulture. Prior to the presidency, Jefferson served as our young republic’s ambassador to France and traveled extensively through Western Europe. He collected many types of plants and seeds that he thought would grow well back in Piedmont, Virginia, with its dry, hot summers and moderate winters.

CHP Director Peggy Cornett and the Monticello Board were interested in a Bell Memorial project when approached late in 1996. But what kind of rose gar-

den would be most appropriate? A simple collection of Léonie's finds would be a hodge-podge. However, she had a favorite group of roses, the early type of Noisettes, the small-flowered primitive ones. John Champneys, originator of the class, coincidentally had produced his first historic seedling, CHAMPNEYS' PINK CLUSTER during the Jefferson presidency. Léonie had identified the Champneys' rose from material discovered by Carl Cato in southern Virginia with the able assistance of the Bermuda Rose Society. CHAMPNEYS' PINK CLUSTER had grown on the island since its introduction there in 1822. Léonie, to her credit, made sure this vanishing piece of history was propagated and widely distributed. Over the years she had also preserved in her garden fifteen of these primitive Noisette types. Why not a Noisette garden? These roses grow extremely well in central Virginia, flowering through summer heat and drought, then taking on fresh energy and color in the cooler autumn right up to killing frost. With a generous initial gift from the Bell family and help from her many friends, the Léonie Bell Noisette Garden was opened to the public in May 1998.

When one visits the Bell Garden today, the setting for this important collection of 19th-century roses is ideal. Jefferson scholar and landscape architect C. Allan Brown's design is an octagon, Jefferson's favorite shape. Around the beds' perimeter is a series of posts festooned with chains on which climbers are being trained. PRINCESSE DE NASSAU, CLIMBING OLD BLUSH, and the foundlings





TOP: Found several years ago on a circa 1830 Virginia grave, this closely matches early descriptions of ‘Smith’s Yellow’ (*Smithii*), an important parent of early Teas and Tea Noisettes. ABOVE: This founding from Charles Walker is close to Thory’s description of *Rosa noisettiana purpurea* and is distributed by the CHP under the study name “Redouté’s Red.” Photos by Kent Krugh.

“MT. VERNON PURPLE” and “RUTH’S WAVY-LEAFED” look particularly beautiful with such treatment. Flanking the main entry are two of Léonie’s favorites: Mrs. Keays’ old “FADED PINK MONTHLY”, brought from Creekside itself, and the Ohio founding “AUNT LOUISA ROSE”, named for the aunt of martyred President Garfield. All the old-type Noisettes available in the States in the 1980s and 1990s are here, clearly labeled. OLD BLUSH, father to the Noisette class, grows well, as does the mother, *R. moschata*. The Musk Rose in the Bell Garden was propagated from the venerable specimen at Bremo Recess, the nearby plantation of Gen. John Hartwell Cocke, a close friend of Jefferson. In the General’s papers, preserved at the University of Virginia, correspondence with the Prince Nursery in New York states that the “WHITE MUSK CLUSTER” was sent to

Bremo and first planted in 1815, making this plant one of the oldest rose bushes in North America. This “BREMO MUSK” is the semi-double type found elsewhere in Virginia and the Carolinas. The Bell Garden also preserves the fully double form, called the “TEMPLE MUSK” in recent literature from its discovery in the early ’80s on the Temple family plot in the Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond.

The Bell Garden has gone to great effort to collect and grow Dr. C. C. Hurst’s four Stud Chinas so important as rose ancestors. Three single China roses grow superbly: Bermuda’s “EMMIE GREY,” SINGLE PINK CHINA, and the crimson MISS LOWE. Since most of the early Noisettes are white or blush, the deeper colors are used as accents because this is more than a collection, it’s a garden. FELLEBERG, BOUGAINVILLE, and CAMÉLIA ROSE show up well against the pale types, along with the Chinas WHITE PEARL IN RED DRAGON’S MOUTH and FABVIER. Use is also made of a red foundling from Dr. Charles Walker, which strongly resembles the Redouté plate of *R. noisettiana purpurea*. Its study name at Tufton is “REDOUTÉ’S RED”. The pink varieties have recently welcomed a new sister. CHP volunteer Wayne Goodall brought a very fragrant, deep rose-colored type from an old family garden in Halifax County, which has now been successfully propagated. Other foundlings are here as research continues on their identities. Chief among these is a wonderful fully double type of the palest shade of yellow. Tufton’s director Peggy Cornett found this one on a circa 1830 grave. This is the Bell Garden’s candidate for the long lost SMITH’S YELLOW.

When one wanders the pathways of this memorial garden, enjoying the scents and subtle colors, it is important to remember that along with the history and beauty, one is experiencing the *endangered*. On the East Coast of the United States, many of the rural haunts, the ancient burial grounds, the plantations and farms have been phased out of existence by developers, and along with them the old roses that once flourished. To complicate matters further: in our Midwest, the Middle Atlantic States, and especially in the Shenandoah Valley and Virginia’s Piedmont, there is the apocalyptic specter of Rose Rosette Disease. This mite-borne malady could potentially wipe out all our roses, old and new. In the face of these challenges the staff at Monticello’s Center for Historic Plants works bravely to save a piece of the living past in the Bell Garden.

The REV. DOUGLAS T. SEIDEL, a consultant to the Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants at Monticello, Virginia, designed the planting plan for the Léonie Bell Noisette Garden on the Center’s grounds. Doug joined the HRF Board in 2003. His collection of old roses features the early type of small-flowered Noisettes, hybrids of American natives, local forms of Gallicas and Portlands, and the very earliest Polyanthas and Minis. A Musk rose released by Vintage Gardens is named in his honor.