On the Trail with Texas Rose Rustlers

A conspiracy of enthusiasts rounds up the roses of yesteryear

Thomas Christopher

WE HAD BEEN RIDING the La Bahia Trail all morning, Pam and I, scouting for the upcoming rustle. Traveling along the rutted dirt track, we passed ranch after ranch stocked with sleek horses and Brahman cattle. Pam spared them hardly a glance, because when the rustlers assembled from all over Texas in two weeks, it wouldn't be livestock they'd be after. They'd be looking for roses, the roses of Texas's past.

Admittedly, these Texans' interest in antique roses is hardly unique. In the last few years the so-called old roses—the cultivars bred before the rise of the modern Hybrid Tea—have become the most fashionable of flowers. The number of nurseries specializing in these shrubs has tripled in the last decade, and Heritage Roses ("a fellowship of those who care about old roses") now boasts six regional chapters and has members in every state. If the Texans do not stand alone in this interest, though, their expertise and their flamboyant style surely puts them in a class by themselves.

I had heard rumors of a "Texas Old Rose Symposium" from collectors in my native New York, and plans for a visit to the Lone Star State tempted me to pursue the matter. At the advice of Heritage Roses, I called Miss Pamela Puryear of Navasota.

Pam extended the warmest of invitations. In Texas, she assured me, the roses bloom into December, and if I came on the second weekend of November I would be welcome to attend the Seventh Annual Old Rose Rustle. On Saturday of that weekend, she promised, the old-rose community from all over central Texas, collectors from Dallas to the Gulf, would be assembling at her house. Then they would drive out in their cars, trucks, and campers to take cuttings of every old rose they could find, in what she described as a horticultural version of Sherman's march to the sea. When I volunteered not only for the rustle but also for a preliminary "scout," she chilled my swelling enthusiasm by advising me to be sure to bring my snake-proof boots.

Because my knowledge of Texas was derived entirely from cowboy movies (shot, no doubt, in the California desert), her warning fit my preconceptions only too well. I arrived in Navasota expecting not only dens of rattlesnakes but also endless vistas of sagebrush and dust. I found instead a rolling countryside of lush green fields, meandering streams, and live oak trees neatly trimmed along their bottoms by fat cattle. The resemblance to an English ducal park was thoroughly disorienting.

Just wait until summer, Pam retorted. "In central Texas," she observed, "God is sparing with His watering can." Summertime here is a savage season that can drive the most patriotic Texan over the border, with months of drought and 110-degree heat in the interior matched by stifling humidity at the coast. In this climate the average rose lasts no more than a season or two. If black spot, mildew, thrips, and mites don't kill it, the return of the rains in November will tempt the weakened shrub to bloom itself to death.

So when Pam Puryear found a rosebush thriving out in front of an abandoned log cabin back in 1969, she was taken aback.

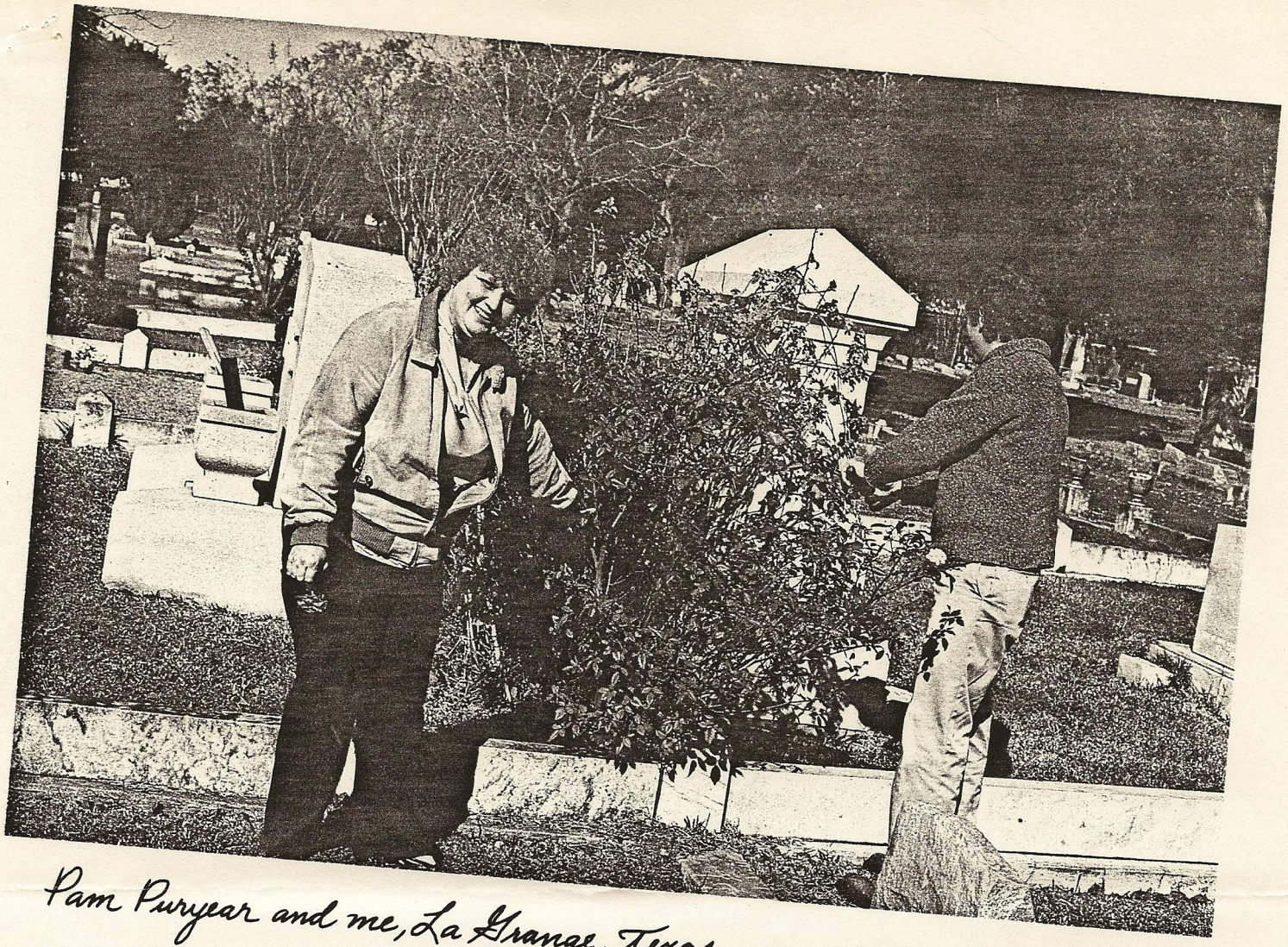
"It was August," she recalls. "It had not rained in five months," yet the rose was "blooming its head off; you couldn't put your fingers between the blooms." Ruefully, she thought of her pampered Hybrid Tea back home, which, despite all her cosseting, had degenerated into "three brown sticks."

Pam knew the unidentified rose to be no transient. It was her historical research that had brought her to the site; an eighth-generation Texan, Pam has a special interest in local history and has made herself an expert on subjects ranging from the steamboats of the Brazos River to traditional Texas cottage gardens. By its architectural detail, she could date the cabin to the 1820s. Thus the rose might well be a veteran of a century and a half of Texas summers. At the very least it must predate the homeplace's abandonment in the 1940s.

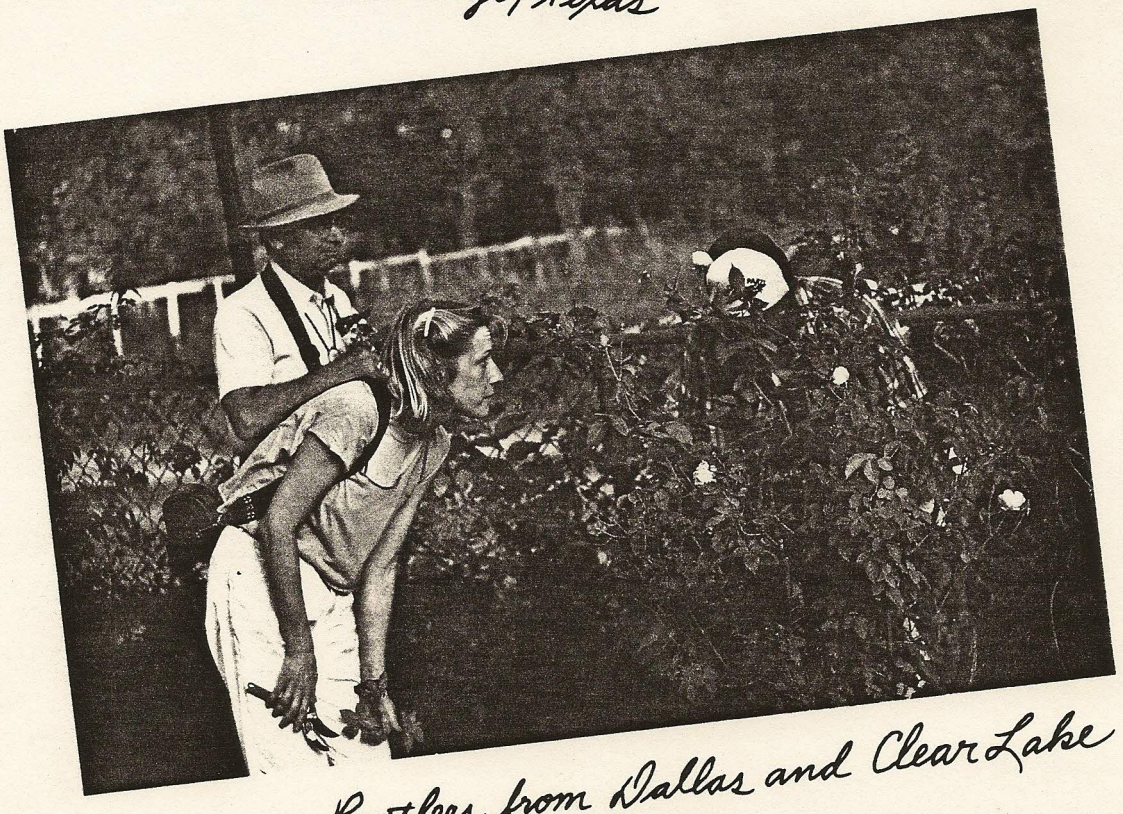
Now, this rose couldn't compete with a modern rose in grandiosity of display. Indeed, the foundling's flowers were almost scentless, modest in size, semidouble, and an artless rose-pink in color. Nevertheless, this rose did exhibit the virtue Texans admire most: it loved Texas.

With the help of a grub hoe and two men from a nearby cotton mill, Pam transplanted the venerable bush to her own yard. Completely indifferent to the change of scene, the rose continued to flourish. Searching through rose manuals at a local library, Pam learned that her find was even older than she had suspected. 'Old Blush' was its name. It was a variety of a Chinese rose, *Rosa chinensis,* that had come to Europe in the hold of a tea ship sometime before 1789 and had entered Texas with the first Anglo settlers back when the territory was still a province of Mexico. Later, Pam was to find it alongside the homesteads and plantations of many early settlers.

As a historian, Pam found this rose's ties to Texas's past intriguing;



Pam Puryear and me, La Grange, Texas



Rustlers from Dallas and Clear Lake

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUZANNE O'CONNELL

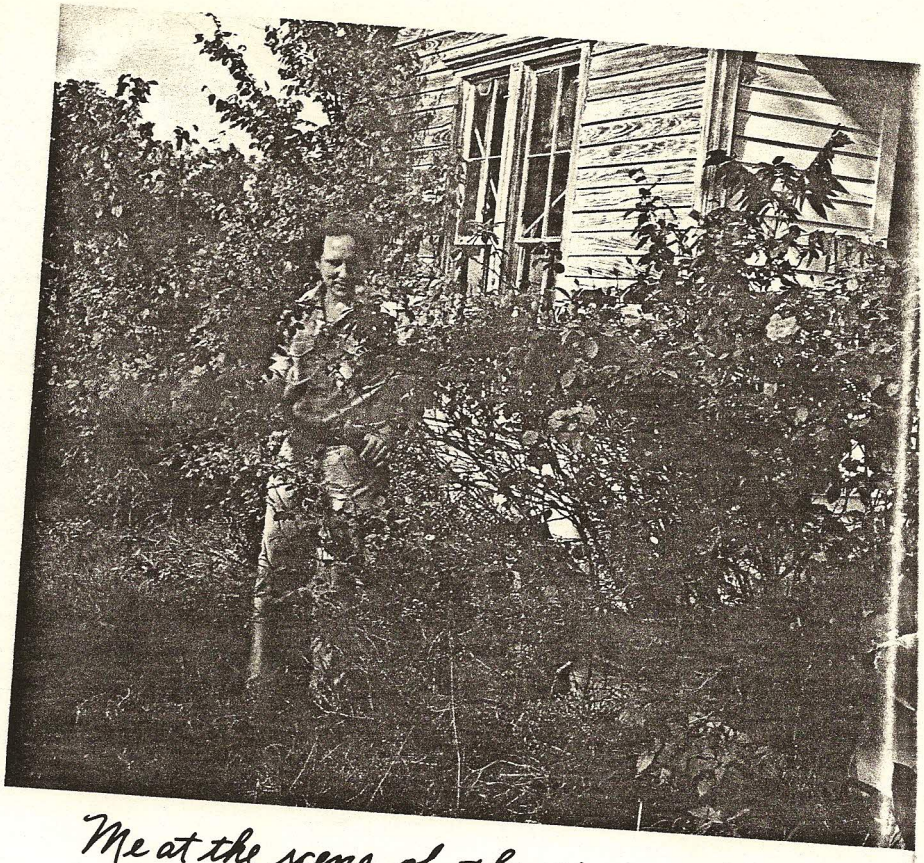
as a gardener, she found its rugged vitality irresistible. She began to bring home other similar survivors she found about the countryside. As word of her unconventional roses spread, other gardeners came to join her in the search for old Texan roses. Dubbed "rustles" by a visitor from Missouri (a cowboy-movie aficionado like myself, no doubt), these get-togethers had evolved by 1979 into an annual event. It was from her meeting, two years later, with Dr. William Welch, of Texas A&M University, however, that Pam dates the birth of the Texas Old Rose Symposium.

With graduate degrees in landscape design and horticulture as well as many years of service as an extension agent and professor of horticulture, Bill Welch is one of those rare individuals who combine a first-rate academic background with broad practical experience; when he isn't teaching classes or lecturing to a garden club, he is most likely advising a local nurseryman or working in the garden of his turn-of-the-century farmhouse. In garden, lecture hall, or laboratory, though, Bill Welch's emphasis is the same: the promotion of plants especially suited to Texas.

Bill had heard of Pam's activities from a mutual friend, so when he arrived at his office one afternoon to find her waiting there, he wasn't entirely unprepared. Her tales of old Texan roses, however, excited him. Could they become a new class of low-maintenance, flowering shrub for local landscapers and park systems? At that first meeting they formed a partnership. Bill would contribute his knowledge of taxonomy and horticulture, rose growing in particular, while Pam would share her special familiarity with the old cultivars and her exhaustive knowledge of the little towns and back roads of central Texas.

Calling on old-rose enthusiasts all over Texas, Pam and Bill enlisted a host of new collectors. In old communities from Navasota to North Zulch these searchers turned up a wealth of old roses. Old cemeteries furnished fine hunting grounds because of a 19th-century custom of planting Mother's favorite flower, very often a rose, by her grave. Abandoned plantations furnished more. But it was ethnic neighborhoods, principally the old German and black communities, that proved most rewarding.

For many of these folk, their garden is their pride. Isolated from the mainstream of American life by poverty, or in the case of the German-Americans by their refusal to assimilate, the inhabitants of these communities have remained loyal to the roses of their parents and grandparents. Rarely do they purchase a rosebush. When the time comes to move or expand the garden, the countryfolk take cuttings from an old favorite. In this fashion they have preserved many a fine old cultivar long after the quest for novelty has driven it from the nursery catalogs.



Me at the scene of the crime

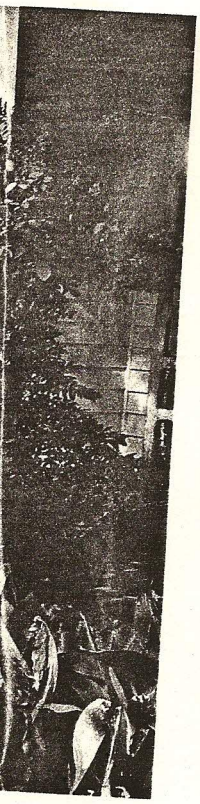
Identification of the rustled roses has often proved difficult. Most belong to classes the average gardener forsook three or four generations ago: Hybrid China roses, Teas, Bourbons, Noisettes, Multifloras, and Polyanthas. The rustlers give each find a "study name" until the rose's true identity can be established.

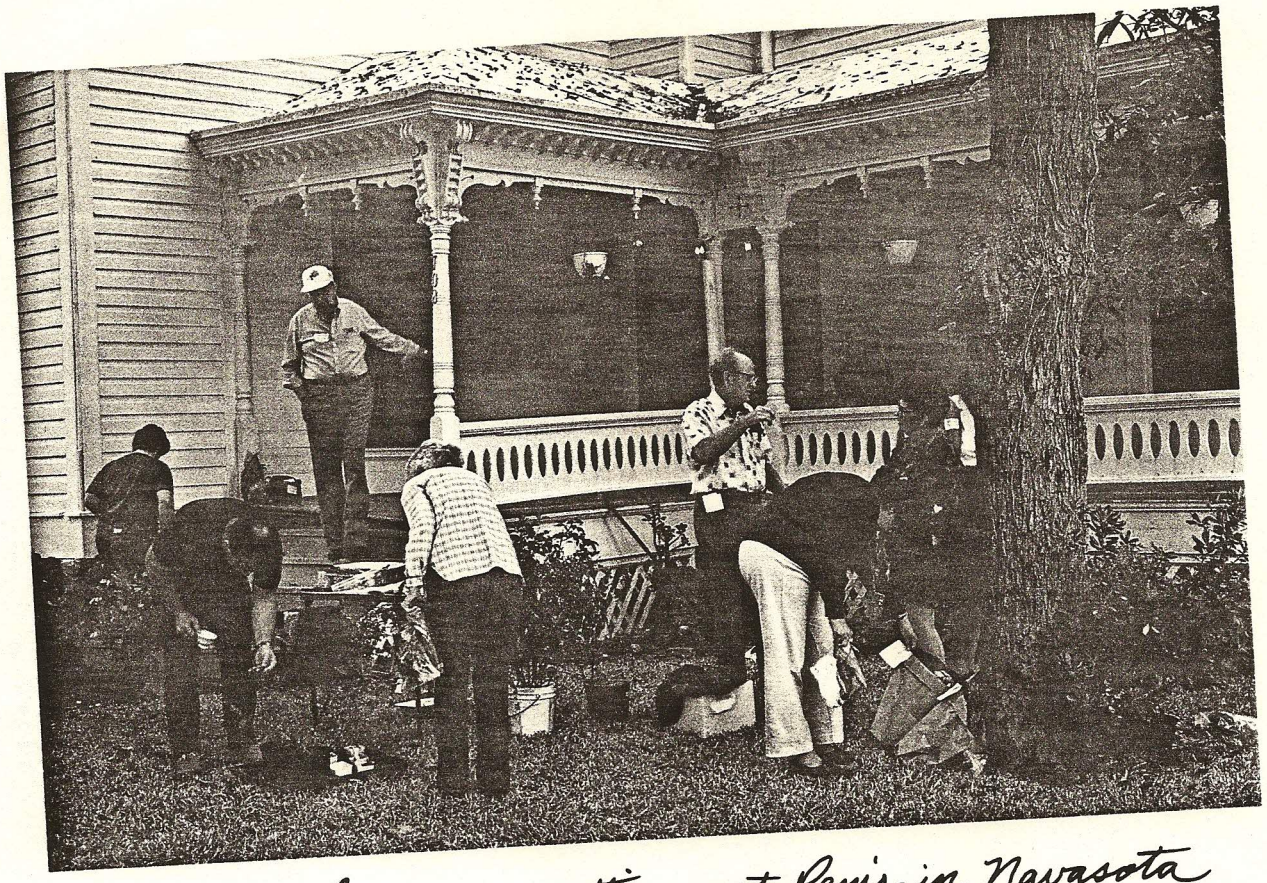
'Souvenir de la Malmaison', a white Bourbon rose named for the garden of Napoleon's empress, passed for years as "Mary Minor" in honor of the elderly black lady from whose garden it came. 'Mary van Houtte', a lemon-yellow Tea that dates to 1871, will always remain the "Hole Rose" to the Texan collectors who found it in a roadside hollow. Only last year did Pam lose her namesake, "Pam's Pink," a particularly floriferous, rose-colored China that finally proved to be the old French cultivar 'Napoleon'.

Besides their hardiness, these roses have another attraction for Texan gardeners. Many of the old roses are non-remontant, that is, they yield only a single flush of flowers in the spring. Others, though remontant in the near-perfect environment of a California nursery, prove less generous in Texas. To weed out these ungenerous "Yankee roses," the Texans collect only in the fall. If a rose is blooming then, the rustlers know they can depend on it to bloom repeatedly.

THE MORNING OF November 8th dawned clear and fresh. By 10 o'clock the rustlers began to arrive, some having driven that morning from Fort Worth, almost 200 miles away. Car after car pulled up in front of Pam's imposing, white-columned home. On the porch a total of 38 rustlers spread out bundles of cuttings they had brought to share, together with bouquets of their garden's best blossoms.

The next couple of hours were spent





Swapping cuttings at Pam's in Navasota

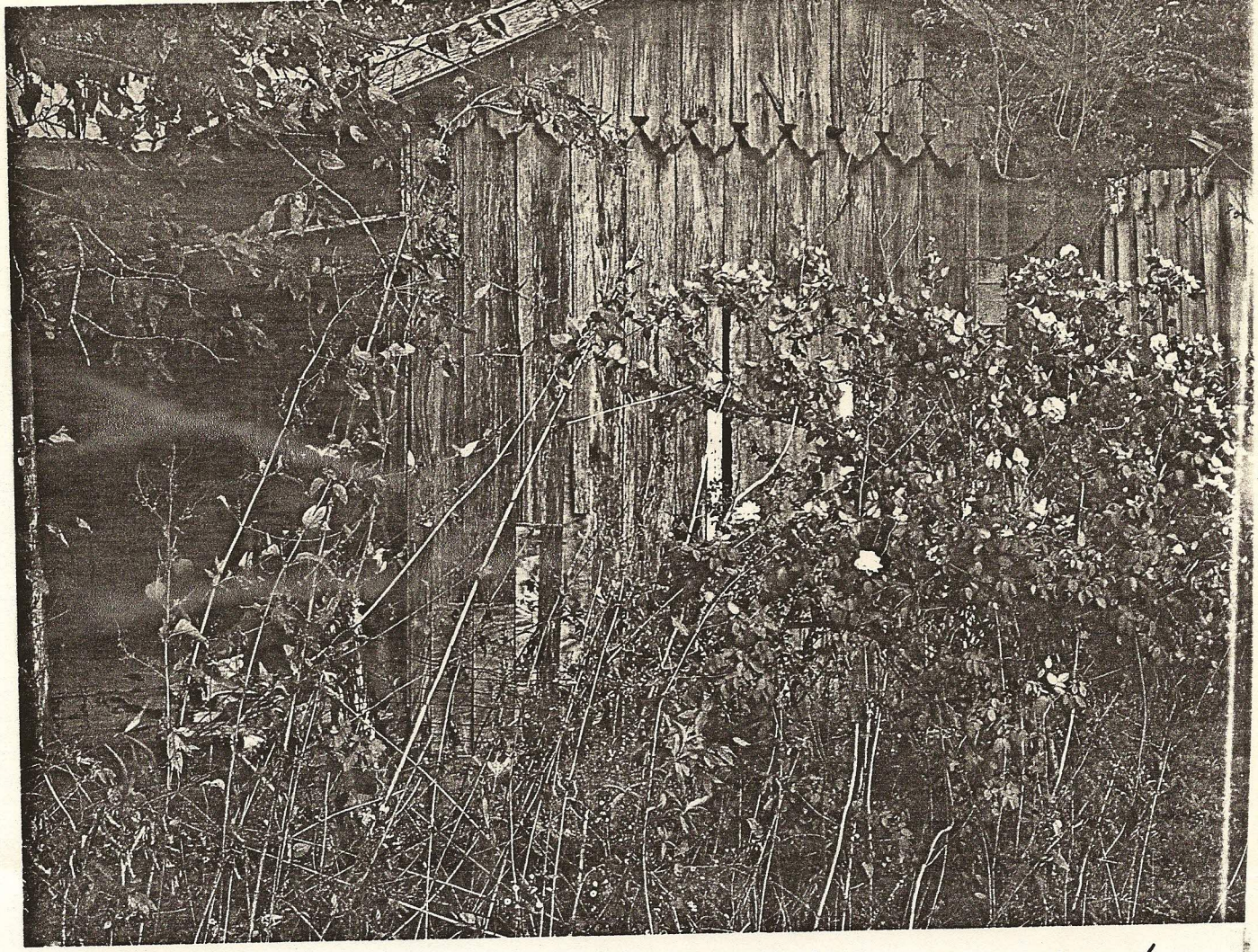
swapping roses and trade secrets. Long past are the days of grub-hoe collecting. Being dedicated preservationists, the rustlers prefer to leave the old roses in their original settings. Only if a shrub lacks an owner and is threatened with destruction will they transplant it to their own gardens. As a rule they content themselves with cuttings, clipping pencil-size lengths from the semimature wood of the current season's growth. Sealing these cuttings immediately in plastic bags, the rustlers later soak them for 24 hours in "willow water." This potion, invented by Dr. Makota Kawase, of the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, is made by soaking one-inch lengths of fresh-cut willow shoots in a half-inch of water overnight. Willow, a notoriously easy group to root, releases a root-promoting substance called rhizocaline into the water. Used within three days, this willow water, the rustlers insist, is far more effective than commercially available rooting hormones.

Rooting benches are another device eschewed by these hit-and-run rosarians. An intense young rustler from Houston carries his whole propagation system in the bed of his pickup. Having filled a three-inch plastic pot from the barrel of screened peat and sand, he fished a likely looking cutting of the "Hole Rose," a six-inch length of cane with three nodes, from his bucket of willow brew. Stripping off all but the terminal leaf, he stuck the base of the cutting one and a half inches deep in the rooting medium, sprinkled the pot with a handy watering can, and sealed it, cutting and all, in a plastic bag. Upon his return home, he informed me, the plastic-wrapped pot would go into a shallow cold frame on the north side of his house. Two to three weeks, he said, should see the cutting rooted.

Despite the swagger they affect, the self-styled bandits demonstrated admirable restraint during this day's foray. In a motorcade we drove to the nearby town of Bryan, stopping first at a Miz Shirireed Walker's house for sand cakes and cider. Then it was on to a Mrs. Seeman's property on 31st Street to admire her specimens of primitive Hybrid Teas, in particular a scarlet-red 'Etoile de Hollande'. Dating only to 1919, this rose lacked the antiquity of the other roses we had been viewing but obviously shared their affinity for a southern climate and soils. Only a generation or two removed from their Tea ancestors, these roses retain a durability since bred out of the Hybrid Teas. 'La France', for example, a stunning silver-pink introduced in 1867 and the very first Hybrid Tea, grows well throughout Texas, as does 'Radiance', an enormous pink blossom dating to 1908. Indeed, the rustlers' stock of the latter derives from a bush they found not far from Pam's house in Navasota. It had been planted, the owner recalled, by his grandmother the very first year this cultivar appeared on the market.

Nearby, two rustlers faced off over a handsome deep-pink blossom. A lady who sported a pair of red-handled pruning shears in a leather holster identified it as 'American Beauty', the famous Hybrid Perpetual florists' rose. This assertion was emphatically denied by a gentleman with a yellow rose enameled on the slide of his bolo tie. Before the dispute could be resolved, however, it was on to the next stop, the home of an elderly Polish lady with a choice selection of Tea roses.

Though warned of the visit, she was taken aback at the sight of the eager collectors milling about her yard. Re-



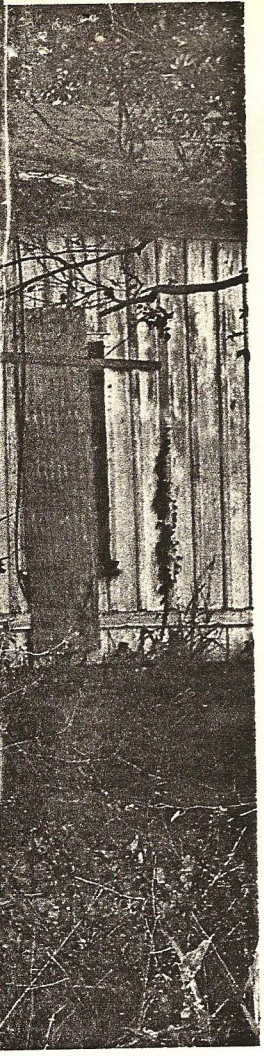
Original plant of "Hole Rose", now 'Mary van Houtte', 1871

fusing entreaties to address the mob, she nevertheless did donate cuttings of her prize, a fine 'Marechal Niel'. A Hybrid Noisette, this cultivar traces its descent from a rose called 'Champney's Pink Cluster', bred in 1811 by a South Carolina rice planter of that name. The cross of a China rose (*R. chinensis*) with a Musk rose (*R. moschata*), 'Champney's Pink Cluster' was later interbred with China, Tea, and Bourbon roses to spawn a whole class of Hybrid Noisette climbers. 'Marechal Niel' was the finest of these, described as outstandingly vigorous when first introduced in 1864. Unfortunately, it has since fallen prey to an incurable viral infection and today is notorious for its delicacy. This loss of vigor is a problem shared by many old roses, for hasty and often careless propagation by commercial nurseries has fostered epidemics. Sometimes, however, collected roses can offer a solution. The 'Marechal Niel' the rustlers were eyeing was obviously in the best of health. Handed down for generations from friend to friend and grown in isolation, it may have remained infection-free. If so, it offered an invaluable source of pristine stock.

IT WAS the unexpected sighting of a 'Duchesse de Brabant' that put an end to the day's organized activities. Following the stampede to the yard of an abandoned cottage, I found a sturdy shrub covered with cupped, salmon-pink Tea roses. This, Pam informed me, was the rose that Teddy Roosevelt (another New Yorker who succumbed to the lure of the West) favored above all others as a boutonniere. Then a shout from across the street announced the discovery of 'Maggie,' a China-Bourbon cross that bears rose-pink blossoms of an extraordinary perfume. With this all semblance of order vanished. The fistfuls of cuttings contributed by the rose's startled but smiling owner only seemed to whet the rustlers' appetites. Climbing into their cars they separated, each one going his own way in search of undiscovered treasure.

Graduating from onlooker to accomplice, I rustled my first rose that afternoon, an antique Hybrid Tea with graceful, long-stemmed blossoms of vivid pink. With the proverbial southern gallantry, my hosts insisted on giving this flower the study name "Suzanne" in honor of my fiancée, who had accompanied me on this expedition. Tired at last, having scoured every cemetery, churchyard, and dusty alley in Bryan, we reassembled at Pam's house for an evening of cucumber sandwiches and tall tales.

Invented, I am convinced, or at least embroidered to impress rivals and visiting Yankees, these stories



'Duchesse de Brabant', 1857

were fine examples of the Texan's ability to spin a yarn. In confidential tones, one woman in a yellow-rose-of-Texas T-shirt confided that she really prefers to rustle on horseback. Easier to hide than a car, a horse is also harder to trace. Her neighbor complained loudly of a faint-hearted husband. If only he would cooperate, she lamented, he could be so useful as the driver of her getaway car. The young man from Houston strolled over to Pam to boast that he almost rustled her garden the first time he happened through Navasota. A respectable dowager recalled joining forces with a stranger to rustle a vacant lot. Only upon leaving, the narrator admitted, did she discover that her impromptu assistant was actually the landowner.

Though I am skeptical about the veracity of these tales, I did see undeniable evidence of the rustlers' prowess the next morning during a visit to a local nursery, the Antique Rose Emporium, of Independence, Texas. The owner, Mike Shoup, studied with Bill Welch and has been cooperating with the rustlers for two years, propagating and evaluating their finds. His collection now totals some 400 different cultivars, which, he hastens to point out, are only the cream of the crop. These he promotes as the ideal flowering shrub for the Texas garden, so tough and disease-resistant that in defiance of traditional rosarian dogma he waters his crop with an overhead sprinkler system. Having already found a market for 100,000 old roses each year among the landscapers and retail nurserymen of Texas, he now aspires to convert the rest of the Old South to his Texan roses.

With a grin, Mike Shoup likens his roses to Texas itself. "It's still a young state, settled originally by outlaws, and they're a tougher breed. We've got a gene pool that's a little different."

Bill Welch addresses the topic more seriously, but still with a touch of humor. "The roses of Texas," he has written, "are like the early pioneers—hardy, dependable, and usually beautiful."

But it is Pam Puryear who put it best. Guiding me through the nursery yard, she stopped by a climbing Tea rose of 1851 vintage, 'Sombreuil'. This one I recognized, for it grows in my own northern garden, though the Texan giant put my struggling specimen to shame. Handing me a flawless cream-and-pink-tinted blossom the size and shape of a large saucer, Pam smiled. "You have never lived," she drawled, "until you've seen 'Sombreuil' in the South." A fitting epitaph for a Texas rose rustler. ❦

Thomas Christopher was last seen riding off into the sunset with Suzanne.