

CONRAD TIPS - A ROSE RUSTLER THROUGH THE DECADES

By Kathy Huizinga



Q. Did your family have a garden when you were growing up? Did you garden or were you exposed to gardens as a child? What about roses?

A. I was not born to the trowel. In the late 30s, we had a large house on an unusually, for that time and place, large lot, fine trees and lawns. Mother planted wisteria, Hortensia, 'Cecile Brunner' roses, and cestrum nocturnum, sacred to the memory of Jefferson Davis. My father had a small orchard put in—the figs, citrus and pomegranates did well, the rest not so much—and later a quite large bed of 'Peace', the only rose he truly liked.

Perhaps in competition with Uncle Edward Ryan? He had two beds, 13 plants each, of 'Texas Centennial' and the perfume would knock you flat. My contribution was what I called a rock garden, in which I grew dwarf bearded iris, rather grotesque little things but modish just then.

My paternal grandparents were not much interested in gardening, though Grannie Tips was involved in the early days of the Garden Club of Houston's Plant & Bulb Mart, but as a social occasion. Much later I sold roses at the Mart for 30 years with the help of the Rustlers, great fun. My grandfather enjoyed raising sweet white corn and tomatoes, which he did with success, and I enjoyed the fruits of his labor.

Q. Conrad, You said "for that time and place" - where was this? Since citrus was grown I don't think it could have been very far north of Houston.

A. Time and place—around 1940 we moved to Garden Oaks so that me an' the sibs could attend GOES. It was the back of beyond back then, far to the north of metropolitan Houston. We had uncut forest on two sides, wonderful for exploration as small boys will.



Conrad and his brother

Mother's mother—Big Mama, but being Southerners we also had a Little Mama and an Other Mama, nor can we forget Aunt Jake, Aunt Sister, Aunt Sook, and Uncle Brother—had a large garden. Not as a hobby. She was left a youngish widow with a large brood of children and it was a matter of survival. Also fruit trees, nut trees, timber for cutting and selling, swine, cattle, poultry, fish ponds; not much came onto the place and that primarily by barter. And a vineyard. As a Saved by the Blood of the Lamb East Texas Baptist Lady, Big Mama had no use for Drink, but she made wine and spirits, medicine she claimed. My brothers and I appropriated a bottle of the stuff, drank it and got so sick. Our father was amused, our mother was not, and Big Mama smacked our bottoms, then went on to more important matters. The vines were trained on tripods of lopped branches and petunias seeded themselves here and there, pink, white and lavender, a pretty effect however unplanned. Life there was not altogether comfy because Big Mama scorned effete modern conveniences like indoor plumbing and electricity, both of which I quite liked. Then too her tales about the pain of the War Between the States, the horrors of the Reconstruction Era, the rise of the Klan, blood feuds, family dissection unto the grave if not beyond—all too Faulkner for me.

But I enjoyed hearing about her mother, Sophronia Jane Tullos. She buried three husbands, her marriage contracts were the talk of the County, she never dressed without the help of a servant, and had no idea where the kitchen was. "A great woman," said my sister, "an example for all." I don't know anything about S.'s marriage contracts other than they existed. She was a woman of property and required protection, and as Mother said, she was a woman as knew her mind. About Sophronia Jane: a granddaughter described her to me as "petite, mais tres grande dame." She was proud of her fluent French, though I doubt she had much use of it in the East Texas of her day. But she had a collection of books in French—history, biography, court life at Versailles and such. I have a florilegium that belonged to her.

Big Mama lived in the depths of E TX, not very far from Livingston. She was land rich but cash poor, and when she needed cash, Big Mama would allow a certain number of her trees to be cut, but only under close supervision. She would sit in her rocking chair, watching with steely eye, her late husband's six-shooter in her lap. Nobody messed with Big Mama. She did not trust the timber

companies. Big Mama was formidable because she had to be. Times were not so great in East Texas and got much worse during the Depression, thanks to the banks and the timber companies. People were evicted from their land and wandered the roads, but Big Mama, who trusted neither the local bankers nor the timber merchants, fortunately, cleared several buildings on her place and took in anyone who needed help. She birthed a few, buried a few, and fostered a number of orphaned or abandoned children. Not everyone could do that, but how many people would do that?

About a mile from Big Mama's place was Uncle Billie Hutto's gambling hell and sportin' house, very popular with free spending outlaws of the day—if the law came in the front door guests of the establishment could go out the back door and into the Big Thicket, where nobody with good sense would follow them. Big Mama had stories—the James brothers, "perfect gentlemen"; the Dalton boys, "trash"; Belle Starr, "that face would stop a clock"; Sam Bass, "henpecked".

When we went to E. TX to visit Big Mama, we would pass little rural churches along the way and mostly they had what was called a tabernacle. A detached and quite simple timber structure, no walls and a roof of lattice or louvre, used for services during the heat of the year, and overgrown with trumpet vine, honeysuckle, morning glories—pretty. Big Mama had a swept yard, not uncommon back then, the idea was to discourage insects, rodent, snakes, also it would be a fire brake. Imagine the expense of finding suitable grass seed or turf, installing it, nurturing it—country folk would not dream of such frivolity. Big Mama, when she visited us in Garden Oaks, must have been amazed at the sight of endless green lawns.



Big Mama sitting on the porch of her house

My great grandmother Rather's situation was quite unlike. Mu was the center of a large and adoring family on a large and handsome property. She liked her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren about her, she liked her comforts (no vase-de-nuit for Mu), and she understood the Theory and Practice of Staff: Aunt Liz, her maid and companion, Aunt Temp and Aunt Lou in the kitchen, Uncle Amos, the houseman, the cleaners, the people outside, and so on. Mu was Plantocracy and life in her house was comfortable. We children were allowed to play in her garden, a spacious square plot, not small and well fenced, never allowed to leave without supervision. But who would want to leave? I always thought. I never did. As gardens go it was a bit shaggy, overgrown, tousled, perfect for exploration and let's pretend. I remember great unpruned bushes of tea roses, watermelon red crape myrtles, and masses of plants we called lemon lilies, naked ladies, four o'clocks, mourning brides, old maids; bygone perennials. And a big, grand vitex that perfumed the

house. Mu did not approve of idle hands. She had her needlework—cobwebby linen and muslin, silk too now and then—and she liked to make sachets and sweet bags using dried vitex leaves. As a bit of cake was to Proust, so the perfume of vitex is to me, still; a piercing memory. These semi-wild gardens speak persuasively to me, emotionally, but then I am not one of those obsessively tidy people. Obsession is unhealthy. I felt a familiar atmosphere when I visited Sissinghurst before the National Trust took it on and changed it, and again at luncheon in Peggy Guggenheim's garden in Venice. It can be overwhelming.

Q. I had to look up Plantocracy, as it is an unfamiliar word to me.

A. Plantocracy: the plantation owners of the South. For instance, Lady Bird Johnson was Plantocracy, her husband was not, hard scrabble ranching and farming in the Hill Country, where the scrabble does not get much harder. Mu by descent brought in the Lees, Jeffersons, Randolphs, Curtis-Washingtons, etc., and her daughter Aunt Mamie, married Henry Austin Perry, Uncle Austin, descended from Moses Austin by way of his daughter.

I wonder where the fruit trees came from—possibly Gilbert Onderdonk's nursery near Victoria? I recommend GILBERT ONDERDONK, THE NURSERYMAN OF MISSION VALLEY, by Evelyn Oppenheimer. She reproduces his 1888 catalogue, everything you could possibly want in 1888, including a very nice list of roses. "Texas is the land of Roses" he said. I remember that figs, apricots, pomegranates, and grapes did well, heavenly grape jelly made from the wild grapes of the area, in Mu's kitchen by Aunt Lou and Aunt Temp. Mu rarely set foot in that part of the house.

Q. Conrad, these fruit trees refer to Big Mama's fruit trees, right?

A. No, great grandfather Rather's orchard. Big Mama of course had fruit trees also but not as an orchard per se, just here and there. Ever hear of Indian peaches?

Q. No, I have not heard of Indian peaches. Are they a peach as we know them today? Or are they some other type of fruit called a peach?

A. *Prunus persica*, Cherokee Peach, Blood Peach, and so on. How it got to North America is a mystery—the Spanish maybe, or maybe not. Anyway, Jefferson grew them and so did everybody else in the South. Grand for cooking and preserving, peach brandy, even food for livestock I am told. The skin is purple streaked red at times, flesh ruddy and firm. Unique flavor and unusually prolific. Also it comes true from seed, which is convenient. I remember from visits to Big Mama hedges of it. Beautiful in bloom. Plants are available online and I have tried to grow it here, but this is not a suitable climate for peaches. Oh the frustration!



Indian blood peach – photo credit Trees of Antiquity

Indian peach—I don't remember eating them fresh off the tree, mostly pickled or in pies and cobblers. Big Mama was a legendary cook and all on a cast iron wood stove, but she did do that terrible thing Southern woman did back then, stew vegetables to mush. Hated that. But everything else—divine and almost everything on the table came off her land. Cookery may have been an art form to her, and crochet. She was the World's Champeen Crochet Lady, could do anything with cotton or linen thread, and so could Aunt Emma.

Q. Conrad, just so I am clear on this, is Great Grandmother Rather, Mu, from your paternal side? Where did she live?

A. Mu was my paternal grandmother's mother. The Rather place was located near Seguin and, curiously, my ggg grandfather settled in the area when he came over from Prussia in the 1840s, at Live-Oak Farm.

Q. The lemon lillies were a yellow daylily, weren't they? Never having grown vitex, I did not realize it was fragrant. You said, "These semi-wild gardens speak persuasively to me, emotionally..." This of course makes me think of "The Secret Garden", which is a children's book. Are you familiar with it?

A. Lemon lily, probably a day lily, don't really know. Yes, vitex is marvelously fragrant, like lavender. The Secret Garden—I remember it well and some of the lady's other books too, she wrote a lot, for adults too. One of my aunts had a shelf of her work, from her mother I think, all the Oz books and on and on.

Q. I have never visited Sissinghurst, but I find it fascinating that it would have once been more wild and untidy. How old were you at that time? Can you remember any more details?

A. Sissinghurst.....yes, well, I do have some fairly vivid memories but I think I might save them for an article someday.

Q. I am totally unfamiliar with Peggy Guggenheim's garden in Venice. Can you tell me more about it?

A. Miss Guggenheim—oh my. Her garden there in Venice, gardens in Venice being rather rare, but I don't have much memory of it. A magnolia I think, some oleanders in tubs, but it was quiet, private

and comparatively cool for an Italian summer. Mostly I studied her, curious little woman, plain, Jewish, not young, but she had a notion that she was a femme fatale, not just fatale but unspeakably fatale. She flirted outrageously with my Scottish friend Chris and I am sure wished me at the bottom of the Grand Canal. I just smiled and agreed with everything she said. Don't recall how Chris knew her. He bought quantities of Italian fashion twice a year for the British market, which is why we were in Venice, looking into the studio of someone who dyed silk to order. Lord, the stink! Anyway, she gave us a private tour of the house, including her bedroom (!), we gazed upon the bed, made for her by some sculptor and featuring insets of glass eyes. Gave me a turn. Her art collection was famous, if not to my taste, and the house is now a museum.



Conrad's passport photo

Q. Did any of these gardens (Mu's, Sissinghurst, Peggy's) inspire you later on when you began to garden yourself? At the time of seeing them, did you say to yourself, "Some day I am going to have/do such and such in my garden"?

A. Abundance. As Vita Sackville-West said, "Cram! Cram! Cram!" Yes. If More is More, why settle for Less?

We children were not allowed to leave Mu's garden without supervision: the river to splash about in, the sawmill and the cotton gin, the tenant farms, the orchard for a picnic, the cattle but only at a safe distance, and Uncle Charlie's ponies. Respected in equine circles, he bred and trained quarter horses, and was a brilliant horseman, never saw better. As a boy, he went on one of the last great trail rides, taking cattle to market. A treasury of Western lore and cowboy wisdom, Uncle Charlie was the sweetest man imaginable, and such tales! And then we might be taken to the general store for a treat. I preferred pineapple sorbet. A stout old building, it was built as a refuge from Indian attacks, then it was a stop for the stage on its way to San Antonio, and finally repurposed by my great grandfather as a store and post office. Dark and musty and wonderful for exploration.

Uncle Charlie had an interesting, perhaps unique, way of feeding the cattle. Pastures would be planted with watermelons. When ripe the cattle would be driven in, to browse, scatter the seed, and fertilize in a perfectly organic way. An elegant solution. "Improvement" it was called in those days, ever so euphemistically. No Southern man in those days would use Language in the presence of the ladies.

Q. Do you have a favorite book on roses? Was there a book on roses or gardening that had an influence on you?

A. Books: I don't recall being particularly moved by any book in particular—got all the catalogues though—and then I found G.S. Thomas' trilogy. Still have them. Mrs. Drennan and Mrs. Keays, lovely nostalgic wallows for a Southern boy; Miss Jekyll and Miss Willmott and their contemporary Eleanor Vere Boyle, a forgotten heroine of British gardening; Bunyard, Dickerson, G.C. Thomas (I have a soft spot for Capt. Thomas), Francis Lester; but of course, politics and gardening are local—Bill, Greg, Liz and Mike; and then there is MISS NANCY LINDSAY'S ROSE LIST.

I forgot: Francis Parkman, a treasury of information and it has been reprinted. The original edition is in that vile wood pulp paper that falls to pieces as you turn the page.

Allyson Hayward wrote "Norah Lindsay: Life and Art of a Garden Designer" —very very good. Not much about Miss Nancy unfortunately but some. We can't have everything I am told, which really is poor management.



Conrad looking at the book table at the summer TRR meeting 2019 at the Antique Rose Emporium

Q. Was there was a person or event that caused you to become interested in roses? I remember that you once mentioned Leonie Bell. Isn't there a Leonie Bell rose garden somewhere? I seem to think of Noisettes in relation to it. And I know she wrote a book about scented plants called "The Fragrant Year".

A. No one really, I think now that it was my discovery of the G.S. Thomas trilogy that prompted my interest in roses, or more exactly focused my interest in roses. I enjoy growing things—I'm trying bearded iris again this spring—but to a great degree it's literary and historical, the flora of old Southern gardens. A lot of documentation fortunately. Leonie: yes, she wrote the chapter on roses and illustrated the book, grand isn't it? And then the garden at Monticello, early Noisettes. She didn't much care for the tea Noisettes. After she died the family gave her research, mounds and piles of it,

the work of years, to Doug, but what he did with it I cannot discover. I mean after he died, and Miriam doesn't know. Maddening! I was hoping it could all be scanned.

Q. I remember you telling me once that your grandmother used to sometimes take you along when she went to visit Ima Hogg at Bayou Bend. Do you remember much about your visits there? Particularly regarding the gardens?

A. What I mostly remember about the gardens at Bayou Bend—I was very young you know—fountains, statues, manicured hedges, not the usual thing hereabouts in those days. During the committee meetings indoors, and Grannie Tips was a great one for committees, the dressier the better, I was allowed to ramble a bit, but watched of course. Miss Ima was perfectly kind to me, though I wonder now if she wasn't a bit surprised to see a small boy in attendance. But where my grandparents went, I went. Package deal.

I told you that I was allowed to wander a bit in Miss Ima's garden when Grannie was visiting. My grandfather said, with a perfectly straight face, that I must be cautious because the bayou was teeming with 'gators! On mature reflection perhaps not, anyway I never saw them, however teeming, but I was careful. Who knows what may be lurking behind the azaleas?

Q. Are roses your favorite plant? Do you have a favorite plant or a favorite group of plants?

A. My favorite plants are trees, flowering and fruit. I shared that taste with Big Mama, though of course she looked upon them as a source of food and, when necessary, cash. She had little interest in ornamentals. She would talk to her trees now and then, tell them how much she was anticipating the pecans, persimmons, pears, whatever, or she would advise them to produce or else. She always had a need for kindling.

What else? Did I tell you about Miss Lindsay's Rose List?

Q. No. Please do tell me about Miss Lindsay's rose list. And you can start by telling me who Miss Lindsay is.

A. Impressed, Barbara decided to publish it (Miss Lindsay's Rose list) and asked me to do research, editorial work and so on. Delighted of course, I was very fond of Barbara, but she had a collaborator and the whole thing collapsed. A scathing letter from Miriam Wilkins about it—Miriam was nothing if not frankly spoken. But I kept the List, a mimeograph of a typed manuscript and poorly done, full of errors, and I would happily share it with the Rustlers, surely of interest and so unknown. But it is long, 300-odd entries with descriptions, and then it requires some explication and revision. Nancy was a spontaneous girl. So you see it is something of a project.

Q. Barbara - might this be Barbara Worl, who owned a bookstore in California? I looked online for more information about Barbara, and I found this little blurb in a short biography of her: "Over the years, Barbara created three different gardens, lush with roses but other plants as well. Shunning formality in favor of simplicity, her not-so-tidy gardens were cascading and redolent with flowers, especially her enormous collection of old and species roses."

A. Yes, Barbara Worl. I saw garden two when I was visiting my pal Charles Knight in San Francisco. Lovely! And so non-tidy, just my cup of tea. Even Charles, who would not have known a magnolia from a dandelion if it bit him, was impressed. Specially by a R.g. versicolor in full bloom amidst a sea of sweet violets. Barbara was good! Then we sat down under a Santa Rosa plum of the original introduction Barbara said, and gorged ourselves. Bliss.....

Norah Lindsay has ascended long since into the pantheon of British Garden Goddesses, together with the likes of Mrs. Lloyd, Mrs. Fish, Miss Jekyll, Lady Salisbury and such, and according to her biographer she was adored by all who knew her. Except possibly her husband. By way of contrast, her daughter Nancy was not much loved. She was...difficult, and riled the rather staid gardening grandees of the day, not very usefully. A talent to annoy it appears. So: a Grand English Eccentric or a Crazy Lady. Take your pick. I admit that she was problematical and not easy to deal with, but I quite like what I know about her. Of course I am used to women with, shall we say, personalities on a large scale. Miss Nancy was also a distinguished botanical artist, an intrepid collector of rare, not to say utterly unknown plants, particularly in the Middle East, and a nurserywoman in the avant-garde of antique rose rediscovery and distribution. Oh to read her correspondence with V. Sackville-West—where is it now?

Barbara Worl was in England sometime during the 1970s and got from James Russell or G.S. Thomas (don't remember which) a copy of the Rose List, that is the roses she offered from her nursery. Impressed, Barbara decided to publish it.



Sissinghurst Castle garden – photo credit picturesofengland.com

Q. Can you tell me about any of the early rose rustles you attended? Or anything about what the Rose Rustler meetings were like when you first began attending? Are there any people from the past who stand out in your memory? Any special happenings? Didn't you tell me that you had stopped at Schulenburg when going to a rose rustle once? I also remember you telling me about your grandfather's car breaking down at that same town decades earlier.

A. Yes, the Schulenburg rustle. We were going into town I think, stopped at an abandoned house and found Schulenburg Cream and Schulenburg Apricot. My grandfather's Packard broke down in

Schulenburg, greatly to his distress. And ours. The early rustles rather flow together now, hard to recall any one particularly, all very unscripted, improvised, hugger-mugger. Much to Pamela's taste of course. She had a certain buccaneering quality. I can see her as a lady-pirate, the Terror of the Gulf Coast! In a becoming hat. I enjoyed most visiting gardens—The Peaceable Kingdom, The Emporium in its earliest manifestation, like that. Personalities: Pamela, Margaret, Bill, Mike, Greg, Tom and Suzanne Christopher, Libby Winston, the Herrs, so many others, and you may remember that we sold roses at the Mart for years.

And Liz Druitt—how did I forget her? One afternoon Robert and I were out and about and we ran across Liz. So back to Robert's house for wine and tea cakes and conversation. He said later, "I like that Liz—she's crazy!"

Q. Conrad, do you remember when you first heard about the Texas Rose Rustlers and/or became involved with them?

A. Yes, very early 80s, before we began publishing the 'Letter. Pam got my name from Miriam Wilkins, and contacted me—she was in the process just then of organizing. At that time the group was called The Brazos Symposium, Pam's idea I think. TX Rose Rustlers was Margaret's. I recall the debate and I think Bill was there. He might remember.

Q. Have you always gardened in Texas? Or have you ever gardened in any other place?

A. Yes, always in TX.

Q. If you could have a garden anywhere in the world, where would you choose to garden?

A. I would like to be 20 and have a garden in any benign climate, that is 4 seasons but not too hot and not too cold, with sufficient rainfall but also with water on the place, a nice stream, ponds, all that, fertile soil of the neutral persuasion, space enough for trees and meadows, and a stunning view would be nice. Also a staff. Is it too much to ask?