Roses of Yesterday and Today: A History in Catalogs

The Roses of Yesterday and Today catalogs represent the history of the world famous rose growing, breeding and shipping enterprise of Browns Valley Road, Watsonville, and the origin and subject of the current exhibits in the McHenry and Science Libraries. No other complete set of these catalogs is known to exist outside the Library of Congress. The format and content of the catalog has remained fairly consistent since the earliest versions were produced by Will Tillotson in the 1940's. Each issue began with a friendly essay written either by Mr. Tillotson ("CW" or Catalog Writer), Dorothy Stemler (known in the early catalogs as "Honorable Secretary"), or Patricia Stemler-Wiley (Dorothy's daughter and the donor of the collection). The body of the catalog is an annotated list of the roses available in that year, each precisely and gracefully described. The catalogs are handsomely designed and attractively illustrated, the older years reflecting Dorothy's love of art and her skill as a photographer, the more recent issues continuing this tradition of graphic excellence with the work of Pat and her husband Jack. The charm of the catalogs lies in the care invested them; their design and production resemble that of a well-tended garden; they are literally "anthologies" (originally flower collections) of images, annotations, verses, and essays which when read in sequence provide us with an engaging history of the firm. When Francis Lester, pioneer rosarian and author of My Friend the Rose, planted rose gardens among the redwoods in Browns Valley in 1937, he also began "a tradition of attractive, chatty catalogues calculated to infect their readers with Lester's love of the subject. These informative, readable booklets have been the old roses' most effective propagandists -- under Lester's successor, Will Tillotson, this catalogue ... inspired ...the founders of the Heritage Roses Group. (Thomas Christopher, In Search of Lost Roses, (New York, 1989) p.156).

Francis Lester died in 1945. A decade later, the garden he established, later known as the Marjorie Lester Gardens (named for his widow, Marjorie Winifred Lester) was swept away in the flood of December, 1955 (the poignant "ANNOUNCEMENT" of this disaster, written by Marjorie and her husband and partner Byron Quayle is displayed among the catalogs). But the 1952 catalog conveys, in the words of another partner, Will Tillotson, the playful relationship among the hardworking rose growers of Browns Valley: "Let it be admitted forthwith, all quips, quirks, effusions, omissions and errors within are the sole responsibility of Will Tillotson. Mrs. Lester looks with considerable doubt and some alarm on the literary antics of the catalog-writer."

The 1959 catalog has the following introduction: "'You'll be doing this some day' often commented the Catalog-Writer to Honorable Secretary, as he sorted his 'sack of adjectives' preapring another edition of Roses of Yesterday and Today. In leaving the old and rare roses in my care, he wrote in his Last Will and Testament ...'I would like to be remembered occasionally by mention in her catalogs -- and give her anything which I may transfer in style or content of those I have written for many years." "Remembered? [the italics are Honorable Secretary's (Dorothy Stemler's) own] "....Roses of Yesterday and Today is Will Tillotson." Will Tillotson (CW) had died in England in 1957, while, of course, on a rose buying trip.

As we peruse Honorable Secretary's catalogs and those of her daughter, it is easy to conclude that for twenty years, Roses of Yesterday and Today was Dorothy Stemler, and then, until last year, Roses of Yesterday and Today was Patricia Stemler-Wiley. The UCSC Library is honored to provide a home for their catalogs, evocative relics of local industry and creativity.

The New Yorker's view of the RYT Catalogs
The March 14, 1959, issue of the New Yorker had an article on garden catalogues, in which the author, Katharine S. White, rated Roses of Yesterday and Today above all others:

"The most beautiful, and still my favorite of all the rose books, is "Roses of Yesterday and Today," the Will Tillotson Catalogue, of which Dorothy Stemler is now the editor. A photo of the late Mr. Tillotson forms the frontispiece, and his spirit lingers in the book, together with some of his descriptions of the many old-fashioned and modern roses that the nursery stocks. Mrs. Stemler, it seems to me, has made no missteps. The catalogue is now her own; the tone is a bit less rapturous and the whole presentation is more down to earth, yet still full of charm. The photographs of the roses, which were always hers, are better than ever. The cover this year is Watteau's 'L'Amante Inquiete,' and it is in delicate color -- an innovation... I should add that the 1958 Tillotson method of packing dormant roses in polyethylene bags worked perfectly; every rose I ordered from Will Tillotson last spring ... made it from California to Maine in perfect shape, and lived to thrive, in spite of the change of climate." (P.100)

This exhibit was curated by Alan Ritch, Head of Collection Planning at McHenry Library. If you have questions or comments please write him at: aritch@cats.ucsc.edu

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