

Spring 2008

Free

The Black River JOURNAL

EXPLORING NEW JERSEY YESTERDAY

Froh Heim and Mansion in May

Willowwood Arboretum

The Hanging Wall Tragedy

Park Roll: Another Good Thing About New Jersey

Hiking Chester's Rail Trails

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Illuminating Value: Royal Bonn Porcelain, Spring Wine & Cheese Pick, sharingVillage, A Sheepish Wedding, Butler's Pantry Trackside, Pottersville Shamrock Shuttle, Calendar of Events and More...

A Place that Takes You by the Hand

In Honor of Willowood Arboretum's Centennial Celebration we are happy to bring our readers this re-edited and updated version of an article that first appeared in the BRJ in the Spring of 2002...

By CG Wolfe

*Historic Photos From The Collection of The Morris County Park Commission
Color Images Courtesy of The Willowood Foundation*



In 1908, Robert Tubbs, an officer of the Corn Exchange Bank in New York, and his brother Henry, an editor at Scribner's, turned their backs on the big city and began searching the rolling hills of northwest New Jersey for the country life they had known as boys growing up in Kingston, Pennsylvania. With their modest savings they began their quest, neither brother exactly sure of what they were looking for, until one snowy day when they followed a friend to an 18th century farmhouse on a site that she said, "takes you by the hand." When Henry and Robert Tubbs gazed down into the fertile little valley in Chester, New Jersey called Paradise Farm, they knew they had found their Eden. It was more than just the "friendly house in an inviting setting" that they had been searching for. Here amongst the willows, buried beneath the brambles and the impenetrable blackberry patches, they found a place of warmth and grace, and a place of inspiration.

Nestled along a stream in a valley between two gentle slopes, Paradise



The Tubbs family in Kingston, Pennsylvania

Farm, once part of a larger 18th century tract owned by Frederick Hunnel, was the homestead of the Kennedy family, who acquired the property, hand-

some farmhouse, and puddingstone coetage that serves as the property's centerpiece, in 1839. After being in the Kennedy family for generations, the 134 acre farm was sold to Ellis Tiger in 1906, who in turn offered the property for sale two years later. It was a bit overgrown and somewhat shaggy around the edges but the Tubbs brothers saw the possibilities that lay buried beneath the scrub brush and blueberry brambles. They immediately purchased the farm and moved in that spring.

As it would turn out, the brothers weren't the only Tubbs' to fall in love with Paradise Farm. Eager to show their new home to the family, Robert and Henry invited their parents, Benjamin and Carrie Ladd Welles, and their sister, Claise, out for a visit that first spring - they never left. Instead, they sold their home in Pennsylvania and



An early view of Willowood



Henry W. Tabbs (left) and Robert H. Tabbs (right)

moved in with the boys that year. Claire never married and they all spent the rest of their lives on the farm.

When the Tabbs brothers bought the

property, most of the land had been cleared for pastures or was under cultivation but a few cows and a vegetable garden would be the extent of Robert

and Henry's gentlemen farming. What they were really interested in was the landscape.

A freight car of flowering shrubs

The few trees that remained on the once working farm were confined to a peach orchard on the eastern slope, a thick stand of American Chestnuts and Oaks on the western slope, and a cluster of huge weeping willows along the stream bank. These drooping giants dominated the approach from Hacklebarney Road and made such an impression when entering the property that the farm was renamed "Willowood."

Since their boyhood days in Kingston, the Tabbs brothers had always been "enthusiastic gardeners" and friends would often drop by to see what new tropical rarities the boys were growing



Willowood Centennial Lilac Party

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in their "water garden" (two brewery casks sawed in half and sunk into the ground). Now, with 134 acres before them, the brothers would take their horticultural passions to a new, artistic level and Willowood would be their canvas.

They began by clearing the overgrown blackberry bushes and tangled brush that were trying to reclaim the property and planted fruit trees, including apple, peach and pear, and quite a few nut trees. They also brought over plants from their Kingston garden such as Harison's Yellow Roses, a Kerria, and a White Lilac; they even gathered a few Canada Hemlock seedlings from Grandfather Tubbs' summer cabin. But, the real planning and planting began in earnest when Benjamin Dorrance, an old family friend from Pennsylvania, sent them an entire freight car of plants from his green-

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A mature view of a Dutch Redwood tree at Willowood, which now stands more than 100 years old.

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houses and nurseries. The incredible gift from the Dorrance family, which included Syringas, Hydrangeas,

Honeysuckles, Spireas, Forsythias, Lilacs, Roses, Peonies, Plantain lilies, and various conifers, arrived in a con-

vey of "exciting wagon-loads" from the train station in nearby Gladstone. Soon, Dorrance's generosity "took the form of masses of flowering shrubs along the driveway, hedges to outline lawn areas, and enclosure plantings around the space north of the house".

Singing in the wilderness

Many of the early plantings were also discoveries made by Robert while scouring the markets in lower Manhattan. Each Friday the family would eagerly await his return from these urban expeditions to see if he had found "another dwarf conifer for the Japanese garden taking shape around the Cypress pool, or some other treasure he had spotted at the market".

Soon, friends and fellow horticulturists across the country wanted to add their own touches of color to the

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expanding gardens at Willowood. They would trade plant species from around the world like sports enthusiasts trading baseball cards, constantly adding to Willowood's growing collection. Notable among these "gardening friends" was world-renowned "plant explorer" E.H. "Chinese" Wilson, and the Tubb's neighbor from next door Merchiston Farm (now Bamboo Brook Outdoor Education Center), the famous landscape architect and designer, Martha Brooks Hutcheson, whom the brothers often engaged in friendly but "heated arguments about composite and design".

From the freight load of plants provided by the Dorrances, E.H. Wilson's donations of Chinese Lacebark Pine, Waterlily Magnolias, and Chinese House Lemon, (a species discovered by Wilson in a remote province of China, where it was grown in courtyards and



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Dr. Benjamin Blackburn in WWI.



Dr. Benjamin Blackburn in 1986.

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windowsills to provide fruit over the winter), the hundreds of Pink ladyslippers, established on the pine hillside by Dr. William Wilson of Montclair, and the contributions from their many friends and colleagues, Willowood took on breathtaking vistas of color, depth, and texture.

Natural in appearance, the beauty of Willowood was actually carefully designed to be compatible with the landscape and to take advantage of the natural light and changing seasons. Special attention was paid to the twilight hours. "We have to play up to our sunsets," Henry Tubbs once stated. "See that huge Elm in the distance? Its silhouette is splendid against the sky... You should see those trees aflame as the setting sun intensifies their colors...Singing in the wilderness." "Study nature's way," he advised, quoting from a friend and landscape architect. "Man

cannot copy nature, but from it he can learn to develop a folk song or a poem."

A legacy of horticulture, aesthetics, and education

Since 1939, the Tubbs brothers began entertaining the idea of creating a public arboretum at Willowood. Though there was a great interest and enthusiasm, there wasn't sufficient funding to make this dream a reality. Robert Tubbs died in 1942 but Henry continued his efforts to have the property preserved. Aided by Dr. Benjamin Blackburn, a famous botanist, horticultural author, radio talk show personality, and faculty member at Rutgers and Drew Universities, he finally succeeded in 1950, and Willowood was established as a public arboretum.

Blackburn, whose botanical expertise led him down many colorful paths,

including a stint in the army during World War II, where he specialized in developing camouflage, has been described as "the quintessential gentleman farmer - handsome and aristocratic." He began coming out to Willowood on weekends during the 1930s and developed a deep bond with Henry Tubbs. Eventually Blackburn took up permanent residence at Willowood and in Henry's will he was given the use of 30 acres and all the buildings on the farm. Dr. Blackburn traveled the world collecting specimens to enhance the gardens at Willowood and though he always downplayed his role at the arboretum, he is credited with much of the "design and attention to quality" that can be seen there today. An example of his work can be seen in the "Coetage Garden," an "unpretentious and welcoming arrangement" of "numerous contrasting plant species growing side by side in harmony."

Henry Tubbs died in 1958, leaving Willowood to Wildlife Preserves Inc. "on the condition that it would be maintained as an arboretum and controlled wildlife preserve for its lifetime." Dr. Blackburn, whom Henry had adopted as his son in 1949, continued to play a major role in the development of Willowood as executor of the estate. In 1960, Blackburn together with Russell W. Myers, landscape architect and Secretary Director of the Morris County Park Commission, established the Willowood Foundation to oversee Wildlife Preserves Inc. and to protect the "treasures" of Willowood. In time however, it became evident that Wildlife Preserves Inc. "was not equipped to maintain the property as promised" and in 1967, Rutgers University assumed stewardship of Willowood. After 13 years however, Rutgers also

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The Willowood Foundation

Photos of the 2007 "Lilac Party" by Deanna Pevsator

Formed by Dr. Benjamin Blackburn and Russell W. Myers in 1960, to protect the "treasures" at Willowood, The Willowood Foundation is a nonprofit educational organization whose mission is to "nurture an appreciation for knowledge of botany, horticulture and the natural world through its support of public education, written materials and facilities to promote use, access and information about native and exotic plants." The Foundation has provided grants to restore the propagation facilities at Willowood Arboretum, to develop a modern nursery facility, to adapt existing buildings to public meeting facilities, to establish a viable volunteer program to assist with enhanced maintenance of both gardens, to initiate an international seed exchange with botanical gardens around the world and to co-operate with other institutions, such as the Arnold Arboretum, in research.

Through its Annual Autumn Symposium, the Foundation continues to attract noted garden authorities and features significant plant collections growing at the Arboretum. Continuing the traditions of both the Tubbs and Hutcheson families, the Foundation has underwritten plant exploration and collection trips to temperate areas of China and Korea to preserve their vanishing flora and to introduce new plants to the nursery trade. The Foundation assists in maintaining the extensive botanical and horticultural libraries at both Willowood and Frelinghuysen Arboretum and publishes a newsletter. The Foundation also supports the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's Metropolitan Flora Project to document and preserve native flora.

The Foundation continues to preserve New Jersey's garden heritage and needs your support to achieve their goals. For more information on how you can help this unique organization, write to: The Willowood Foundation, PO Box 218, Gladstone, NJ 07934 or call (908) 234-1815.

had trouble maintaining the funding for its proper upkeep. Through the efforts of the Willowood Foundation, the arboretum became affiliated with the Morris County Parks Commission. The Parks Commission jumped at the rare opportunity and has continued to improve and add to Willowood's legacy of horticulture, aesthetics, and education.

The seeds of a dream

Almost a century after Robert and Henry Tubbs began sowing the seeds of their dream, Paradise Farm, now Willowood Arboretum, is still a place that "takes you by the hand." With over 3,500 domestic and exotic species to enjoy and admire, visitors are lured down quiet pathways to provocative scenes of calculated beauty such as "Pan's Garden," where Henry Tubbs utilized the design from a Persian prayer rug to create an illusion of perspective or what he called his "ruse" of design. Using what appears to be parallel borders of Lamb's Ear as edging, the path actually narrows at its far end and the plants diminish in size. The effect is an optical illusion that makes the path seem much longer. The bronze bust of "Pan," who smiles knowingly, mocking our senses as if he is in on the joke, seems much farther away than he actually is. It's a ruse that Henry was very fond of and used throughout the park. Other intriguing sites include the "Elephant Walk," where porcelain pachyderms greet strolling visitors; the brilliant "Treasure Trove," which holds a wealth of exotic rarities; the subtle, English style "Cottage Garden," and the "Cypress Pool," a Japanese garden where a pagoda, a temple bell, and a statue of Buddha rest serenely under the dappled shade of Japanese

Magnolias and American Bald Cypress.

Henry and Robert Tubbs came to Willowood in search of a canvas for their artistic expression and have left us a panoramic tapestry of finely woven landscape design surrounded by natural perfection. "Both wild and cultivated plantings can be seen on self-guiding tours. In addition to undisturbed forest, historic collections include oak, maple, willow, magnolia, lilac, cherry, fir, pine, a superb specimen of Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia*) now more than 98 feet tall, masses of ferns and handsome stands of field and forest wild flowers." But you don't have to be a landscape designer, horticulturist, or even a garden enthusiast to enjoy the extraordinary gift they have bequeathed to New Jersey. Willowood is a haven for birdwatchers, an inspiration for artists, a romantic setting for summer strolls, and a natural temple for quiet contemplation. So let Willowood "take you by the hand," or better yet, take someone you love by the hand and discover the sublime beauty of the place once known as "Paradise Farm."

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*Map of Philadelphia & vicinity. C.
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