

Transforming Raleigh 1925-1940 – A Mission of Civic Beautification

When the garden club was founded, Raleigh was a small city, an urban island in a sea of agriculture. Hayes Barton, Glenwood, and Five Points were the “suburbs.” White Oak Road was “out in the country.” Many of the streets were still unpaved, such as Six Forks, Lake Boone Trail, and Ridge Road. Downtown few trees remained, the streets were very narrow, and back yards were often swept dirt to give more working space to the kitchen area. High fences were not uncommon, blocking the backyard from the street. Foundation plantings were rare along the houses.



Aerial View, Raleigh c. 1930

The garden club set out to change that. They were keen to take a different vision of gardening – one where aesthetics and beautification of home and city were the focus. They were not growing vegetables – they were not farming!

In newspaper articles and on the radio, they encouraged Raleigh citizens to “plant shrubs along the foundation, remove high board fences to show glimpses of back yards (neatly swept).” (Garden of Air radio talk, 1937 on accomplishments). They encouraged too by having open gardens listed every month in the newspaper to inspire and show how it “should” look. Founder Susan Iden wrote: “Susan Iden described it well: “There is nothing quite so contagious as gardening enthusiasm, and stimulated by the publicity and a spirit of friendly rivalry, ... the Club has been unlimited in its field of service, helping, stimulating, encouraging, and inspiring new gardeners; affording forums for discussion of common garden problems; drawing all gardeners closer together in ties of friendship and mutual interest.”



Morgan and Blount streets, c. 1930

Their vision for the city of Raleigh also focused on flowers, especially flowering trees and shrubs. They planted the major roads in and out of Raleigh over a sustained effort that spanned over a decade. Beginning in the club year of 1927-28 *(A club year was Sept through June), they planted Willow Oaks and Crepe myrtles on Hillsboro Street. In the 1930-31 club year, they planted crepe myrtles and climbing roses over a length of one mile on each of three different highways. In the following year, they worked on 4 different highways leading into Raleigh:

- On Wake Forest Road they planted 115 climbing roses planted, 6 crepe myrtles were replaced, 25 mimosa trees, 15 flowering shrubs, bamboo, ivy winter jasmine and honey suckle.
- On the Hillsboro Road 26 trees were replaced.
- On Western Boulevard over 40 signs were removed and trash cleared away.
- On the Millburnie Road a few roses have been planted and signs removed.



Western Avenue, c. 1930

Their efforts were often helped by the city. Caught up in the Great Depression, giving work to the unemployed was a goal of the city. The Unemployed Relief Commission hired day laborers to dig for the roadside plantings and provided equipment to plow for the relief gardens. All the plants were donated by club members, who also did the actual planting. These were “dirt gardeners,” a term in use as far back as the 1920’s to distinguish gardeners who liked to do it themselves – and be sure it was done right.

They worked with other garden clubs in the area, sending 10 letters to surrounding garden clubs to ask their cooperation in improving the same roads starting from their own city centers with the hopes the improvements would eventually be continued their whole length. In 1934-35, they planted 41 Cloth of Gold and Dorothy Perkins rose bushes at the new Airport.

But their ambitions extended much further than fixing up the city and its public roads. The Raleigh Garden Club wanted public green spaces and gardens. In 1932-3, the Club’s Civic Group secured the land for the Raleigh Rose Garden, and commissioned a plan for creating the garden.



Rose Garden

The also landscaped the newly built Memorial Auditorium and Little Theatre, among many public buildings. In 1937-8. The Theatre leaders asked “Raleigh housewives to donate shrubbery” for what “will someday be a showplace of the city,” and plant material was donated by garden clubs, nurseries, and individuals from across the state. Under the supervision of member Elizabeth Lawrence for the Raleigh Garden Club, the front of the theatre building was graded, and the area was planted with trees—given by the Raleigh Garden Club—and bulbs and shrubs.



Memorial Auditorium

They put in gardens and landscaping around monuments and historic buildings like the Andrew Johnson House and his Monument near the college.

They created parks like the small 2-acre Flora Park from a piece of unkempt land in the 1930-31 club year (renaming the Edna Metz Wells Park in 1938) , putting in 69 trees and 115 shrubs in the first year alone, and then transplanted in hundreds of wildflowers and native plants.



Flora Park, renamed Edna

Metz Wells Park in 1938.

When the Glenwood Avenue trolley system was finally dismantled, it left a large gap at the downtown terminus, and the Club was asked to design and plant it. The Glenwood Esplanade was designed by famed garden writer and Raleigh Garden Club member Elizabeth Lawrence and the Club, with help from the Dept of Parks, planted with 677 shrubs and trees. It was completed in 1933-4, and the Club worked for several years afterwards to maintain it with the help of the Dept. of Parks.



Trolley on Glenwood Ave., 1920's

The Club also helped many local businesses. They gave 32 climbing roses to Gulf Oil Plant for their fences and added a flower border to the Russell Filling station, along with shrubs to beautify the grounds. The Club considered the sudden invasion of these gas stations into the residential areas a major eyesore and urged them to improve their grounds. They helped plant gardens at schools and colleges. And added special trees to downtown landmarks and major intersections.

The Club did still more than planting and landscaping. They went on the offensive and tackled municipal "eye sores" as well. They attacked the problem of litter, sending pleas to the public via the newspaper to stop throwing trash. They petitioned and got trash cans added to downtown streets. On the radio show they urged citizens to keep trash collected in the car and not thrown out the window. They got the city to paint the sides of the garbage trucks to be more attractive. They also joined forces with the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce in 1936 on a "Clean up, Paint Up" week in Raleigh.

Poverty was of course an issue in the depression. The clubs secured vacant lots for cultivating, got city to plow them up and then furnished vegetable seed for 50 gardens to be cultivated by those in need.

Instigators of Civic Pride

How did these women gardeners achieve their really quite spectacular results, defying everyone's expectations?

Education was one keystone. They taught members through programs at the meetings, study groups for special interests, and through mentoring. Then took all this education and put it to practical work in beautifying city.

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But even a large club can do only so much. Success required getting others to join in the effort. They achieved this through partnering with the Dept of Parks and other city organizations like the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce and the Women's Club of Raleigh.

But one of their most effective tools was the use of contests. They also held out contests with prizes to motivate the public, or any group that they wished to influence. This turned out to be a brilliant way to engage the public in the goal they were determined to achieve. They held a LOT of contests.

- Most Improved Filing station, from the 20's up to 1939, they offered a prize for the most improved gas stations that were springing up in many Raleigh neighborhoods to handle the growth of automobiles.



A filling Station, 1920's

- Most Improved Neighborhood Beautification contest
- A Tree Personality Contest for Raleigh, held in 1936 via the Raleigh Times, with the goal to "plant some a particular tree in sufficient masses to present a spectacle of color during their blooming season. It ended up a tie between the Dogwood and Crepe Myrtle. In 1937-8, they chose watermelon pink crepe myrtle for Raleigh. Club opened order to the Public for any color, and eventually 1000 crepe myrtle saplings and 500 dogwood saplings were ordered and planted.
- A Living Tree Contest at Christmas for the best decorated outdoor tree, urged conservation at the holidays.

The Spring Flower Show, featuring horticulture. The Raleigh Garden Club put on the first Spring Flower Shows in May of 1928. It was held at the Sir Walter Raleigh Hotel, and it became a tradition lasting into the 1980s. In the early years, it was the single largest and most popular gardening event in Raleigh. Headlines in the papers read: "Raleigh had never seen the like" and "Greatest Display of Flowers Ever seen in City" and "Hundreds of Visitors from Out of the City." Ivy twined trellises, garden benches, and more turned the ball room into a spring garden. In addition to displays of horticulture, luncheon and party tables, floral designs, novice arrangements, and a children's exhibit brought delight to young and old alike.



The Spring Flower Show

- the Raleigh Beautiful campaign, as they called it, motivated schools, both elementary and high, each with cash prize for most improvement.
- They also held contests at every meeting for the best horticulture and floral designs

The RGC's Public Voice

The Club founder, Susan Iden, made use of her job as reporter to the Raleigh Times to continue her mission to educate and inspire the public. This was also a strong factor in giving the Club a voice to the public.

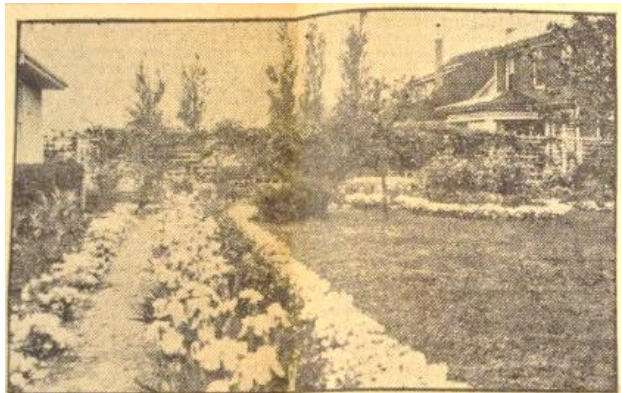
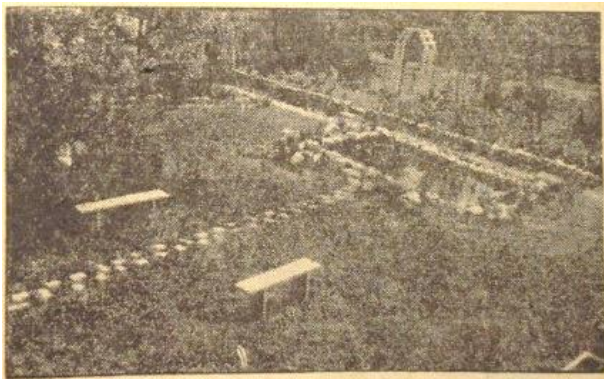
- Christmas Shows -- Mary Lee MacMillan organized the first Christmas show in 1934. It was a small affair where the tree in the Women's Club where the garden club met was decorated with seed packets and children were invited in and given the seeds. The following year they decorated the whole club for the children and members, and then the following year they decorated the building inside and out, showcasing new trends in decorating, and opened it to the public for a weekend. It was so successful that it became an annual tradition afterwards and led to the Club decorating the Governor's Mansion in the first year of each administration. Many decades later the venue was changed to decorating the Historic State Capital and that continued into the 21st millennium.



The Governor's Mansion

for Christmas

- Garden Tours – 1930 the open gardens turned into a full-fledged garden tour which became a regular event for the next 6 decades.



They educated the public with a weekly radio show, called the Gardening School of the Air, beginning in 1932 under then President Mary Lee McMillan. This show continued down the decades and is known today as WPTF's The Weekend Gardener! Letters of appreciation from all over the state show impact of the radio show in the early years. Speakers of the show were often invited to come speak to other garden clubs.



Nancy Clancy on radio, 1924

The club held Open Garden Day one Sunday afternoon each month to show off member gardens to the public. Susan Iden made sure these were listed in the paper and they were very popular. The first true Garden Tour was begun in the 1932 presidency of and this was a feature in the paper and continued for decades into the 1970s, with a fee to enter the gardens. After 1935, it was held every other year.

In 1934, Club President Mary Lee McMillan, decided to hold a Gardening School. 3 days of full-time study of horticulture, floral design and landscaping. It was the first of its kind nationally, and to the surprise of the newspaper reporter, it was very well attended. Eventually this led to the Garden Schools of the National Garden Club, still being held today as a 2-day intensive courses.

Special lectures were arranged with prominent, usually out of town, speakers. The first in 1930 was a lecture on Japanese Gardens and was attended by several hundred! The Club charged a small fee for attending ... presumably to pay for the auditorium, and over the years brought in prominent speakers including Landscape Architect Ellen Shipman Biddle, nationally famed floral arrangers, and more.

Educating the public was not limited to fellow adult gardeners. The Raleigh Garden Club had a Youth committee. In 1930-1, they helped the students at Meredith College in planning and planting a garden. And the following year they started 4 youth gardening clubs, 3 in schools and one neighborhood club. The neighborhood club established both a garden and a playground for the members. That year they also added a Youth section to the Spring Flower Show, and 48 young gardeners submitted entries.