

THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS  
of  
THE AMERICAN IRIS SOCIETY  
by  
John C. Wister  
1st President  
1920 - 1934

THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS OF THE AMERICAN  
IRIS SOCIETY

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## PREFACE

America is a land of many horticultural societies. The oldest has endured since 1827. But most of the national special flower societies are much younger, and of these the American Iris Society is one of the youngest.

Now that it has fifteen years behind it, it seems wise to record its history, for the experience of other organizations seems to prove that early history is easily lost when there is no permanent office to hold records. Indeed, some of our early records are already gone and have made various gaps necessary in this compiling. Much more of the early work which is in the record seems entirely forgotten although it has a direct bearing on the present and future policy of the Society. Indeed, it was the tendency of new officers and members to advocate changes of policy as if the ideas were entirely new, when they had been carefully considered and turned down at an earlier period, that prompted my going to the considerable labor of tracing our steps and the reasons for these steps from the beginning.

Not that I believe these matters were always settled wisely in the past. Far from it! Time has shown many mistakes, and still more disappointments. But in the main I have come to feel that the work of the Society was more carefully studied, more slowly and seriously discussed in the early days than has been true since. In the first fire of enthusiasm much more time was given to these matters than has been possible in recent years, and without wishing to endow the earlier directors with exceptional wisdom, it must be

admitted that many of them had had unusual experience in similar organizations which helped them to guide our new Society wisely through and around various pitfalls.

Many of the difficulties of our last few years seemed to me to spring directly from various innovations hurriedly adopted without studying the original policy and its reasons. For often such policy had been ordered after careful (and disillusioning) study of the very plan later brought forth as a new and inspired idea to cure all our ills.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One tells in narrative form of the organization of the Society and of its work year by year and closes with lists of officers, committees, etc., and By-Laws. Part two gives details of various special projects. I have made no attempt to make even the narrative of interest to the casual reader because I felt that to bring in too much of the fascinating picture of the times in the Iris world and the interesting personalities of the various men and women who did so much for the flower and for the Society, would detract from the main purpose of the work. I have tried to present, entirely impersonally, the aspirations and the various activities of the Society. I hope that future officers, directors and committee men and women may by reading this book gain a background, be able to rise over mistakes of the past without repeating them, and thus be able to lead the Society to a much greater field of usefulness.

John C. Wister

January 1, 1935

PART ONE

## Chapter 1.

### Events Leading up to Formation of Society

It is difficult to determine where, when and with whom the idea of a special society devoted to Irises originated. Between 1910 and 1917 there had been a great increase in the interest in Irises. This was due first, probably, to the beautiful catalogs published by Bertrand H. Farr of Wyomissing, Pa., which listed for the first time in this country some hundreds of varieties of Irises. In addition to well known older kinds Mr. Farr offered some seedlings of his own, among them Quaker Lady, Mount Penn, Glory of Reading, Pocahontas and Wyomissing. They made his name known all over the world when they received high awards at the 1915 exhibition in San Francisco. He also introduced to American gardeners the then new German varieties, Lohengrin, Loreley, Iris King, Princess Victoria Louise and Rhein Nixe, and the French varieties, Prosper Laugier, Edouard Michel, Alcazar and Opera. These whetted the American appetite for novelties so that about 1915 there were several independent importations from abroad which included such large flowered varieties as Caterina and Lord of June.

What discussions may have taken place during that period I do not know. The first definite mention I can remember came in a letter written by Lee E. Bonnewitz to me when I was in France in the summer of 1918. He suggested that when the war was over we ought to organize a society to do for Irises the work which the American Peony Society had

done for Peonies. Similar suggestions I understand were made by Frank M. Thomas, who was later killed in the war, and by Samuel \_\_\_\_\_, R.S. Sturtevant, Miss Grace Sturtevant, Mrs. J. Dean and James Boyd.

I do not know just when B. Y. Morrison entered into this discussion but his letter written in November 1919 to Dr. H.A. Gleason of the New York Botanical Garden did definitely initiate the movement for the organization of the society. After receiving it, Dr. Gleason asked me to talk this matter over with him in New York, and later he arranged for me to meet Mr. Frank H. Presby in Newark. After consultation with Mr. James Boyd, a series of letters were sent to a number of persons believed to be interested. The result was that plans were made for an organization meeting and the following letter was sent out.

New York City, January 10, 1920

"To All Persons Interested in Iris:

"A meeting will be held in the Museum Building of the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx Park, New York City, at 11 A.M., January 29, 1920, for the purpose of organizing an Iris Society. You are cordially invited to be present at this meeting and to cooperate in the formation of the society.

"Few plants offer such a reward to the gardener or such interesting possibilities to the experimenter as the Iris. Few plants are as easily cultivated or adapted to as wide a range of soil and climate. Still our knowledge of Iris is incomplete, scattered, and unorganized, and only united effort can put Iris cultivation on a par with that of roses, peonies, gladiolus or callias. United effort will be available through an Iris Society.

"Many worthy activities for the Society have been suggested and will be discussed at the organization meeting. Among these are:

1. Compilation of a list of horticultural varieties, with their parentage, synonyms, originators, and dates of introduction.
2. A study of the proper classification of Iris.
3. History of Iris cultivation and of prominent Iris breeders.
4. Compilation of cultural directions for various species and various climates.
5. Research on Iris pests and diseases.
6. Establishment of a Test Garden and of Exhibition Gardens in various sections of the country.
7. Promotion of Iris exhibitions, and of the display of Iris at flower shows.
8. Commending varieties of merit; encouraging the production of new varieties of real quality, and discouraging the introduction of inferior forms.
9. Promotion of popular interest in Iris, through published articles, bulletins, photographs, lantern slides, and lectures.

"You will doubtless think of ways and means by which these purposes may be accomplished, or of other equally worthy things which the Society may do - bring your ideas to the organization meeting.

"Extend this message to your friends. No formal invitation is necessary, but one will be sent to any address on request.

"If you cannot be present in person, may we enroll you as a charter member?

THE ORGANIZATION COMMITTEE

Lee R. Bonnewitz  
 James Foyd  
 J. J. Christman  
 T. A. Glasco  
 Mrs. Francis King  
 B. Y. Morrison  
 Miss Grace Stewart  
 John C. Miller



"The New York Botanical Garden will act as host to the Iris Society at its first meeting. Lunch will be served at the close of the morning session. In order to facilitate preparations, a reply is requested signifying your intention of being present.

H. A. Gleason, Sec. pro tem  
New York Botanical Garden  
Bronx Park, New York City."

Even this first letter took official recognition of the organization of national societies for roses, peonies, gladiolus and dahlias. The above program was, however in the main, founded upon the experiences of the American Peony Society for the simple reason that nearly all the persons at that time growing peonies were also interested in Iris. These persons had seen the work of the American Peony Society in peonies in reference to the nine subjects mentioned in the letter and they wished to see similar work undertaken for Iris. It was with this program before them that persons interested in Iris came to New York to the organization meeting of the society--