

# The AIS Convention, 1964

ELIZABETH H. ROWE

FROM ALL over the United States, during the first week of June, all roads led to the Convention city, Chicago, Illinois. By bus, train, plane and private car, groups of irisarians hurried to the Pick-Congress Hotel in anticipation of the festivities. I, too, headed west, by car, from Pittsburgh on Monday, June 1, via the Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana Turnpikes, giving myself ample time to visit friends on the way and to see their beautiful gardens. By the time I reached the Hotel on Tuesday night, it was already buzzing with convention goers and each new arrival was met by many "kissing cousins" before he even had a chance to register at the desk. Warm greetings of friends from previous conventions plus the joys of seeing Robin friends for the first time could be heard everywhere. And soon there were many groups deep in discussions of new seedlings, cultural practices, hybridizing and chromosome counts.

Meetings were held Wednesday morning for the RVPs and although there were no convention tours scheduled for that day, there were some informal bus tours to gardens which were either not included on the main tours or which would be visited much later in the week. As at all conventions, planned far in advance, the weatherman had played tricks on the Chicago area and many of the gardens were rapidly going out of bloom. There had been some "bud" conventions . . . in this instance we saw a lot of the later blooming irises.

I started out in my own car Wednesday morning, filled to the doors with other irisarians, to spend time in some of the gardens before the convention crowds. This proved to be one of the nicest times to visit, as in each case the growers were busily grooming their gardens for the last time and welcomed a chance to sit and relax and talk about the blooms. Unhurriedly we could judge the newer irises and discuss seedlings and their parentages. Although we visited only three gardens, we wouldn't have traded that day for anything. It whetted our appetites for the convention tours to start.

The Welcome Gathering was held Wednesday evening. Ed Varnum, president of the Northern Illinois Iris Society, was our host, and he welcomed us in behalf of that organization. Bob Carney, AIS President, called us out by Regions, and after a few announcements we adjourned to other meetings.

Early Thursday morning the buses loaded for the gardens. With name tags in place, hundreds of irisarians lined the sidewalks in front of the Pick-Congress and filled each bus to capacity. I found Neva Sexton and she and I boarded Bus #11—the lucky bus. Our first stop was at Hubert Fischer's garden, in Hinsdale. There were lovely clumps of irises and also Mrs. Fischer's poppies. Strangely enough I met three other members of a Species Robin. We were told there were some native species in the field, so off we tramped. I wish someone would have thought to take a picture of us as it isn't often that many Species Robinites ever get together.

*Mrs. Rowe is president of the Pittsburgh Iris Society, editor of Region 3 Bulletin, co-chairman of the tall bearded division of the National Robin Program, slides chairman of the Society for Siberian irises, regional representative of the Median Society, and member of the AIS Youth Program Committee.*

The aroma of coffee brought us back from our jaunt, and as we drank a cup, I enjoyed watching Harry Randall explain about his dilapidated hat and how scandalized his good wife was that he would bring it to the United States. But his words were drowned out by the whistle calling us back to the bus. As we traveled on to our next stop you could hear the people talking about what they had seen, including SARAH AVERELL, PRAIRIE BLAZE, PRINCE INDIGO, PAINTED WINGS, WILD GINGER, CHINESE CORAL, and so many others.

Our next stop was the garden of Nathan Rudolph, at Aurora, Illinois. This was one of the gardens I had previously visited. It was interesting to see what seedlings had opened during the night and to recheck those I had already found in the seedling rows. Clumps of Mr. Rudolph's own introductions including DANCING BRIDE and ORCHID BROCADE could be seen in the formal planting with many clumps of seedlings under number. Beside the irises themselves, there were numerous peonies, big, beautiful ones.

Lunch was served at "The Spinning Wheel." Can any of us who were there forget the lovely paneled lounge, complete with a huge fireplace, nor the fireplace on the outside; and did you see the two buckets filled with ferns hanging over a pulley? The wooden Indian which guarded the door was christened "Chief Chickasaw" by someone from Memphis. And there was a parrot that just would not talk, but would either hide his head under his wing or screech at us. The waitresses in their colonial costumes added to the attractive surroundings. Even though our bus and some other ones had a short wait, we were again able to talk over things that we had seen in the gardens or to renew friendships with people that we just hadn't seen before in the crowds. The adjoining gift shops were frequented by all of us, and there were many bags of goodies or gifts gotten for those at home.

Our afternoon was spent at the gardens of Leonard Jugle and Edward Varnum. Mr. Jugle's garden was fast going out of bloom in the hot sun, but there were many things of interest including a bed of Dykes Medalists. Ed Varnum's garden, more protected under the trees, had a little later bloom. In both cases you could see the tremendous work that was put into the gardens to show off those lovely blooms to their best advantage. Of interest to many of us were the raised beds at Varnums' with the sod over the edges. I am sure that a lot of irisarians went home with all the particulars of these beds in their notes.

Back to the hotel. There were so many other conventions in progress at the Pick-Congress that elevator service was slow when our convention buses arrived. But even as we waited for the elevators we talked back and forth across the crowds about the blooms we had seen and you could hear such names as BRIGHT SAILS, IRISH LULLABY, STERLING SILVER, VILLAGE GREEN, and others flying around the lobby. I wondered to myself what the neophyte conventioners thought or even those who were not in our group. As at all conventions, there is always some outsider who would ask, "And just what is an iris?" and try as you would to explain it wasn't until you got down to the fact that irises originally were called "Grandmother's 'flags'" that the light would shine in his eyes. Of course, then came the question, "Do you mean that this is what all you people are looking at?" You would take a few minutes to explain that there are such beautiful colors and forms now, but still they would go away with the idea in their minds that all of us must be slightly "crazy" to be so interested in one flower.

Our Thursday night meeting was a huge success. We were treated to an address by the Honorable Harry J. Randall of the British Iris Society. Those of us who had been lucky enough to hear Mr. Randall in Newark knew the pleasure we had in store. The humorous anecdotes were wonderful and Mr. Randall had the audience at his fingertips. I only wish I could have taken down every word to keep in my treasured memories.

The second speaker of the evening was Mr. Carl Jorgensen, who talked on "Improving Germination of Iris Seeds." Due to an eye problem I could not view the slides so was unable to stay to hear his comments.

Friday morning the buses again sped on their way. The one I was on visited the gardens of Watts and Blocher before lunch. I loved the lupines at the Watts' garden in their dainty pastel shades, such a compliment to the irises. Clumps of POLKA TIME, MOONCREST, CONGENIALITY, and HENRY SHAW took our eye, as did so many others, and they were fresh and lovely in the cool of the morning.

I had visited the garden of Clarence Blocher previously. I quickly went to the irises which had been outstanding two days before in hopes that they would still be as fine. And I wasn't disappointed either. Clarence's own ELLEN MANOR and ALICE BLUE GOWN were beautiful blues. The real eye-catcher was Cliff Benson's SKYWATCH, a real one to watch.

Our luncheon again was at "The Spinning Wheel." We had been scheduled for "The Lilac Lodge" but it had burnt down just a week before. The people at "The Spinning Wheel" really served a wonderful meal with little notice. All convention goers should take off their hats to them. The parrot? Well, he was asleep this time, and no amount of coaxing could get him to more than throw some of his food at me and screech.

The afternoon was spent in the gardens of Marge Hagberg and Lerton Hooker. Marge's mother was on my bus until that point, and she could well be proud of her daughter's garden. Colorful rows of irises were seen; some had almost finished blooming but there were still enough blooms, especially in the seedling rows. I loved a clump of SIVA SIVA. One seedling of Thomas Yano was in this garden, his 95A. Tom and his lovely wife were riding on my bus, and I was so pleased for him that this beautiful ruffled iris was so fine.

Mr. Hooker's garden was a show in itself. His own introductions and seedlings were seen to advantage in their own home grounds. Here again in the guest beds were many irises mentioned before plus others of interest. A wonder of color was Noyd's MAGIC COLOR. ULTRAPOISE, a favorite of mine from Denver still kept its place in my heart. I spent some time here in the Northern Illinois Iris Society Test Garden, making mental notes to compare it with our own Regional one. Lemonade and grape drink helped cool us off in the hot afternoon sun.

Our evening program included a combined meeting of the specialty groups and also a judges training session. Again I had to miss most of the specialty group discussion due to my eyes and the slides, but I truly enjoyed the judges panel. Everything from judging fragrance to the responsibilities of judges in voting for awards was brought out. It was a very informative meeting for all of us.

Saturday, the last day of the convention. I had heard about *The Rebel* bus and the fun all of the riders had been having. This was my day to be

included in it. Helen McCaughey was at her best complete with black wig and funny store teeth. I don't believe any of us in the "singing corner" at the back of the bus will forget the look on the face of one poor innocent truck driver who was fortunate enough to be right behind us for miles. Helen, as Madame X, waved, rolled her eyes and just gazed at him. From the first look he just couldn't believe his eyes. We weren't sure if he finally turned green or purple with mirth or fright. We laughed, and laughed and laughed. And of course there was the \$1.00 we all paid to join the "Sucker Club" for a lick on an all-day sucker.

But we did see gardens that Saturday. Ferris Gaskill's garden was first on our schedule. There were so many beautiful clumps to be seen as well as the seedlings rows. I was pleased to see NITTANY from Max Hunter of my own Region 3 looking so fine; also so many others, including JAVA DOVE, MOON CREST, ESTHER FAY, and RAINBOW GOLD. And just who was the girl that was trying to sell the Gaskill's strawberries at 5 cents apiece?

The last convention garden was that of Orville Fay. Here were spotless beds filled with his originations. ARCTIC FLAME, CHAMPAGNE MUSIC, RIPPLING WATERS, IRISH LINEN, to name a few made gorgeous clumps. And the rows of seedlings were so well laid out. It was of interest to all of us to see the octoploids that Mr. Fay had produced. I loved to see the ducks in the pond swimming and unafraid of any of us. When the whistle blew calling us back to the buses a few of us sat along the edge and sang a few songs in complete fellowship and "harmony" in sort of a parting salute to the blooms.

Our luncheon Saturday was served at McCormick Place. The large banquet room could not dwarf our crowd. In the midst of all the chatter a voice was heard auctioning off everything from Beatele wigs to Thursday's bus check to any or all of us. I wonder if Dr. Conroe knows that I have a picture of him in the black wig that he bought. After our luncheon we walked down the corridors to the Fifth Annual Iris Show of the Northern Illinois Iris Society. The crowd of irisarians could not be held in the room, and we almost had to wait in line to see the blooms.

Back to the hotel again to put up my hair for the banquet. Convention banquets are always grand affairs. The tables, the room, the food, everything was perfect. Then came the presentation of the Awards of the American Iris Society, topped off by the presentation of the Franklin Cook Memorial Cup to Richard Goodman for his iris BRIGHT SAILS.

The guest speaker for our banquet was Sam Caldwell. We could not help laugh at his humor and his comments on irises. The slides that he showed of some of the older varieties and of iris people I had never seen before. Some of these people had just been a name in an old AIS BULLETIN, but now they will be pictures in my heart.

After the speech, the NIIS gave door prizes to some of the lucky members who had registered early. These will always be treasured by the winners as a lasting memory of the wonderful days at Chicago.

And then, all too soon it was over. Many goodbys could be heard, each with a "write soon" to them, and we left our old and new friends for another year.

I have the dates for the convention already marked on my calendar for next year. Why not join me?