Celebrating Currier's Centennial

by Chandler Fulton, Massachusetts

OSCEOLA CURRIER MCEWEN HAS LIVED A LONG LIFE, AND HE has used the time allotted him to achieve major contributions in several different fields of endeavor, including irises. Through his accomplishments and his personality he has enriched many lives. It is rare to live so long. It is rarer still to achieve so much. In celebration of his first 100 years, I wish to share my joy in knowing this remarkable and inspiring individual.

Currier was born in Newark, New Jersey, on April 1, 1902. His father, George Floy McEwen, was a physician who became crippled by arthritis to the extent that he was confined to a chair, yet he devised ways to continue his medical practice. His mother's maiden name was Mary Antoinette Currier. She used to spoil young Currier, and when asked about it she responded "you can't spoil a good thing." He was named Osceola after his grandfather, who in turn had been given the name by his father to honor the memory of a Seminole chief who went to peace talks under a flag of truce, but was arrested and put in prison where he died a year later.

After completing his undergraduate degree at Wesleyan University, Currier attended the New York University School of Medicine, where he received his M.D. in 1926. He did his internship and residence at Bellevue Hospital, and not surprisingly decided to specialize in arthritis and other rheumatic diseases. He did a postdoctoral residence at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research (now Rockefeller University), where for four years he studied rheumatic fever. In 1932 he was invited to return to the New York School of Medicine — they knew a "good thing" when they saw one – as Instructor and Assistant Dean. He quickly rose through the ranks at NYU, and became a very young Dean in 1937, a post he held until 1955. He retired as Professor Emeritus of Medicine in 1970.

Currier has an exceptional ability to bring people together to collaborate as a team, and to instill a sense of urgency and importance to the mission, and thus to induce everyone to work together toward a goal. His leadership has given his efforts especially high impact. Immediately on settling at NYU he started a Rheumatic Diseases Study Group, devoted to patient care, teaching, and research. This pioneering interdepartmental effort, energetically chaired by Currier until 1968, grew to a major project involving 12 academic departments that contributed much to our understanding of arthritis and rheumatic diseases, and also trained over 200 fellows. In a similar role, Currier was active in the American Rheumatism Association, including as a member of its Medical and Scientific Committee, and served as its president from 1952-53. He was involved in the formation of the Arthritis Foundation, and a member of its Board of Directors. He contributed to a major reclassification of rheumatic diseases, and to the establishment of "rheumatology" as a medical specialty in 1950. He was involved in the early days of the National Institute of Arthritis and Metabolic Diseases, including service on its Council and chairing the first large "program project" research grants. He was author or coauthor of about 200 articles on rheumatic diseases. He traveled to many parts of the world, from Egypt to Galapagos, as a consultant or to attend conferences. As he described to me, during his years at NYU he held essentially two fulltime administrative positions, one as Professor and Dean of the Medical School and the other as head of the arthritis project. He used every minute. On the train to Riverdale in the evening he would read his mail and consider his reply to each letter. After dinner he retreated to his study and dictated the replies. He received many honors for his contributions to rheumatic diseases, including honorary doctorates of science from Wesleyan University and Marietta College.

During the Second World War, Currier held several important positions, including as Commanding Officer of the 49th Station Hospital in London, England, and finally serving as Chief Consultant in Medicine of the European Theater of Operations, with rank of Colonel.

Currier began to hybridize irises as a hobby while he was still busy at the medical school. Whenever he had the opportunity, he enjoyed gardening, including vegetables, irises, and daylilies. In the mid-1950s, a Schreiner's catalog arrived in Riverdale, New York, where the

McEwens lived, that was undeliverable as addressed. The addressee's name included a "Mac" so the postman left it at the McEwens'. One February evening Currier looked at the catalog, and followed its suggestion to join the American Iris Society. The *AIS Bulletin* arrived with articles on hybridizing, so he decided to try it, at first with tall bearded irises and with daylilies. (The efforts with daylilies produced over 50 introductions from 1964 to 1978, including some lovely hybrids that are still available. Among these are some that Currier has mentioned as favorites, including PERSONALITY PLUS and ORANGE BOUNTY, and a handsome clear yellow, LEMON PRELUDE, that co-blooms with Siberian irises.)

In 1960, while at a medical conference in Chicago, Currier visited Orville Fay, who was using colchicine with daylilies to induce the doubling of chromosome number from diploid to tetraploid. Fay explained the technique. Currier was enchanted; as a rheumatologist he had used colchicine to treat gout. Once at home, the following spring he tried colchicine on Siberian and Japanese irises, whose tetraploids had never been in commerce. The first tetraploids produced are usually chimeras with both diploid and tetraploid tissue, and thus are unstable, but these can be crossed to obtain a second-generation of pure tetraploids. Currier obtained his second generation of tetraploid Siberian irises by 1966, and two were introduced in 1970, the year he retired from NYU, including a "blue" self that he named in honor of ORVILLE FAY. A whole new line of Siberian irises had begun. ORVILLE FAY received the highest honor for a Siberian iris, the Morgan Award, in 1976. Another of Currier's early tetraploids, SILVER EDGE, also won the Morgan Award two years later.

Currier's hybridization records show that he found time to make hundreds of crosses during the years while he was still working at NYU. The number expanded rapidly after his "retirement." While his efforts to produce tetraploids was underway, other adventures unfolded, including the world's first yellow Siberian iris. The origin of BUTTER AND SUGAR is best told in his own words, a story written in 1987 that also illustrates the eloquence of Currier's descriptive writing:

> Unfortunately, the parentage is only partly known. I want also to make clear at once that it came from breeding efforts in which there was no thought of obtaining yellow. In 1966 I was eager to have CAMBRIDGE and DREAMING SPIRES to use in my

work with colchicine to induce tetraploid Siberian irises. I wrote to Mrs. Marjorie Brummitt in England, the originator of those two lovely blue diploids, explaining my purpose and requesting the two plants. Mrs. Brummitt not only sent the plants but, knowing that I would have to wait several years for them to bloom and provide flowers for crosses, she very kindly sent a packet of "bee pod" seeds from each for me to use at once. That is the reason for the incomplete knowledge of parentage because only the pod parent was known in each case.

The seeds were sprouted and treated with colchicine in February 1967. Approximately 20 seedlings in each batch survived the treatment and of these most were blue, about a third were white and among the white ones in each batch there was one which had quite yellow falls. The one from DREAMING SPIRES was introduced in 1971 as DREAMING YELLOW and the one from CAMBRIDGE in 1973 as FLOATING ISLAND, named after the pudding of yellow custard with egg white floating on top. All of those approximately 40 surviving seedlings proved to have been unaffected by the colchicine and were diploid.

DREAMING YELLOW and FLOATING ISLAND had come purely as lucky breaks, an example of McEwen luck, but once they bloomed it took no very high order of intelligence to recognize the importance of crossing them. This was done the summer of 1971. The resulting seeds were treated with colchicine that winter. Twenty-two survived of which only one, a rich blue-violet was tetraploid. All the others were diploids and all were white with varying amounts of yellow in the falls. Of these the best both in form and in depth of color was the second in the row, 71/33 (2), and it was selected in 1977 for introduction as BUTTER AND SUGAR. Not only is its form superior to that of its parents but the yellow of the falls is richer and is lasting. The falls of DREAMING YELLOW and FLOATING ISLAND are pleasingly yellow on the first day of bloom but then the color fades to creamy white. The yellow of BUTTER AND SUGAR is richer and persists without change and, indeed, is more pronounced on day four than that of the parents on the day of opening.

Currier sent DREAMING YELLOW to his friend and fellow Siberian iris hybridizer, William McGarvey, who jokingly wrote him that it was "more dreaming than yellow." As Currier told me, "The next

year BUTTER AND SUGAR opened, and he had to eat his words." BUTTER AND SUGAR started a revolution in iris colors, and probably is Currier's best known and most widely grown iris. It won the Morgan Award in 1981 and was honored again by receiving the first Morgan-Wood Medal in 1986. While this work was ongoing, other diploid Siberian irises were introduced, including RUFFLED VELVET (1973), a handsome velvety deep violet with wonderful wide and ruffled form that has been involved in the parentage of dozens of subsequently introduced Siberian irises by many breeders, including his good friend Bee Warburton. RUFFLED VELVET won the Morgan Award in 1980.

Success in creating tetraploid Japanese irises took a little longer. The first plant of a second-generation tetraploid Japanese iris bloomed in 1977. By good fortune this first success proved to be beautiful, and it was introduced as RASPBERRY RIMMED in 1979. RASPBERRY RIMMED received the Payne Award in 1983. Other tetraploid Japanese irises hybridized by Currier that won the Payne Award include BLUEBERRY RIMMED, which is a child of RASPBERRY RIMMED, and JAPANESE PINWHEEL. JAPANESE PINWHEEL, a handsome red with a fine light edge, was the favorite guest iris at the 1989 Japanese Iris Convention. Two diploid repeat bloomers, PURPLE PARASOL and RETURNING TIDE, also each won the Payne Award.

As with daylilies and tall-bearded irises, the tetraploid Siberian and Japanese irises proved to have larger flowers, with more pronounced colors and features. They lose some of the daintiness of the diploids, but when successful their exaggerated substance, vibrant color, and starchy ruffling all are striking in the garden. Currier has carried tetraploids of both Japanese and Siberian irises to advanced generations. Essentially whole new "species" of irises are evolving in these tetraploids, as successive generations have proved more fertile and produce more seeds.

In all his efforts, as Currier has emphasized, "McEwen luck" has played a role. With irises, the arrival of the Schreiner's catalog, the meeting with Orville Fay and the gout-relieving drug colchicine derived from the Autumn Crocus, the first yellow Siberian iris, the incredible new seedlings that have appeared every year in his garden, both diploids and tetraploids. As Louis Pasteur said, "luck favors the prepared mind." Currier, with his remarkable intelligence, boyish

enthusiasm, curiosity and boundless energy has consistently been able to turn opportunity into accomplishment.

In Currier's life, people and place have been important. His family summered in South Harpswell, Maine. Currier first visited there when he was about three months old, and every summer subsequently except for three years during World War II. In 1952 he purchased his own home there, a 19th century cottage on a bluff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. He extensively rebuilt this house, including considerable carpentry using his own and his family's hands. His early hybridizing efforts took place mostly in Riverdale, and Harpswell was a place for sailing, relaxing, and spending time with family. After his retirement the garden was moved to Harpswell, and became known as "Seaways Garden." This is a spectacular location, perfectly suited both to restoring one's soul and, with its sun, cool climate and gentle breezes, to exuberantly hybridizing, growing, and studying irises. Settled in Harpswell, the work with irises became his dominant profession.

After his retirement, he established a rheumatology practice in nearby Brunswick, Maine, and he continued this practice into his late eighties, often driving to visit patients who could not come to his office. He generously helped many patients, and "The Doctor" became (and remains) revered throughout the area.

In his efforts, Currier has been staunchly supported by remarkable partners. His first wife Katherine Cogswell, whom he married in 1930, strengthened his efforts by many tasks, while providing homes in Riverdale, New York, and South Harpswell, Maine. Together Kay and Currier raised four wonderful children; Currier now has six grandchildren and one great-grandchild (with another on the way as this is written). Kay died in 1980. In 1982, Elisabeth Fulkerson, a longtime close family friend, married Currier, and they have shared a wonderful partnership for 20 years. In his iris hybridizing efforts he also has been helped by alliances with two dedicated, exceptional women: Shirley Pope, who distributed his irises for years, and Sharon Hayes Whitney, who now distributes his irises and also helps him in his hybridizing and all aspects of handling the plants.

I have known Currier only during the last fifth of his 100 years to date, the fifth of one's life that an average person — if living — sits back and relaxes. Since then Currier, never idle, has accomplished more than most of us do in a lifetime. When I first knew him, he was 82, and I worried in my journal about learning from this remarkable man "while there is time." About once a year since then, I have enjoyed and been

inspired by a pilgrimage to Harpswell, to see his new hybrids, and especially to visit with Currier and Elisabeth. During his supposed "twilight years" he has published three books, a *History of Rheumatology in the United States* (1985, with Charley J. Smyth and Richard H. Freyberg), *The Japanese Iris* (1990), and *The Siberian Iris* (1996). For irisarians, the last two are classics. In addition to excellent research, beautiful organization, and clear exposition, in preparing these books he constantly consulted with the global network of knowledgeable people, so these books are likely to stand as the definitive works for a generation or more. In addition, he has published over a hundred papers in horticultural journals. He was a founding member of the Society for Siberian Irises, and served as its president; later he served as president of the Society for Japanese Irises.

These years of hybridization have always been sparked by scientific curiosity, and in addition to making crosses he is always trying to learn more about the irises. From 1985-92 he was the Chairman of the AIS Scientific Committee, and he has been personally involved in several important scientific projects involving irises, including working on methods for making crosses, germinating seeds, inducing tetraploidy, effect of soil pH, studies of rebloom, even an ongoing collaborative project on growing irises under Arctic conditions that he calls the "Deep Freeze Project." He published a paper on one of these projects, attempts to discover the cause of the disease scorch in irises, in the July 2002 *AIS Bulletin*. When I first knew Currier, he was still planting about 1500 seedlings a year, from which he hoped to introduce about 4 to 6; these numbers have gradually declined. His energy has remained prodigious year after year. I remember visiting him one weekend. He hybridized until 7 p.m., with a brief break for a cocktail at 5 p.m. After a lobster dinner, which he helped prepare, he went to the laboratory-plant room he had built behind the garage, and while we talked he prepared labels for the next day's hybridizing and tended his treated seedlings that were growing under fluorescent lights. He worked until 11 p.m., and was up at 7 a.m. the next morning cooking breakfast for us all. His focus on goals is always strong. When he could still walk around his garden to hybridize, he would greet the frequent visitors to his garden warmly, but then went on working. Moreover, if one spent time in the garden, one's help was soon elicited, to bring a flower or tool, to take a picture, to give an opinion. His energy, intellectual and physical, seemed boundless, but a lot came from determination to get the job done. He kept going at the task, whether at his worktable

overlooking the sea or in his garden, even when tired or hurting. He described himself memorably and yet accurately when he told me "Chandler, I am a young man with 87-year-old knees." Finally, in the past couple of years the osteoarthritis in his knees has required that he visit and work in the garden from a chair. His leadership continues unabated. This summer in the middle of a scientific discussion about irises, I recall his compelling voice as he got out pen and paper and said, "this is important, Chandler."

Through all this, he has continued to introduce, year after year, new and improved Siberian and Japanese irises, tetraploid and diploid, full-sized and miniatures, including repeat bloomers, of every size and color. Each year he has honestly described some of his introductions or seedlings as his "best to date." I hesitate to mention any because even my favorites change from one year to another. He has continued to introduce diploids, and some of his (and my) favorite Siberian irises among his introductions are diploids, including RUFFLED VELVET, BUTTER AND SUGAR, and SHIRLEY POPE. If one could have only one of his miniatures I would choose ANNICK. To me especially notable tetraploid Siberian irises include HARPSWELL VELVET, which has magnificent form, CHANDLER'S CHOICE, which is red velvet with fire, and EVER AGAIN, perhaps the most beautiful repeat bloomer. Among Japanese irises not already mentioned, notable are ORIENTAL ROYALTY, CONTINUING PLEASURE, and JAPANESE PRINCESS. The last of these the great Japanese expert Mototeru Kamo of Kamo Nurseries, when visiting Currier's garden in 1990, declared was the best Japanese iris ever developed outside of Japan. A diploid Japanese iris, SOUTHERN SON, introduced in 1990, was described by Currier that year: "One of our major hybridizing goals is the achievement of true colors and this lovely flower, a self of RHS-93B, is the closest to true medium blue that we know." Improvements in color, pattern, branching, and form are ongoing. Wonderful tetraploid Siberian irises have been developed that are named for continuing dreams, DREAMING GREEN, DREAMING BROWN, and DREAMING ORANGE, new clear colors glimpsed but not yet achieved. In 2002 he introduced the diploid Siberian iris LITTLE CENTENNIAL and the tetraploid Japanese iris CENTENARY. One iris that I think may prove to be his most beautiful tetraploid Siberian iris to date, both as a flower and overall as a garden plant, has been registered as MERRYSPRING. It won best

seedling at the Maine Iris Show in 1999, and is currently being increased for introduction in the future. Clarence Mahan is writing a history of Currier's hybridizing efforts that will chronicle his accomplishments in detail. Currier has left us a rich legacy of diverse Siberian and Japanese irises that no one could even have imagined before his work.

Centenarians are rare, and occur at a frequency of about 1 in 5,000. Current centenarians have survived two world wars, the 1918 flu epidemic, the widespread replacement of horses with gasoline engines and of ice boxes with refrigerators, the intrusion of telephones and radio, the Great Depression, air travel, reduction of the necessity to utilize one's imagination by movies and then by television, the discovery that genes are DNA molecules, men on the moon, the computer and the internet, the human genome, and the evolution of tetraploid Siberian and Japanese irises. Genes and healthy living play important roles in longevity. In addition, researchers who have studied those individuals who live to be 100 find that they tend to have been unusually healthy through their later years, to remain independent, and to be "constantly busy." As T. T. Perls noted, "They basically carried on as if age were not the issue." He added, "Basic good luck surely helps as well." These attributes fit Currier perfectly. Ten years ago he went to his physician in Maine for a physical, and told the physician he hoped there was nothing wrong because "I'm having such a good time, I want to live a long time." The doctor replied "Currier, you already have lived a long time." Happily the physician found nothing that would threaten a still longer life. Currier is always busy, with goals, writing that needs to be done, friends, family, colleagues and admiring visitors, and of course his irises. He works daily from a folder marked "Urgent." As he has emphasized, "I always have a goal" (quoted from Tukey, 2002). Currently, in addition to his projects and correspondence, he is writing his memoirs for his family and, I hope, his friends. And of course this remarkable centenarian holds the patent on "McEwen luck."

His achievements in medicine, administration, and irises as well as his personal kindnesses have touched many lives. An example of his open and helpful nature was told to me. A stranger stopped at his home in Maine. His car had broken down, and he asked to use the phone to call for repair. Currier learned that the man had an appointment in town, so Currier loaned him his car. Currier is also a great and expansive host, as was so amply shown to all of us who attended the July

1990 Japanese Iris Convention in Maine and celebrated a lobster picnic in his garden.

In his later years, the great theoretical physicist Albert Einstein was asked his profession, and replied "photographer's model." Currier also has spent a lot of time receiving awards and accolades, always with grace and charm. His honors include the Hybridizer's Medal of the American Iris Society in 1976, the comparable Foster Memorial Medal of the British Iris Society in 1977, the Luther Burbank Award of the American Horticultural Society in 1995, and the highest honor that the American Iris Society can bestow, its Gold Medal, in 1999. There have been several celebrations of his centennial. This year articles about him have appeared in periodicals as diverse as *Arthritis & Rheumatism* to *People, Places & Plants*. At the Portland Flower Show on March 14, there was a celebration of Currier's birthday that included a slide presentation of irises he has produced. Currier cut a cake on that occasion (photo in the July 2002 *AIS Bulletin*). On June 22, Governor Angus King of Maine proclaimed it Currier McEwen Day, a lovely Currier McEwen Centennial Garden prepared in Harpswell Historic Park by the Harpswell Garden Club was dedicated, and Currier cut two more cakes provided by the Maine Iris Society.

A life so long is rare; a life so rich in achievements is rarer. Currier, those of us you have befriended, helped, taught, mentored, and inspired, whose gardens and lives are enriched by your work, we salute you! Our lives are far richer for the time you spent with us. You have inspired us with your enthusiasm, your curiosity, your welcoming nature, your love of life. By zestful example, you have shown us how to live. Keep going, we still have a lot of learn from you!

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