

Mary Swords DeBaillon

PEARL M. SEGURA

Mary Swords, one of eight children, was born on January 23, 1888, in Opelousas, Louisiana. She was the daughter of Marion Lewis Swords and Aola Virginia Ward.

Her father was born on a plantation near Big Cane, Louisiana, in St. Landry Parish, on February 24, 1857, to James T. Swords of Georgia and Mary E. Moss of Mississippi. One of the best known politicians in the state, he served as sheriff of St. Landry Parish from 1900 until his death in 1916.

Her mother was born near Evergreen, Louisiana, in Avoyelles Parish, and was the daughter of Timothy C. Ward of Ohio and Aurelia Leatherman of Mississippi.

Mary's education was received in the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, Louisiana.

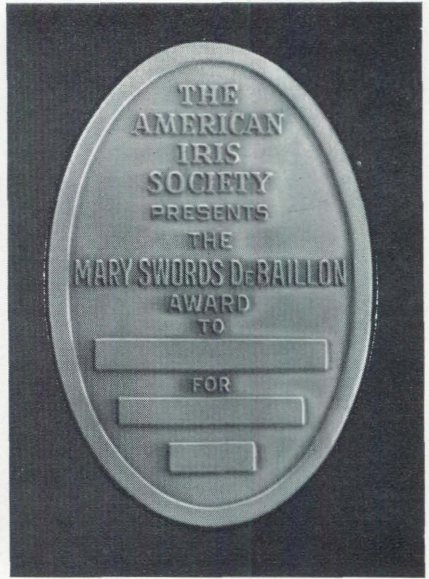
In 1920 she married Dan DeBaillon, a prominent young attorney of Lafayette, who later became a member of the Louisiana State University Board of Supervisors and a member of the executive committee of the Louisiana State Law Institute.

In the mid-twenties they moved from an apartment on College Avenue to a beautiful new brick home at the intersection of the Pont de Mouton Road and what is now known as Moss Street.

The presence of giant live oak trees had been a determining factor in the choice of the location for a home. With these as a nucleus, Mary, a lover of nature, proceeded during a period of a decade and a half to transform the fifteen-acre tract, once overgrown with weeds, into a marvel of horticultural beauty. With a sure eye for the right location for the right plant, coupled with wise selectivity, Mary gradually developed her garden so that each season greeted her with its own special blooms, bringing joy to her heart the whole year round.

Childless, Mary loved her flowers, says her friend, Mrs. Charles E. Hamilton, "like a mother loves her children." An intelligent conversationalist of average height and weight ("au bon point," said Mrs. Hamilton), with brown naturally curly hair, laughing brown eyes and dimpled face, Mary's soft manner belied a strength of character and determination that overrode obstacles that would have daunted a more timid soul in her ceaseless search for the floral treasures with which nature had endowed her native state. Most often accompanied by her negro yardman, but sometimes by her husband, a friend, or fellow collectors, she fearlessly dared the dangers of the swamps with their deadly water moccasins for some elusive plant to add to her growing collection of native flowers.

It was the sight of the Louisiana irises thriving in the sandy soil of Caroline Dormon's "Briarwood" in the spring of 1932 and the realization of its adaptability and possibility as a garden flower that excited her fancy and spurred her onward in a concerted effort to collect every variety possible—a few of which she already possessed. Heretofore, her interest had rested on camellias (of which she had more than 100 varieties), azaleas, magnolias, and other ornamentals, indigenous to the region.



MARY SWORDS DEBAILLON MEDAL

So great was her zeal that in a number of years she had acquired the most extensive and varied collection of Louisiana irises to be found anywhere. Realizing its value to the floriculture of her state during a lingering illness of two years which finally necessitated maintaining her garden by means of bedside instructions, she willed her iris collection to Caroline Dormon.

On March 27, 1940, a beautiful, sunshiny day when her garden was blooming in all its early spring glory, Mary passed away. She was laid to rest in the Swords family plot in Myrtle Grove Cemetery in Opelousas. Choice camellia blossoms from her garden marked the spot.

Area iris enthusiasts honored her memory the following year when on Sunday, May 18, 1941, the Mary Swords DeBaillon Louisiana Iris Society was organized. When this society affiliated with the American Iris Society in 1948 and became the Society for Louisiana Irises, the national organization established the Mary Swords DeBaillon Award for the best Louisiana Iris of the year. The iris which bears her name, registered by Caroline Dormon, received the first award in April 1948.

Mary DeBaillon *As We Knew Her*

W. B. MACMILLAN

Although it was largely through our mutual interest in ornamental horticulture that brought us together, it soon became Mary herself, her personality, and her character that we, Peggy and I, shall never forget; and it was this that held us together as friends until she was taken away only twelve years later.

Very soon after we arrived in Abbeville during July of 1928, we began scouting in all directions into the South Louisiana countryside. It seemed natural that after being cooped up for more than a year in a small Bronx, New York, apartment three stories up, we should find ourselves much like a pair of bird dogs suddenly released in a field filled with quail trails; and it didn't take us long to learn that the name Mary DeBaillon was already a legend in Louisiana floriculture circles. So we were correspondingly impressed when we were by chance introduced to Mary DeBaillon in a camellia garden a few miles out from Jacksonville, Florida.

Our next encounter was in her own "far more than lovely" fifteen-acre garden located some five miles out of Lafayette, Louisiana, just off the present new Highway 10 as it passes Lafayette. Of course, I found that it was then, as now, enclosed in a netting wire fence that to me looked twelve feet tall, with the gates all locked; but I just had to see Mary again, and having been brought up in West Texas and being naturally a friendly type, I took advantage of a strong looking limb reaching from a sturdy inside oak to my side of the fence, and I soon found myself on the inside; and with the trespassing sign completely out of sight giving me a relatively clear conscience, I soon found Mary DeBaillon on her knees caressing a newly emerging camellia graft. If you could have seen her expression of mingled surprise and disbelief as she looked up and saw me, I am sure you would have agreed that we were by that time irrevocably introduced; and the smile that followed, though perhaps grudgingly given, told me that we were also friends forever.

Certainly, this friendship ripened rapidly as I described to her literally fields of red iris interspersed with yellows that I had stumbled upon in the Steen woods near Abbeville during the previous spring. This discovery of mine was somewhat like, except in reverse, the early English explorers who found fabulous fields of diamonds that the Boors of the South African Transvaal had stubbed their toes upon for centuries without ever realizing their value. So Mary DeBaillon was now not only our friend, but our tutor in native iris values as well.

It was thus that "Abbeville Reds" became news and the news begot interest from far and wide—interest that assembled car pools of iris hunters in a way reminiscent of the early California Gold Rush Days but not quite comparable; and the stature of Mary DeBaillon grew as a naturalist.

Of course, this evidence was not needed so far as those who really knew her, and her fifteen-acre garden plot, were concerned. They were the elite among naturalists who had been privileged to work with her and visit her garden—those who could appreciate the many rare specimen plants, shrubs, and trees that were largely indigenous to the Louisiana area and that over the years had been gathered in this show garden. These were the friends and co-workers who could be trusted to respect the privilege of entry.

It should be of interest to recount at least the last of the many trips we made together in the Vermilion Region of the now famous red and yellow native iris species.

Mary came with her regular chauffeur. I have forgotten his name, but I haven't forgotten Adolph, the huge dog, St. Bernard I believe, that was her constant companion on these field trips. At one point Mary was comparing the many obvious hybrid varieties that we had located among these

large reds, when she suddenly asked her chauffeur to bring to her from her car a large pallet where she stretched out on the ground in obviously great pain. Of course, Peggy and I both shared the anxiety that the chauffeur, and even Adolph, clearly showed, but Mary soon recovered and we completed our last iris field trip together with no apparent ill effects to her.

But by this time we, with her many friends, were gradually becoming aware that Mary's iris, or other plant, field trips were numbered, not so much by time and certainly not by any lack of interest on her part. But courageous as she was and regardless of her anxiety to continue the magnificent collection of Louisiana native iris species that she had been collecting over many years, she telephoned to us one day that she would like to see us. We found her in bed and outwardly as cheerful as ever; and as we were preparing to leave after a delightful but anxious visit, she asked us to look in a certain drawer in her bedroom where we found a sack of iris seed; and she went to great pains to explain how they had been carefully selected for what she thought might be her last planting, but she was now asking us to do this planting for her in our own garden.

It was out of this seed collection that the iris, BAYOU SUNSET, and the iris, AURORA BOREALIS, came and it was these two that became the prize winning seedlings at the first and second years shows of the Mary Swords DeBaillon Iris Society that was organized two years later.

Mary was not only a personality of great stamina and courage, but hers was a clear vision and a strong desire for creating as well as collecting beauty as nature made it. To us she revealed a strong and abiding faith in the goodness and mercy as well as the justice of the Creator of all beauty, all truth, and all love.

The Discovery and Gathering of Louisiana Irises

By Lawrence D. Smith

In 1911, a personal search for critical items pertaining to the history of Louisiana irises was made. This was a most interesting and fruitful search for data. The first step was to visit the various places where the irises were known to have been collected. The first place was the Louisiana State University.

The first step was to visit the various places where the irises were known to have been collected. The first place was the Louisiana State University.

The first step was to visit the various places where the irises were known to have been collected. The first place was the Louisiana State University.