

CLARA REES

PEGGY BURKE GREY

AIS conventioners gather this April at the Claremont Hotel in California's Oakland-Berkeley hills in a return to the place where iris history was made exactly 39 years ago. Here, at a meeting of northern and southern California irisarians in 1939, SNOW FLURRY made her debut into iris society as a cut flower. SNOW FLURRY was the first introduction of Miss Clara B. Rees, and since that day the two have made more friends for irisdom than almost any other iris.

Clara Rees came from Ohio to San Jose, California, with her mother and younger sister Ruth in the fall of 1924, moving the following spring to the now-famous house and garden at 1059 Bird Avenue. Although she recalls having grown a yellow iris on the Ohio farm during her girlhood, the tulip was her special flower. Since tulips weren't as well adapted to California's milder winters she turned to irises. Ruth recalls having paid some fantastic prices for new varieties, such as the wild extravagance of \$6.00 for a group including QUAKER LADY, QUEEN OF MAY, CELESTE and SOUVENIR DE MME. GAUDICHAU. When she spent \$18 for a few varieties, including PURISSIMA and SAN FRANCISCO, in the early 1930's, Clara practically accused her of having taken leave of her senses!

The newer irises were planted out in back of the garage where there was lots of good soil and warm sun. It was here that a large clump of the then-new and gorgeous beauty PURISSIMA flourished. At high noon on a bright spring day, as is her hybridizing custom, Clara carried pollen of the lovely pastel orchid-pink THAIS. That summer there were two seeds in a small pod. One was shriveled and she threw it away. The other was plump and appeared to be good; she considered throwing it away too, but finally decided to plant it to see what would happen. What happened was almost unbelievable; the plant bore huge ruffled blue-white flowers on tall, sturdy, well-branched stalks, coming from bountiful blue-green foliage, obviously a tremendous improvement over any variety then in commerce.

"We were strictly from Greenville in those days," says Ruth, who bills herself as Clara's Girl Friday in the garden. Not knowing how in the world to go about introducing an iris, they decided to take the matter to Carl Salbach, one of the country's leading specialists. He lived in Berkeley, then almost an all-day trip by train, ferry-boat and streetcar from San Jose. Individual flowers without stems were carefully put into little boxes for the journey and Ruth set off one Sunday.

The moment Carl Salbach saw the flowers he demanded, "Where did you get that iris?" "In our garden," replied Ruth. "I think it's nice, don't you?" (This must constitute the understatement of all time!) Obviously excited, Salbach called his son Edward to come view this flower and the two made extensive inquiries into its origin and history.

The following day Salbach and his son drove to San Jose and appeared at the Bird Avenue garden to visit with Clara and see the plant of this amazing new creation. They decided at once that they wanted to buy it and introduce it. Ruth was at work, then as courthouse reporter for the *San Jose Mercury*, so Clara brought the Salbachs to the courthouse where they could all discuss a price for the iris. Having scant idea of what arrangements were customary, but knowing the white iris was indeed of consider-



CLARA B. REES CUP WINNERS

1965

HENRY SHAW
C. W. Benson

1966

WINTER OLYMPICS
Opal Brown

1967

FLUTED HAVEN
Serlena Reynolds

able value, Ruth said that the price would be \$200. This was too much, Salbach felt, but he offered \$150 in cash and \$50 worth of irises in trade. Clara could keep one rhizome and they must agree not to distribute any stock for three years following introduction. Thus SNOW FLURRY found its way before the gardening public in the Salbach catalog.

He took away with him a budded cut stalk of SNOW FLURRY, which was kept in cold storage until the following weekend when it was displayed as a fully opened flower at that historic 1939 AIS-member meeting. Ruth remembers that Clara did not attend the meeting, since even then her health was not robust enough for her to make difficult trips. Ruth went and sat across from Dr. Robert Graves, an AIS founder and talented amateur hybridizer. He remarked with great enthusiasm on the perfectly wonderful hybridizing achievement which SNOW FLURRY represented.

Clara Rees actually had produced a number of fine irises before SNOW FLURRY. There was one she called "Funny Boy", a greyish blue, and several others which were excellent irises according to the standards of the day but, because of her limited knowledge of the methods of putting irises into commerce, they were simply sent back to the iris patch to be grown and enjoyed.

By profession Clara was, and still in her mid-80's is, a bookkeeper. In Ohio she kept books for a manufacturer with over 500 accounts and was in the business world for many years, but she gave this up due to eye problems. She then kept house for her mother and Ruth, who was one of central California's noted newspaperwomen and a prominent member of the Penwomen of America. Ruth now heads her own firm of public relations con-

sultants and Clara still keeps her books.

Clara and Ruth inherited their love of gardening from their mother, who was a great gardener. The Rees garden always has been first and foremost a garden where love of beautiful flowers takes precedence and hybridizing is done for fun and personal satisfaction. Some of the later Rees introductions, such as YELLOW ORGANDY, SADDLE TAN, ASTRONAUT and the recent TOUCH OF ELEGANCE, are excellent varieties; but once one has produced the world's most famous breeding iris, which also happens to be tops as a garden variety even today, the achievement scarcely can be topped.

To pay tribute to Clara Rees and SNOW FLURRY irisarians of the world have beaten a well-trodden path to the garden gate at 1059 Bird Avenue, where every spring a great clump of flouncy blue-white flowers smiles a welcome and says quite audibly, "Clara Rees lives here!"

SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY

MRS. J. R. HAMBLÉN

When Clara B. Rees received the *Snow Flurry Achievement Plaque* from Region 14 in 1960, in her note of appreciation she said: "Even my dreams have never projected a picture in which I would receive so great an honor . . . This Plaque will be 'A thing of beauty and a joy forever' and the love and good will of Region 14 is something I value and appreciate just as highly." In some degree these words project the image of the woman who, with her humble and genteel spirit, possesses a magnetism that reaches out in love and understanding to all who would know her. Her contributions to the iris world are equaled only by her generous love of people and her ability to give of herself.

At the golden age of 88 years, with sparkling brown eyes and a halo of silvered hair, she continues to follow the rainbow's trail and the mellow glow of her charms is reflected in her face which has been molded by a beautiful life. At 88 she is still hybridizer, housekeeper, bookkeeper. Her two recent introductions, ANGEL BRIGHT and LIGHT AND LOVELY (with others planned for release when stock permits), the meticulous home, the perfectly balanced books she keeps for her sister, Ruth, are significant of the full life she leads.

On the Ohio farm where she was raised, even as a child Clara's greatest delight was in roaming the verdant fields and tree-clad hills. Undoubtedly the wild roses and black-eyed Susans she loved then sparked her interest in all plants—an interest that flourished as she helped her mother care for the Ohio garden which was filled with any number of things: vegetables, peonies, tulips, amaryllis and one clump of brown and yellow irises! It was here that Clara's hybridizing began, with amaryllis—a work she carries on to this day. However, although Ruth maintains that many of the amaryllis seedlings have surpassed by far the varieties they have purchased, none have been introduced. This is strictly a fun project.

It was after the father died that Clara, with her mother and Ruth, moved to San Jose for the practical purpose of being near another sister, Mrs. Bert E. Loehr. But those who believe in Destiny will probably read a mystic

meaning into the move that brought Clara B. Rees to California where the genial climate lends itself so well to the efforts of those who would pursue the creation of beauty by pollen dabbing. Be that as it may, when the Bird avenue property was purchased in 1925, Clara and Ruth promptly began to stock it with irises. By 1928 they had 50 named varieties and in 1930 they hushed their conscience and paid \$18.00 for SAN FRANCISCO, FRIEDA MOHR, and PURISSIMA. Other plants were not neglected, and soon the Rees garden became a treasure trove of beauty as well as a mecca for the iris-minded.

With the blooming of MESOPOTAMICA in 1928, Clara's first crosses were made. Each year since then she has raised from 600 to 1,000 seedlings, of which 18 have been introduced. They have enriched and will continue to enrich our gardens but Clara's world-wide fame has been achieved through her first introduction—SNOW FLURRY.

No other iris has received such instant and long lasting recognition. Its 1939 debut was well covered in the local newspaper by G. W. McMurry who headlined his story in one-half inch letters: "San Jose Woman Amazes Iris World With New Bloom." Mr. McMurry devoted several columns to a detailed account of the mechanics, romantics, and dynamics of irises and hybridizing in general—and of SNOW FLURRY in particular. We are indebted to him for the following: "Carl Salbach thought so much of SNOW FLURRY that when he bought the plant from Miss Rees, he put the blossoms in cold storage so they'd keep for the amazement of members of The American Iris Society, which held its first West Coast meeting in Oakland on May 6. Members from as far as New Hampshire and South Carolina attended the meeting. When Mr. Salbach brought the new bloom into the room, there were gasps . . . and already a number of the rhizomes have been ordered by iris fanciers from all over the nation."

Marion Shull, hybridizer and charter member of AIS, but better known to many of us through the pages of his immortal book, *Rainbow Fragments*, was among those attending the Oakland convention. His approval of SNOW FLURRY might well be considered the apogee of praise: "The finest new Iris I saw on the West Coast . . . Tall, well-branched, handsomely ruffled, with large flowers and flaring falls."

SNOW FLURRY's breeding potential was immediately recognized by Orville Fay who bought it, in 1940, on the strength of its pedigree alone. His were the first of the SNOW FLURRY progeny to win awards. Both DESERET SONG and NEW SNOW received their HM in 1946, and along with TRANQUILITY and CLIFFS OF DOVER went on to international fame and AM status . . . ad infinitum. Orville's accomplishments with SNOW FLURRY pollen are paralleled by his sincere praise of this iris which, for many years, has been placed at the top of the list of all irises for breeding .

The years between Marion Shull's varietal comment concerning SNOW FLURRY's beauty and Orville Fay's evaluation of its parental abilities are recorded in national and regional iris publications. Their opinions have been endorsed by descriptive phrase and pedigree—a wealth of material—summarized by Region 14's appreciative and witty Ralph Geyer: "A fine ruffled blue-white that has been a sensation since introduction and is consistently chosen 'Mother of the Year' by hybridizers."

That Clara was not unmindful of SNOW FLURRY's potential is borne out

in a statement she made to the press in 1939: "She proved to be a good seed parent last year, even if she doesn't have pollen. It is my hope that, in the hands of skilled hybridizers, she will become the parent of a new strain of giant ruffled irises." In this flash-back we see Clara as a true creator: **Maybe someone else will find it if I don't.**

And between the lines we see something of her faculty for imagination, and something too, of her inherent modesty. Well remembered is the night I spent in her home, not too long since, when she brushed aside congratulatory remarks and entertained me with her latest Scrapbook. An annual project, representative of the scope of her varied interests: clippings of iris activities; items from the Wadsworth, Ohio Weekly, which are clips, mostly, concerning the children and grandchildren of her old friends there; local and national events of importance; an occasional poem or newspaper column that has caught her fancy. This particular scrapbook had as its first entry a colorful picture of an adorable kitten . . . and on the last page—a snarling old cat!

Foremost among the honors that Clara has received over the years is the great tribute bestowed upon her in 1957 when an active group of San Jose irisarians organized the **Clara B. Rees Iris Society**; and in 1959, in recognition of her legacy to the iris world, the theme of their first show was: "Iris-tocrats of the Garden." Mention has been made of the Plaque that Region 14 presented to its famous member in 1960. The following spring, Tell Muhlestein, valued friend of many years, dedicated his catalog to Clara with the tender metaphor: "Patron Saint of the Clara B. Rees Iris Society."

At the Board of Director's spring meeting, 1964, it was voted to activate the **Clara B. Rees Perpetual Trophy**, to be awarded annually to the best white iris as determined by AIS judges. Recently the Board awarded the **Hybridizer's Medal** to Miss Rees.

One of Clara's most treasured memories is the accolade delivered at the Regional convention banquet in 1964 by her great and wonderful friend, the late Harry J. Randall: "This is an important iris occasion in the city of San Jose, and it is fitting and appropriate, I think, that a tribute should be paid to a much revered resident of the City, who is also one of the grand personages in the iris world . . . Clara Rees, I convey to you greetings from all of your friends, many of whom are unknown to you: I congratulate you on your achievements: I thank you for the pleasure you have given to so many gardeners everywhere: and I wish you good health and happy contentment for the rest of your days."

Mr. Randall's words eloquently express the sentiments of Clara's friends throughout the world. It is neither possible to add to them—nor to realize the influence that Clara B. Rees and her irises will have on our future.

AIS PINS

To be sold for the Scientific Research Fund. Either safety-catch or lapel type. \$2.50 each. Order from:

Clifford Benson, Secretary
2315 Tower Grove Blvd.

American Iris Society
St. Louis, Mo. 63110