

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 17, 2017

Wholesale Rose Growers in Kennett Square: For a long time Kennett Square has advertised itself as the Mushroom Capital of the World, and although the Mushroom Growers Association had its offices in the borough, in the 20th century the Avondale-Hockessin (DE) area was more central to the growing areas. Near Valley Road in Hockessin alone, first generation Italian-American growers named Camoirano, Accorsi, Buonmici, Sannini, Iaconi, and Orsini flourished. Clarence J. Yeatman & Sons was a major operation northwest of Avondale. Kennett Square, on the other hand, was a wholesale growing area for flowers, mostly roses. Many of these growers exhibited annually at the famous Philadelphia Flower Show and brought home top prizes.

In addition to the several large growers in Kennett, the Conard-Pyle Company, trading under the name "Star Roses," developed species well known around the world. Its home office was near West Grove with satellite operations in the Jennersville area. I knew Robert Pyle during the last year of his life (1951-52) and had many friendly business relations with his successor, Sidney B. Hutton. Mr. Hutton told me we had two Van Fleet rose bushes on our arbor at Auburn Heights, very popular in Victorian times.

One of the largest rose growers was J. Howard Thompson and Sons, whose greenhouses were next to their family homes between Kennett and Toughkenamon. Theodore and Howard (Jr.) were the sons, and Theodore's son Bob, who had served in the Ski Troops during World War II, ran the business with his brother-in-law in more recent years. Closely following in size and importance was Pennock J. Yeatman and Sons, which operated houses on Birch Street on the southeast side of Kennett. The sons were Marshall and Penn Jr., born about 100 years ago.

Frank and Paul Way, second cousins of my father, had major greenhouses on the east side of Kennett. Each owned Stanley steamers, and Paul was also a trapshooter. He died in 1928 at the age of 48 and Frank in 1942 at the age of 64, after which the company became known as P. B. Way and Son. "P. B." was Frank's widow, Phoebe, and the son was Robert Morris Way, born in 1921. Bob Way, who died in 1998, ran the business successfully for 50 years, after which his son Frank took it over. Frank is now retired.

Other local growers of note were Meadowcroft and Arden, Rayne and Darling, the Murphy brothers (Elmer and Richard), Evans R. Jackson, and Donald S. Pratt. Meadowcroft was an Englishman, and his partner, Tom Arden, worked at the National Bank and Trust Company in the 1930s. Arden and his wife were known for long motor trips on their free vacation days, often making 6,000 miles in 10 days before the advent of super highways. Howard "Skinny" Rayne and A. Bennett "Ben" Darling had married Farquhar sisters (whose father was an executive of Longwood Gardens), and I think Rayne was Stan Wilcox's grandfather. Stan has been a longtime Board member of F.A.H.P.

Elmer Murphy's son learned to ride our high-wheel bicycle, and my father lent it to him to ride in the Centennial parade in Kennett in 1955. Elmer's brother Dick was the chief score keeper at the Yorklyn trapshooting tournaments through the 1930s and '40s and would solicit more scorekeepers for us from the Kennett community, most of whom were teachers who were available in August. Dick's wife, Elizabeth Fogg Murphy, was my mentor at the Kennett bank during the summer of 1942. Evans Jackson had greenhouses behind his home on Route 82 opposite Locust Lane, and Pratt, who specialized in carnations, was located near New Garden.

Since the sale of flowers has always been a luxury business, the success of the Kennett growers was largely dependent on the economy. During the Depression of the 1930s, many of them had trouble holding on and retaining their properties. With the prosperous years following World War II, however, business was good, and the industry did very well.

There were two local retail florists in Kennett who come to mind. The first was William Swayne, Florist, whose shop and greenhouse was in the borough east of South Broad Street. Swayne was best known for his invention of mushroom spawn in 1895, and his sons, Bancroft and Lawrence Swayne, carried on this very profitable business. William Swayne lived to be nearly 100 and spent his last years at the Friends Home in Kennett. When he was about 97 in 1946, my father gave him a ride in his 1901 Toledo Jr. Steam Car. Swayne's florist business was capably operated by Roland Barber, who eventually had his name identified with the operation. Many years later, Barber, too, spent his last years at the Friends Home. James B. D. Edge Jr., the son of a DuPont Company executive who had emigrated from England, opened the House of Flowers on Route 1 near Longwood Gardens. This business was successful for many years, operated by Scott McMurtrie, who had a deep baritone singing voice.

To my knowledge, Barber's Flower Shop is still in operation, the old Way greenhouses also remain in use, and a former employee now owns Pratt's. With the possible exception of Thompsons', the others are operations of the past.