

A Visit to Sequoia

by Jim Delahanty (jjzdelahanty@earthlink.net)

Sequoia Nursery, home to Ralph Moore miniatures and other plants, is not hard to find. Framed beneath towering trees, it sits on a road parallel to Hwy 198 up in Tulare County in the town of Visalia. When we hit the entrance on a warm half hazy day in April, the first scent to assail the senses was the unmistakable odor of citrus in full and lavish bloom. Three of us came to visit Mr. Moore and the greenhouses and the products of his life. One thing should be clear at the outset: even those privileged enough to refer to the hybridizer as 'Ralph' in the interchange of conversation, tend to refer to him as 'Mr. Moore' in third party conversations. This is not to denote distance, but rather that peculiarly American combination of both respect and affection united in the almost un-American formality.

Sequoia occupies about six acres with about ten greenhouses and plantings of things including a stand of lilacs toward the back and a lifetime of achievements spread here and there in the form of old and new creations. Kim Rupert and I wandered around the nursery while we waited for Alice Flores to show up on her drive down from San Jose. Kim is a plantsman who has hybridized dozens of roses including 'Nessie,' 'Purple Buttons,' and 'Too Cute;' Alice is the owner of White Rabbit Roses, currently in hiatus. (Astute rosarians will conclude that I was out of my depth in this triad; they will be right.)

Mr. Moore came to greet us sometime around ten thirty and we spent the next nine hours or so listening, learning, and socializing. Layered with sweaters and clothed for comfort, Mr. Moore retains the curious contradiction of an imposing physical presence in his mid-nineties and a gentleness of spirit that puts the lie to age and contrariety. Toward the shank of the afternoon, while she completed the transaction for 'Doc,' 'Splish-Splash,' and 'Iced Tea,' Carolyn Supinger, the generalissima of the operations of Sequoia, asked me if I had enjoyed my visit to Mr. Moore. I replied that it was the equivalent of reading two books. Ideas and visions simply overflow in his company whether the topic is the three great sights of the world he wanted to see but never did: The Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China, and the Pyramids of Egypt, or the three bud eyes of a piece of *r. chinensis viridiflora*, one of which bloomed regularly, another of which bloomed with great bronze leaves in the flower and the third, in which the flowers reverted to some pink ancestor.

At this point in his life Mr. Moore, (born 1907) is now convinced that the great numbers of species roses and their variations were necessary because no single rose could contain all the secrets to be learned from studying and working with the rose. Certainly he had unearthed secrets from the mosses culminating in his 'Crested Jewel,' and the bracteatas, domesticated in the yields of 'Precious Dreams,' 'Star Dust,' and 'Tangerine Jewel,' last year's introductions. However, he opined that there were tremendous potentialities in crossing the semi-forgotten polyanthas with some more modern introductions and yielding new crops of vigorous and floriferous roses.

About two or so, we broke for lunch at Ryan's Restaurant, a block and a half from the nursery where Mr. Moore is a regular and greeted by name upon his entrance. The restaurant seemed to be little more than the regular small town restaurant that you might encounter in a hundred towns in a hundred venues. Except that I noticed on the menu: *linguica*, a highly seasoned Portuguese pork sausage with garlic, onions and peppers. And there on the menu was Portuguese beans-a mixture of beans, slow cooked with *linguica*, garlic, onions, tomato paste, and sweet paprika. . Mr. Moore restricted himself to the senior menu of sensible choices.

And then it was back to the nursery to visit some of the potentialities for next year:

- A 'dahlia' rose. The petals are shaped like those of a dahlia coming to a small point atop a curved edging. From the center out a purple/cerise strain eventually yields to a bonewhite tip; on the reverse the white prevails. This rose is so striking that my memory of the plant itself is blotted out. The parents of this rose are a 1969 miniature, Fairy Moss with medium pink flowers X Old Master, a 1974 McGredy floribunda with crimson flowers and a white eye and reverse. Fairy Moss is a cross involving a 1940 Floribunda named Pinocchio with salmon colored blooms, an old 1855 Moss rose, William Lobb, with crimson purple blooms and New Penny, a 1962 miniature with orange-red blossoms. The forebears of Old Master include three floribundas from the fifties, sixties and seventies as well as a Hybrid Spinosissima from the forties. The mere transcription of the ancestry of this rose tires me out much less its conceptualization and execution.
- A cross between two stalwarts of the Moore breeding roses: Orange Crest and CO.1: This rose produces single blooms on long stems. The bloom color is that odd salmon orange red that characterizes many of Mr. Moore's hybrids. What is so different here is the incredible sepals cresting up in bud and lowering in bloom like the plumage of some wild Aztec bird. The foliage is a mid green on a mid-sized plant.
- A swirl of burgundy/cerise with white alternates of significant bloom size and recognizably rugosa shape and scent. The bushes were fairly vigorous and large with the darkest green foliage of substance promising resistance to powdery mildew and the like.

It would be impossible to predict how these plants would do on the commercial market of today, even for someone with seventy years in the business. Aficionados of the rare and the unusual would be unable to resist, but the world of disposable roses treated as annuals is a new and developing universe. A recurring question on Mr. Moore's lips was an inquiry regarding the potential success of this or that rose. However, it would be impossible for Mr. Moore not to have visions of roses not yet dreamed and to fail to act upon them. He seems to embody the bygone Biblical injunctions of both obligation and action: Don't just stand there. Do something. Do something good.

We left Mr. Moore about 7: 30 in the evening as he started to attend to other tasks delayed by our visit—the reading of mail, the attending to correspondence, the genesis of new visions. Jack Harkness, in his 'The Makers of Heavenly Roses,' notes that the lifetime goals of Mr. Moore were to marry the right woman, to be of good Christian faith, and to make a good career—all merged in the desire to 'do something worth while.' (Page 132) No doubt those goals would be discounted in a postmodern analysis as insufficiently ambitious or even retrograde; but for a person forged in an agrarian cosmos of the flamboyant twenties and distressed thirties, they must seem evergreen and ever new.