

HOLLY FARM TOUR – text by Daniel G. Fenton, Jr.

CLARENCE R. WOLF

One day in December in the early 1930s, Clarence Wolf looked out his office window and saw a man driving a pick-up truck loaded with beautiful holly boughs. He ran out to ask the man where he found the holly. The man confessed that he got the holly on Mr. Wolf's sand plant owned land and didn't mean any harm. The man showed Mr. Wolf where he had found the holly and Mr. Wolf sent out a crew to cut some boughs to send out to his customers. That Christmas gift of holly boughs was a huge hit and Mr. Wolf got requests for additional boxes the following year. The whole concept of the holly orchard started in the spring of 1939 due to a late frost which killed the blossoms. Without blossoms, there is no fruit. Mr. Wolf sent out boxes of berryless holly boughs and other evergreens that year. He vowed to make every effort to prevent that from happening again and work began to plant an orchard with the best looking trees found in the wild.

Mr. Wolf soon realized that he needed help to run the orchard and the NJ Silica Sand Company. That's when Mr. Wolf hired my father, Dan Fenton, a Millville High School Agriculture and Science teacher. In 1949 Dad and a crew from the sand plant, were tasked with further planting and maintenance of the orchard. The orchard was planted on a 40 acre parcel of a 55 acre tract of land. They scoured the nearby woods to find the best specimens of wild holly and began to dig them up and plant them in rows on the 40 acre tract. A two story house (the Holly House) was built as a museum and welcome center for visitors. The basement was set up for meetings with long foldable tables. The house was surrounded by hollies. That is how it all started.

Mr. Wolf had seen "wind machines" in the Florida orange groves, used to prevent frost damage and purchased three of these "wind machines". These units were two diesel engines with two fixed airplane propellers, mounted on 40' rotating towers which mixed the warmer upper air with the colder ground air. Greenhouses were built to propagate the holly to produce new trees. In the summer we would root cuttings of the most desirable trees. Rooting a vegetative cutting is the only way to ensure that the genetic characteristics of the original plant are preserved. Fourteen distinct varieties were selected by my father and named after places in the area and in honor of noteworthy individuals. Dad published two books on holly propagation techniques.

HOLLY FACTS

Holly trees are dioecious plants, meaning that the sexes are borne on separate trees. Male or "pollinators" have 10 times more blossoms than females. Only female trees bear fruit. Some of the named varieties are: Menantico; Maurice River; Cumberland; Red Velvet; Lady Alice (the Wolf's daughter); David (a pollinator named after the Wolf's son); Eleanor (in honor of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt); Mamie (in honor of First Lady Mamie Eisenhower). In the mid 50's, another part of the 55 acre tract was planted with these varieties. The varieties named after the first ladies along with other named varieties were donated to the White House and continue to adorn the White House lawn today.

Millville, NJ was officially named "The Holly City of America" in 1951. The holly legacy continues to this day.

GROWING UP WITH HOLLY

I grew up on the Holly Farm and I have many fond memories of Mr. & Mrs. Wolf and my Dad. Mr. Wolf's son, Franklin lived next door to us and we played with his children, Margret Mary and Kay. John Wolf, Mr. Wolf's youngest son, was like an uncle to us. I'd like to share some of my experiences growing up here. I remember going out to the orchard on weekends as a small boy fighting frost with the crew in the early hours before dawn. Oil burning "Salamander" heaters were placed throughout the orchard in April to warm up the air, when the holly blossoms were forming. Dawn is the coldest part of the day and it was an intense battle to keep the smudge pots or "Salamanders" burning. Our worst "perfect storm" was a clear night with a full moon! At daybreak we would all gather together, drink hot chocolate and walk through the orchard to assess the damage.

The "farm" was in fact an orchard and our "fruit" was the holly berry. Like any orchard operation, in the spring you need to disc with a tractor and hoe around the trees to get rid of the weeds and the vines. My summer job was pulling out the vines and working the hoe. Fertilizer was applied to each tree by the handful. Grass seed (winter rye) was planted between the rows so that you could walk there without getting all muddy. Bee hives were placed around the orchard to ensure adequate pollination and we harvested the honey. The honey from holly blossoms is a dark, rich tasting honey we dubbed "Holly Honey".

DECK THE HALLS

By the time October came around, we had a constant battle keeping the birds from eating the berries. We had several carbide cannons and firecracker strings placed all throughout the orchard. We would even walk the rows shouting and shooting 12 gauge shotguns loaded with blanks. The birds, mainly robins, were unstoppable, but we did our best to limit the damage. The birds had a distinct varietal preference for certain fruit and you could see them "zero in" on certain trees...it was very interesting!

In late November and December, dozens of bus tours would come to Millville "The Holly City", to tour America's largest *Ilex opaca* holly orchard and the "Holly House" which was a mini museum dedicated to Holly. All the furniture in the Holly House was made from holly wood, a white hardwood. Everything, including chairs a functional desk and beds, were made of holly wood. There was a large open room on the first floor, where the holly museum was located. The museum housed an extensive collection of Haviland Limoges and Wedgewood fine holly motif china dinner plates, tea services, oyster server plates, etc. Visitors donated holly related artifacts to the museum and over the years, the collection grew. The Holly Farm never charged for the tours. There was a small gift shop in the museum where holly related articles and small holly plants were sold. Jars of delicious holly honey were also available to purchase. Dad's favorite artifact was a carving of the Lord's Prayer made entirely from holly wood and said to be over 200 years old. My Mother and my sister Kathy were always a big part of the whole "Holly" phenomenon. Mom ran the gift shop and was an active participant in the Holly Society of America to the end.

December was like Santa's workshop, when once a year all the effort resulted in the annual holly harvest. We harvested and boxed the holly in fancy red & white striped waxed paper and sent the gift boxes all over the country.

A NEW BEGINNING

Mr. Wolf lost his daughter Alice and his son David many years ago. Clarence R. Wolf passed away on May 7, 1966, five days after his son, Franklin died of a heart attack on May 2, 1966. Soon after his death, the NJ Silica Sand Company was sold to Warner Concrete. Warner Concrete had no need for the Holly Farm and decided to sell the land and the orchard. Our father, along with a group of local businessmen, bought the Holly Farm and created a company called American Holly Products, Inc. We propagated various types of holly and sold containerized plants and cut holly to garden centers. Then disaster struck in on February 10th 1983 when a heavy wet snow lasting for two days, blanketed the farm with 18" of snow, crushing our quonset huts where the hollies were protected from the elements during the winter months, destroying all the saleable plants! That winter was the end of American Holly Products and the farm was sold to Atlantic Electric Company to be used as a meeting and convention center.

A FITTING TRIBUTE

Many years later, Dr. Elwin Orton of Rutgers University, having done many experiments in cross-pollination intraspecific hybridizing, developed an American holly with a noticeably darker, glossier leaf and a vibrant red berry. He named it *Ilex opaca* "Dan Fenton", dedicated to our father. Dr. Orton also gifted a specimen that today is growing in our yard today and is about 30' tall. Dad was deeply moved and honored by Dr. Orton's unexpected gesture! Dad passed away in October a year later.

SHARING A MEMORY

I lived and worked on the farm for about a year during that period. I remember listening to the whip-or-will calls and hearing the mournful wail of a barn owl and the hooting of the great horned owls in the middle of the night. We were also treated to the spring peeper tree frog chorus and the sound of the occasional drumming of a ruffed grouse in the distance. I used to brew tea from the wild chamomile that grew in the sandy soil, right outside of the back door to the Holly House. I have many fond memories of the Holly Farm and our family is very grateful to know that the land will be stewarded in a manner which would have pleased the founders.