

# The Louisiana Iris Conservation Society

## *A Missing Chapter in Our History*

By Patrick O'Connor\*

The discovery of Louisiana irises is a familiar story. At least it is an accessible one, with many individual pieces having been recounted in Society publications over the years.

It is not a dry tale either. The accounts of the early days when iris enthusiasts tromped through swamps and bogs in search of different colors, novel forms and, many thought, new species, often captured the imagination of those new to Louisiana irises. The stories of the early collectors and their finds were infectious, and for many they contributed as much to building interest in Louisianas as growing the plants themselves.

The elements of Louisiana iris history were nicely and thoroughly assembled by Richard Goula in his contribution to SLI's book on Louisiana irises, although only in the first edition was Dick credited with his work.<sup>1</sup> Tom Dillard's article in the old *SLI Newsletter* also was an excellent account,<sup>2</sup> and the Society's Special Publications often have been windows into the early years. In addition, the occasional reproduction of older articles in the *Fleur de Lis* has kept our history front and center.

The cast of characters is well known – John K. Small, Mary Swords Debaillon, W. B. MacMillan, Ira S. Nelson, Caroline Dormon, Percy Viosca, and many, many others.



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Over the years, SLI has assembled an impressive amount of information on our luminaries and their contributions.

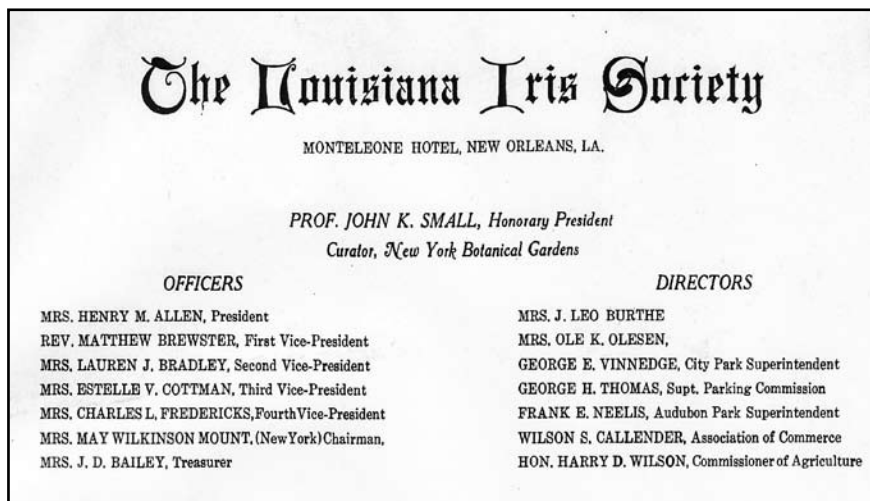
**Missing Link.** There is a gap in the story, however. Few people are aware that there was an organization – the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society, first named simply the Louisiana Iris Society – that predated SLI. Keep in mind that our current Society for Louisiana Irises was founded in 1941, but the heavy lifting of modern discovery of these irises began in the mid-1920s when Dr. John K. Small, Cu-

rator of the New York Botanical Garden, reportedly traveling by train from Florida, spotted fields of irises in what is now developed, urban New Orleans.

In fact, individuals in Louisiana had already discovered the irises when Small's train rolled through. The renowned naturalist, conservationist

and artist Caroline Dormon reported that she first came to appreciate the plants in 1920 on a visit to a friend in Morgan City where the tall blues abound.<sup>3</sup> In 1921, Percy Viosca, a “pre-eminent herpetologist” began a career with the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries in which he “documented the coastal landscape” as he traveled doing work that “included mosquito control, riparian and marshland studies, flood control, taxonomic work with native Louisiana irises, newts and snakes, culture of crawfish, and environmental impact of oil refinery practices.”<sup>4</sup> A *Times-Picayune* article in 1933 cites the J. H. Montreuil Garden on Tonti Street, noting that the garden “has grown irises for 60 years....”<sup>5</sup> There are other examples of early local familiarity with Louisiana's native irises, but Dr. Small is properly credited as the catalyst and driver of their

Above: The first letterhead of the Society showing the original officers and directors. “Conservation” appears to have been added to the title later.



national recognition.

In a nutshell, beginning in 1926 Dr. Small returned to Louisiana each year until around 1932 to study the irises. He collected specimens, named an astounding number of “species,” and publicized the irises with beautiful color plates by artist Mary Eaton in *Addisonia*, the publication of the N.Y. Botanical Garden. Small continued to champion and promote irises well into the 1930s in journal articles and public lectures, and part of this effort was in association with the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society which had formed in New Orleans. It is highly probable, in fact, that Small engineered its creation.

SLI accounts of the early “collecting days” of the 1920s and 1930s prior to its own birth in 1941 emphasize the contribution of Small and others. That era was not only important, it was still a fresh memory when SLI was born. But I have never seen mention in SLI publications of the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society.<sup>6</sup> It is an odd omission since there was at least some overlap in early membership.<sup>7</sup> Even more, the Conservation Society was active throughout much of the 1930s in promoting Louisiana irises to a degree that I doubt has been surpassed in intensity by any organization.

I first learned about the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society through Mark Schexnayder of New Orleans. Mark shared a number of documents he found in the Tulane Library Special Collection. They consisted of several articles from the *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans’ then-daily morning newspaper, and a program and a special bulletin of the Conservation Society associated with a 1939 memorial service for Dr. Small held at Tulane University after his death in 1938.

These documents put the Conservation Society on my radar as something to research, but I never took the next step. Then last year I learned that the *Times-Picayune* archives had been digitized and made available for online searches by topic back to 1837. For forty bucks, one could locate and print 200 pages. I was off.

Amazingly, I found so many “hits” on “irises”, on Dr. Small, and on the Conservation Society, its leaders and activities that I had to spend another forty dollars. I wound up with a thick binder of pages that I arranged by date.

On most of the pages the relevant article was just a couple of paragraphs in length, often a notice of meetings and programs, but many were more substantial. In aggregate, I had in my hands a virtual chronology of the organization, if not an actual history. The level of detail varied, sometimes very high but occasionally revealing considerable information about the activities and personalities involved.

Many of the articles were among general news, but quite a few were contained in the *Times-Picayune*’s weekly gardening column penned by the anonymous “Lady Banksia.” Lady Banksia’s columns were most interesting and remain so today, ranging broadly over many horticultural topics. They often included tidbits on Louisiana irises and activities but occasionally longer, substantive iris topics as well.

There were gaps, of course, and things I still wonder about, particularly the Conservation Society’s eventual demise. Above all, I was astonished that a newspaper would provide so much coverage of an iris organization. What other iris society has generated over 200 articles in a major newspaper over an eight year period? What was going on here?

### The Louisiana Iris Conservation Society

The first reference in the *Times-Picayune* to an iris organization was carried on December 1, 1931. It was in a simple one paragraph meeting notice headed, “Speeches To Be Made At Iris Society Meet.”<sup>8</sup> This appears to have been the organizational meeting of the Society.

It was evident, however, that Dr. Small had previously been at work in the area promoting his two principal themes: that Louisiana offered the widest assortment of irises in the world **and** that they were endangered by development. In an April 1929 editorial in the *Times-Picayune*, entitled “Our Louisiana Irises,” the writer notes that Small had found “our neighborhood of New Orleans the finest region in all the United States for the collection of the wild iris.” And the paper supported his fear that the irises were endangered, noting: “It was only a few years before the World war that the tract of ground now built upon by Newcomb College was abandoned pasture land upon which the wild iris flourished



May Wilkinson Mount

with especial luxuriancy.” The editorial also expressed hope that the many plants that Small transported back to New York to grow in his Botanical Garden would not “lose any of their native charm in new and maybe unsympathetic surroundings.”<sup>9</sup>

### **May Wilkinson Mount,**

#### **“Founder, Executive Secretary and Board Chair”**

May Wilkinson Mount likely will be a new name to those with an active interest in the history of Louisiana irises. Because few surviving documents from the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society have been found, this account is based in large part upon inference from the press coverage and a few letters in the Archive at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

There is no doubt, however, that May Wilkinson Mount was the driving local force behind the organization, at least until 1937. A letter from Mrs. Mount to Mrs. B. S. Nelson of New Orleans after Mrs. Nelson was unable to attend the organizational meeting contains a liberal dose of insight into the Society.<sup>10</sup> In the letter, Mrs. Mount appealed to Mary Nelson to attend the next meeting, to become a member of the Board of Directors, and to accept the position of Recording Secretary. Based on the suggestion of the president Mrs. Henry M. Allen, Mrs. Mount told Mrs. Nelson, “you were one of the first two persons (and your sister was the other) to whom I wrote when I planned the organization.”

Mrs. Mount continues: “We have seventy members in the club and more are promised. But I have not tried to create a membership of numbers, only of people who actually grow irises or those whose influence and cooperation will be of advantage to our cause.” “It does seem so very important for you to be a leader in this club when you are so widely known as a great authority on the subject of iris, and Mrs. Burthe<sup>11</sup> tells me that you have worked among your friends for ten years to get them interested in making this ‘the Iris City.’” And: “The first meeting was intended to awaken interest through good public speakers, and to arouse the interest of the press ....”, but the next, which Mrs. Mount appealed to Mrs. Nelson to attend, will “turn to a discussion of how best to further the plans of iris lovers of New Orleans; how to cooperate with the City Beautification committee”; and how to handle a January meeting with “scientific horticulturists from the North – when Professor Small writes he probably will be joining us....”

Mrs. Mount appeared to run an organization under a model in which presidents, if not ceremonial, were individuals prominent in the community in some capacity but who were supported by a prestigious board, generous patrons and dedicated individuals doing the work of the

Society. If one reads in the newspaper coverage of who attended meetings, who was elected officers, and who headed up committees, it is clear that the Society had reached out and brought in many individuals active in other capacities, in key organizations, in local offices, in state agencies. John K. Small even held a position of sorts, “Honorary President-General.”

Finally, ending any reasonable doubt about who was in charge, the official headquarters of the Society and the site of all the meetings and activities was the Monteleone Hotel, where Mrs. Mount lived.

Two articles in the *Times-Picayune* especially elevated an understanding of club dynamics. The first was a report in October 1934 of the presentation of a loving cup by the New Orleans Horticultural Society to Lady Banksia in appreciation for her service in writing garden articles in the *Times-Picayune*. Here it was revealed that Lady Banksia was May Wilkinson Mount. The founder of the Society was also the garden editor of the newspaper.<sup>12</sup>

The second article that brought the Conservation Society into sharper focus was Mrs. Mount’s obituary in 1943. It speaks for itself:

“Member of a prominent Louisiana family, Mrs. Mount early in life moved to New York City from her plantation home in Plaquemines parish with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Biddle Wilkinson, and became engaged in newspaper work there.

“Assuming a post with the *New York World*, she remained with the newspaper about 15 years, in the interval becoming one of the first women syndicate writers in the nation. There she married P. W. Mount, New York newspaperman who later was connected with *The New Orleans States*.

“While with the *World*, Mrs. Mount gained distinction as an interviewer, forming many close friendships with celebrities of the day that persisted into later life....

“Returning to New Orleans at the death of her husband over 10 years ago, Mrs. Mount became active as a garden writer here. She evinced particular interest in the Louisiana iris, and gained wide recognition in her efforts to popularize the flower throughout the country.”<sup>13</sup>

At this point, I did not have to be slapped hard to dredge up an hypothesis: May Wilkinson Mount knew Dr. John K. Small, Curator of the New York Botanical Garden, while living in New York, and after her move back to Louisiana, the two worked together to create and direct the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society.

I actually already had in my hands confirmation that Wilkinson and Small were acquainted in New York. One of the documents given me by Mark Schexnayder -- but not fully digested or appreciated until well after reading the Mount obituary -- was a special Society bulletin at the time of the memorial service for Dr. Small in 1939. In reviewing the purpose of the Society, the document says: "...Dr. Small, who knew Mrs. Mount, writer and lecturer in New York, told her that the most beautiful species of

iris in Louisiana were being destroyed by natural city expansion around New Orleans. He interested her in saving what were left, placing them in a safe place and preserving them for the benefit of future generations."<sup>14</sup>

If one wanted bring to bear the optimal resources to build an iris organization at the time, it would be hard to top Dr. John K. Small and a friend and accomplished journalist placed as garden editor of New Orleans' major daily newspaper, who, by the way, had a knack for befriending celebrities. So, what did the Small-Mount combination wrought?

#### **Projects of the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society**

The Louisiana Iris Conservation Society could not be accused of failure due to aiming too low. Undoubtedly, many of their activities were of a kind with those of any

## **The Dedication of the Pearl Rivers Rainbow Memorial**

The dedication of the Pearl Rivers Rainbow Memorial was no haphazard occurrence. New Orleans Mayor T. Semmes Walmsley had declared the date (April 20) as "Louisiana Iris Day" in perpetuity. A platform was constructed in City Park to accommodate speakers and honored guests.

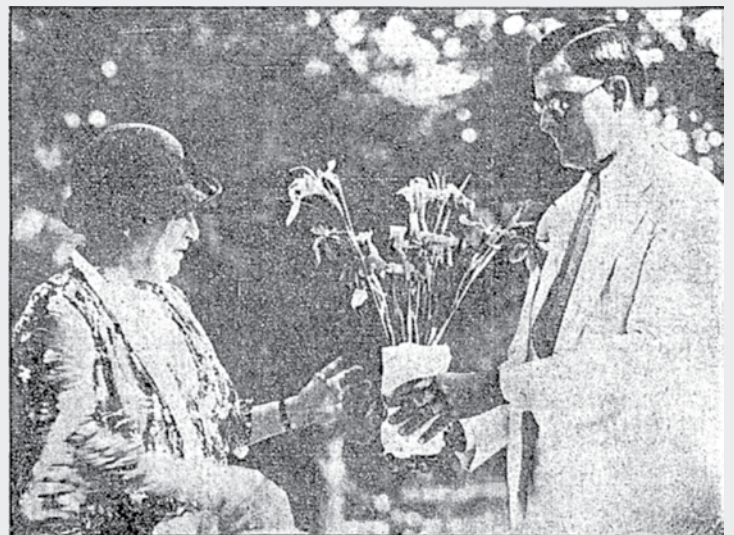
Poems by the honoree Eliza Poitevent Nicholson, who wrote under the name Pearl Rivers, were read. Mrs. Nicholson had served as publisher of *The Picayune*, a predecessor of the *Times Picayune* and was described as a "pioneer in the field of woman journalism." The first woman publisher of a major metropolitan paper, she "took a bankrupt daily and so built it up that at the time of her death it was the most influential paper in the South." A "great mind of the Old South", one speaker said.

Percy Viosca served as Master of Ceremonies and the benediction was given by the Rev. Matthew Brewster, Rector of St. Andrews Episcopal Church and First Vice President of the Iris Society. Music was furnished by the Alcee Fortier Boys High School band, by Milwaukee tenor K. F. Johnson who sang Joyce Kilmer's "The Tree", and by the Choral Union of the Women's Auxiliary, American Legion Post 114.

According to the *Times Picayune*, "The scene of the dedication ceremonies Wednesday was one of picturesque beauty. Sunshine slanted through branches of giant oak trees upon the heads of the honor guests who were seated on a platform, and on the hundreds of persons who sat out under the trees."

In a special section, roped off by lavender ribbon, sat a "Guard of Honor," sixteen "young girls of New Orleans" with the first name "Iris." They were: Iris Jordan, Iris Hoffman, Iris O'Dowd, Iris Luteman, Iris Ball, Iris Boutillier, Iris Rebenne, Iris Daussee, Iris Frisch, Iris Savarese, Iris Rose, Iris Heffner, Iris Stokeses, Iris Riggs, Iris Garr, and Iris Lourdes.

At the end of the ceremonies, "the crowd dispersed in groups to visit the park lagoon which the irises border." The Rainbow Memorial itself was the gift of irises which the Iris Society had placed around the lagoon over several years in preparing to honor Pearl Rivers.



Master of Ceremonies Percy Viosca, Jr. presenting a vase of irises to Mrs. Elizabeth M. Gilmer, a friend of Pearl Rivers and a writer for *The Picayune* who became nationally famous under her pen name of Dorothy Dix.

iris organization. Annual sales, for example. Seminars on culture and garden design. Garden tours. Iris plantings as part of beautification projects. But the tone, tenor and scale of the Society's projects were often unique, and there were a few activities that would seem alien to today's iris societies, although understandable in the Great Depression; specifically, the sponsorship of a "sorority dance" to raise funds to aid unemployed individuals who had applied to the American Legion for assistance. Or securing unused City Park property on which the unemployed could plant and grow out irises they had collected in order to sell them for some income later.<sup>15</sup>

**The Rainbow Memorials.** Beautification projects were one of two major thrusts of the Society, and they took two forms. The first was a series of "Rainbow Memorials" to commemorate famous Louisiana poets, musicians and artists. At least three of four planned Rainbow Memorials were created. Each consisted of a large-to-massive number of irises planted in public gardens or other public locations, designed both to beautify and to conserve the irises by removing them from the path of development. Lady Banksia reported in February 1932 that the "Louisiana Iris Society has held innumerable small iris hunts which brought in thousands of iris" in preparation for the initial Rainbow Memorial.<sup>16</sup>

The first, most elaborate and well-publicized Rainbow Memorial was for Eliza Poitevent Nicholson, a poet who wrote under the name Pearl Rivers (see sidebar). Mrs. Nicholson also had been a prominent newspaper woman in New Orleans. Based upon the comments of her many admirers, the choice of Pearl Rivers undoubtedly was highly deserved, and it was also a master stroke of public relations, linking the Iris Society further with the city's morning newspaper. And, the dedication, it seems, was a grand event.

The second Rainbow Memorial was in Audubon Park and dedicated to another Louisiana poet, Mary Ashley Townsend "author of 'Down The Bayou' and other poems of Louisiana."<sup>17</sup> Townsend, who wrote under the name "Xariffa" had been suggested for a Rainbow Memorial by the Association of Commerce. The Townsend Memorial featured blue and white irises.

Tulane University was asked to nominate additional individuals as recipients of Rainbow Memorials, and it chose Dr. Giuseppe Ferrata, former professor piano and composition at Newcomb College. At the time of the announcement by Dr. William Penfound, Chairman of the Tulane Botany Department, plantings for his Memorial had already begun along Bayou St. John near the Dumaine Street Bridge.<sup>18</sup>

**The John K. Small State Iris Study Field.** The other major public beautification project, a particularly ambitious one in Audubon Park, was the John K. Small State Iris Study Field. The concept was to grow native irises from each of Louisiana's 64 parishes in proximity for study and comparison. Lady Banksia reported that, "The Louisiana Iris Conservation Society has sent out an appeal to all the parishes to represent their types of irises" in the Study Field. The project had the support of Frank Neelis, Superintendent of Audubon Park and who also was a director of the Iris Society. The Iris Field added to the many irises in the Park "around the Mary Ashley Townsend Memorial . . . where Dr. Small set out the first plants."<sup>19</sup> Considerable progress was made on the Study Field with contributions from local people in at least 19 parishes.

**The School Plantings and Iris Garden Contests.** Soon after it was organized, the Conservation Society began donating irises to "schools at which officials expressed a willingness to care for them." In one week in April 1932

## *Iris Society Plans to Comb City for Specimens Today*

Plants Will Be Used to Carry Out Scheme of Park Beautification

The Louisiana Iris Society will conduct its first hunt for plants to be used in city beautification when members equipped with boots, spades and trucks assemble at the Monteleone hotel at 12:45 o'clock this afternoon to be conducted by Dr. John K. Small, curator of the New York Botanical Gardens and honorary president of the society, and Percy Viosca, Jr., director of the society, to spots where they expect to find irises.

Red and pink iris will be obtained from one section of the city, after which the party will visit the Gentilly district for the purple and rainbow-hued bloom-bearing plants. Some of the species to be sought are those believed doomed to destruction by city improvements unless replanted in other sections. All of the plants obtained will be used in park beautification. One of the parks, it is announced, has asked for a supply for one of its pools. The question of distribution, however, will be decided after the party returns.

-Times Picayune, January 6, 1932

the Society's "school planting committees" placed irises at 21 public schools.<sup>20</sup> At some point, Frank M. Carroll gave the Conservation Society 3,000 plants to distribute to the schools.<sup>21</sup>

The Society solicited donations of cups to be given as awards and arranged for the judging of school iris gardens. Society awards were given in 1932 and 1933. Beginning in 1934, the awards and judging by the Society continued but were reported as part of a larger school garden judging of which iris gardens were a category. New Orleans seems to have had a robust public school gardening program at the time directed for over twenty years by James M. McArthur, Director of School Gardens and Nature Study. In any case, school iris awards survived as a Society activity into at least the mid-1940s, long after any other signs of other Society activity ceased.

**Order of the Fleur-de-Lis.** According to its 1939 memorial bulletin, "The Order of the Fleur-de-Lis was conferred by the Society on anyone who has performed a signal service for its help and from wholly disinterested motives." It is not known what reward, ceremony or regalia, if any, were associated with the conferring of membership in the Order, but the practice, while hardly a major activity of the Society, was one that enlarges an understanding of the mindset and scope of the organization's rather grandiose vision. The 1939 Small memorial bulletin names past recipients, most all prominent figures in the community, but one was the General Passenger Agent of the Southern Pacific Railroad who had been especially helpful in arranging a train trip for members through iris territory to the famous Jungle Gardens at Avery Island near New Iberia.<sup>22</sup>

**Prospects, Kudos and Disappearance.** From all appearances, the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society was a strong member of the community and a going concern with excellent prospects for the future. At a December 1931 meeting just after its organization, the topic of the program was "Enlarging the Iris Industry." William Callender of the Association of Commerce (and future Society president) declared that "New Orleans is the center for the native iris and that the flower provides a community asset which can be made an attraction of national interest." There was the hint of an outlook that the discovery of irises was akin to the discovery of gold, or that the economic slogan of the area might someday be "Oil, Gas, and Irises." Insofar as sales go, I can report that oil and gas are still in the lead.

The actual good work of the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society did not go unnoticed, however. In 1935, the State Department of Conservation held a reception at the Monteleone Hotel to honor "Patrons and members .... who



**Dr. John Kunkel Small**

have 'rendered signal and unselfish service' to the organization." The spokesperson for the Department cited especially the Society's work "in the planting of irises from many parishes in Audubon Park and educational garden work in public schools."<sup>23</sup> Back to earth and solid accomplishments, well worthy of notice in a history of Louisiana irises.

Judging from press coverage, however, the organization fell off the map in the latter part of 1936. Or, more to the point, it fell out of the newspaper. In all of 1937, the Conservation Society was mentioned in only three issues of the *Times-Picayune*, and in 1938 not at all. What had happened in large part is speculation. In 1939, the Society did come to life again in arranging the memorial service for Dr. Small. The Treasurer's Report in the special bulletin at the time contained a strong hint of what had happened, if not why. In listing the club's receipts, the report offered this preface and qualification: "Omitting the years 1937 - 1938, when Mrs. Mount was absent from the club ...."

For whatever reason, the driving force had been absent from the driver's seat, and activity, or at least the publicity given it, languished. Some of Mrs. Mount's earlier correspondence pointed to a possible health issue. Perhaps it recurred. Or perhaps there was the kind of "falling out" that occurs in organizations. Dr. Small was terminally ill in 1937 and died in January 1938. Possibly that had a bearing. Interestingly, Lady Banksia's *Times-Picayune* gardening columns during the same period also declined radically in number.<sup>24</sup>

But in 1939, for the Small Memorial, Mrs. Mount was back, and as "President and Founder." The Small Memo-

# The Louisiana Iris Conservation Society

P. O. BOX 1037, NEW ORLEANS, LA.

## Memorial Meeting to Honor Dr. John Kunkel Small

GIBSON HALL, TULANE UNIVERSITY, SEPTEMBER 29th, 1939, 3:30 P. M.

### THE JOHN KUNKEL SMALL MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

Wm. M. Garic, past president the La. Iris Conservation Society; Marshall C. Callender, past president; Brigadier General E. A. McIlhenny, Avery Island; Marshall Ballard, Editor the Item-Tribune; Nicholas Bauer, Superintendent of Education; Harry D. Wilson, Commissioner of Agriculture; Andre Lafargue, attorney, decorated by France; General Allison Owen, president the Parkway Commission; State Forester V. H. Sonderegger; Frank E. Neelis, superintendent Audubon Park; Col. R. E. E. DeMontluzin, Mrs. Donald Rafferty, president of the Federation of Garden Clubs, of Mississippi, who are patrons of the iris society; H. Van R. Chase, Association of Commerce, James P. Guillot, secretary of State Conservation; Harry L. Daunoy, soil conservationist; Attorney Richard B. Otero, Attorney Gaspar R. Bossetta; Prof. James M. McArthur, Director of School Gardens and Nature Study in public schools; Richard Koch, architect; Mrs. Ole K. Olsen, landscape architect; Louis Reuter, P. D. Nielsen, Jeff J. Steckler, seedmen; Mrs. Olive A. Stallings, Felix Seeger, superintendent the Parkway Commission; E. A. Farley, Peter A. Chopin, C. W. Eichling, Sr., Frank Reyes, president the Horticultural Society; Max Scheinuk, Paul Abele, Charles Eble, Dan Newsham, Mrs. Jules F. Peytral, Jr., Harry Papworth, Leo Van Os, florists; Dr. C. V. Kraft, owner the Algiers Herald; Prof. Wm. T. Penfound, Dept. of Botany Tulane University; M. E. Polson, president the Floral Trail Association; Mrs. J. J. McLoughlin, chairman the John K. Small Louisiana Iris Study Field, Paul Ebeyer, rosarian; Robert Usher, librarian Howard Library; Mrs. May Wilkenson Mount, founder and president the iris society; Mrs. Jos. Burrell Simmons, Mrs. Estelle Verjje Cottman, Mrs. Bertram R. Baker, vice presidents and Miss Mae W. Barthel treasurer.

Mr. M. E. Polson, Master of ceremonies.

Mr. Frank E. Neelis, chairman of reception committee.

General E. A. McIlhenny, Chairman of Arrangements.

Mrs. May Wilkenson Mount, program chairman.

Mrs. J. J. McLoughlin, chairman the John K. Small La. Iris Study Field.

### SPEAKERS

Organization of the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society.

Peter A. Chopin, florist, real estate developer, Always found in chairmanships of city beautification enterprises.

What the Iris Society Has Done In Teaching School Children To Conserve Wild Iris.

Prof. James M. McArthur, Director of School Gardens and Nature Study, New Orleans Public Schools.

The Floral Trail and Iris Gardens On The Trail.

M. E. Polson, president the Floral Trail Association of the Y. M. B. C.

What Dr. Small Has Done for the Botany of Louisiana

—DR. W. T. Penfound, Dept. of Botany, Tulane University.

What the Iris Society, Inspired By Dr. Small, has done to Conserve Native Wild Flowers.

Gaspar R. Bossetta, prominent attorney, who has taken an active part in civic functions, particularly those pertaining to the conservation of natural resources.

How the Work of Dr. Small and the Iris Society Have Attracted Strangers To New Orleans.

Wilson S. Callender, Secretary of Committee of 101 Membership Dept. the Association of Commerce.

How the Eminent Botanist Illustrated Devotion To Duty. Benediction.

Rev. Father O'Brien, S. J., Loyola University.

Taps—The Boy Scouts of America

### RECEPTION COMMITTEE

Hon. Frank E. Neelis, chairman.

Representatives from each large florist on the Memorial Committee or the florist, himself. Officers of the Iris Society and Mrs. Helen Grace Stanton, Mr. Albert Huber, Mrs. Jules F. Peytral, Jr., Mrs. J. H. Forcelles, Jr., and Mrs. Henry Mische.

Ushers: Boy Scouts of America.

## Small, Viosca and Species Inflation

The number of actual “species” of Louisiana irises has long been an interesting and open question. Some might say controversy.

It is common in SLI for people to say that there are five recognized species today, but there are some, including scientist-types, who assert that *I. giganticaerulea* is actually *I. hexagona*, so there are only four. There are



others who insist that in Florida, “*I. savannarum*”, one of Small’s designations, in fact should be regarded as a distinct species, so we are back to five, or six depending on how you count.

In the 1920s and 1930s, when Dr. John K. Small was studying native irises in Louisiana and Florida, he was naming species right and left. How many is unclear. Richard Goula reported in our first iris book that the number was 77.<sup>1</sup> A 1931 New York Times article on Dr. Small puts the number at 96 in the New Orleans region.

In the period 1930 – 1932, Small was giving talks around New Orleans and citing upwards of 100 species. In a 1932 talk to the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society, he put the number at “more than 100 species of iris

represented by 300 color varieties ... in and near New Orleans.”

In April 1934, May Wilkinson Mount, undoubtedly in a burst of massive embellishment, was quoted in the *Times-Picayune*: “According to botanical reports...there are more than 700 shades of irises and more than 200 species around New Orleans.”

In 1935, Percy Viosca, long a student of the flora of South Louisiana, published his paper “The Irises of Southeastern Louisiana: A Taxonomic and Ecological Interpretation.” Based on detailed analysis and in-depth knowledge of South Louisiana, Viosca concluded that



there were only three distinct iris species of the Louisiana iris group in the area. Viosca’s view, which prevails today, was that, “The large majority of the forms described from the same region by Small and Alexander ... and innumerable others yet undescribed, [should be interpreted] in part as variants and in part as natural hybrids.”<sup>2</sup>

It appears that Viosca was right in today’s terms, but Small was operating under different standards. In an interesting letter to Mrs. B. S. Nelson of New Orleans, who apparently had written raising questions about the irises, Small wrote back, “Hybrid origin is the way to state the reason for some of the Louisiana irises; but many are

Left: Dr. John Kunkel.Small. Above: Percy Viosca, Jr.

not hybrids now, they have become fixed species through their long development. Of course, we find new hybrids among our discoveries, but we do not consider these fixed. We have some of these growing here, but have not had a chance to observe their behavior.”<sup>3</sup>

In January 1932, the Iris Society executed plans to “comb the city for specimens” to be used in park beautification.<sup>4</sup> Jointly leading the hunt were Dr. John K. Small and Percy Viosca. Oh, to have been able to overhear the conversation.

In a broad sense, the species count does not matter much. No one disputed the natural variations among wild irises that have contributed to the modern hybrids. Three hundred colors? Seven hundred hues? Innumerable forms? That will do, regardless of the species buckets into which they are crammed.

Small’s “species inflation”, however, was a useful idiom through which to bring these important irises to the public’s attention. Did it work? We all know today that it did. One small item in the *Times-Picayune* in February 1932 testifies to its success back in the day:<sup>5</sup>

**LOUISIANA PLANTS  
GO TO WHITE HOUSE**  
A total of 250 Louisiana iris plants were shipped Saturday afternoon to the White House in Washington and to President Herbert C. Hoover's camp at Rapidan Camp in Virginia by the Louisiana Iris Society.  
In a telegram to Percy Viosca, Jr., a director in the Louisiana Iris Society, President Hoover requested a number of the plants for transplanting in both Washington and Rapidan.

-*Times Picayune*, February 21, 1932

## Notes

1 Richard A. Goula, “History of Louisiana Irises” in Marie Caillet and Joseph K. Mertzweiller (eds.), *The Louisiana Iris: The History and Culture of Five Native American Species and their Hybrids*, Waco: Texas Gardener Press, 1988 p. 6.

2 *AIS Bulletin*, No. 57 (April 1935), p. 5.

3 Letter from John K. Small to Mrs. B. S. Nelson, October 3, 1931. Collection 29, Ira Schreiber Nelson Collection, Box 10, University Archives and Acadiana Manuscripts Collection, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

4 *Times-Picayune*, January 1932, p.18.

5 *Times-Picayune*, February 21, 1932, p. 10.

rial appears to have been the organization’s last hurrah,<sup>25</sup> but it was an elaborate one befitting Mrs. Mount’s organizational skills and the exceedingly high regard in which John K. Small was held. Dr. Small’s contributions were widely appreciated and, judging from his correspondence, he was a kind and generous individual both with his plants and the time he took to interact with those interested in irises. The participation in his memorial service is thus not surprising.

**Lessons.** Was the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society a failure? If survival is the criterion, yes. Did its beautification work endure? Not in its original form. I don’t think one would find any signs today of the major Rainbow Memorials or the John K. Small Iris Study Field as such.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps some of the irises still circulate as pas-salong plants. Does the New York Botanical Garden still maintain the reported 10,000 irises transplanted there from Louisiana by Small and his associates? Not a chance.<sup>27</sup>

I do believe that the educational impact of the amazing burst of iris activity in the 1930s had a lasting effect. Learning about our irises is a diffuse and non-linear process, and the exposure to the plants and publicity that were a direct result of the Society’s work without a doubt flowed into the public consciousness about Louisiana irises that we know has increased so remarkably over the years.

The Louisiana Iris Conservation Society faced several problems. First, the scale of public plantings undertaken undoubtedly outstripped the resources available to maintain them. Second, the Society to a large extent was more of a civic organization and less of a plant society than would have been good for its long term health. Times and interests change – we get into distracting World Wars for example – and in New Orleans the civic layer driven by local iris pride and aggressive leadership peeled away. The dirt-under-the-nails gardeners retained their interest, even if not the ability to sustain the organization.

Finally, the Conservation Society maintained a steadfast focus on New Orleans. The center of the iris universe was hardly restricted to that area, of course, and there were important iris growers, gardens and activists throughout Louisiana. The time was right for a new iris organization to emerge.

In a 1946 *Times-Picayune* article on the upcoming sixth annual meeting of the Mary Swords Debaillon Louisiana Iris Society, the writer observes, “The extent of iris interest in Louisiana amounts almost to a cult.”<sup>28</sup> With the qualification “almost,” any objective observer could almost agree.

## Notes On Main Article.

1 Richard A. Goula, "History of Louisiana Irises, Chapter 1 in "Marie Caillet and Joseph K. Mertzweiler (eds.), *The Louisiana Iris: The History and Culture of Five Native American Species and their Hybrids*, Waco: Texas Gardener Press, 1988.

2 The Dillard article can be viewed online on the SLI website at: <http://www.louisianas.org/aboutsli/history.html>

3 Caroline Dormon, "History of the Louisiana Iris," in Society for Louisiana Irises, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Publication, 1966, p. 5.

4 [http://www.louisianadigitallibrary.org/cdm4/index\\_LSU\\_PVC.php?CISOROOT=/LSU\\_PVC](http://www.louisianadigitallibrary.org/cdm4/index_LSU_PVC.php?CISOROOT=/LSU_PVC)

5 *Times-Picayune*, October 15, 1933, p. 6. "One of the rare irises in it, and is native, is white with splashes of purple...."

6 There are several documents relating to the Conservation Society in the papers of Ira S. Nelson in the archives at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette. One was a blank piece of stationery of the Louisiana Iris Society showing its officers and directors, with the note penciled in: "This Society only lasted one or two years – 29-30 and 30-31." Another document in the collection was a copy of a 1932 article from the *Times-Picayune* about a Conservation Society plant sale, with the penciled notation: "This was the 1<sup>st</sup> Louisiana Iris Society we formed. It planted iris in New Orleans Public School Grounds and also in Audubon and City Parks. It only lasted a few years." Ira Nelson did not come to Louisiana until the early 1940s. Collection 29, Ira Schreiber Nelson Collection, Box 13, University Archives and Acadiana Manuscripts Collection, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

7 Mrs. B. S. Nelson of New Orleans, active in the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society, was a charter member of SLI.

8 *Times-Picayune*, December 1, 1931, p. 16.

9 *Times-Picayune*, April 14, 1929, p. 32.

10 Letter from May Wilkinson Mount to Mrs. Mary H. Nelson, December 7, 1931. Collection 29, Ira Schreiber Nelson Collection, Box 10, University Archives and Acadiana Manuscripts Collection, University of Louisiana at Lafayette. The "Correspondence of Mary H. Nelson" is included as part of the Ira Nelson Collection, although they were not related.

11 Mrs. J. Leo Burthe, a Director of the Society.

12 *Times-Picayune*, October 3, 1934, Part 2, p. 13.

13 *Times-Picayune*, March 12, 1942, p. 2.

14 Undated, "Memorial Edition" bulletin of the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society (1939), 8 pages, unnumbered..

15 April 17, 1932, in column by Lady Banksia, p. 18.

16 *Times-Picayune*, February 21, 1932, p. 18.

17 *Times-Picayune*, January 27, 1932, p. 27.

18 *Times-Picayune*, March 29, 1932, p. 19. A fourth Rainbow Memorial to composer Louis Gottschalk was planned, but it can't be determined from the news coverage if the project was completed. A separate committee was established for each of the Rainbow Memorials and worked independently under the umbrella of the Conservation Society.

19 *Times-Picayune*, May 6, 1934, p. B-5.

20 *Times-Picayune*, April 15, 1932, p. 21.

21 Frank M. Carroll was a major figure in the Society and a grower on an extensive scale. He also gave 300 plants to the John K. Small State Iris Field and plants to Milne Home and Tuberculosis Hospital. According to the 1939 memorial publication, Carroll "has given plants, seed, and personal assistance, liberally, to the club for their work in City Park." Carroll "had an iris experiment station at Carroll's Iris Study."

22 Recipients included Mrs. Olive A. Stallings; Mrs. Ole K. Olsen; Mrs. Donald G. Rafferty, president of the Mississippi Federation of Garden Clubs; Mr. Richard Koch, architect and planner of a botanical garden for City Park; Hon. Yuki Sato, General Consul of Japan; Dr. Walter Schmid, Consul of Switzerland; General Allison Owen; Dr. John K. Small; Col. V. H. Sondregger; Hon. Frank E. Neelis, Superintendent of Audubon Park; John D. Bailey; and W.C. McCormick, the General Passenger Agent of the Southern Pacific R.R.

23 *Times-Picayune*, April 5, 1935, p. 6.

24 By coincidence, the Pearl Rivers Rainbow Memorial in City Park was located on the same site as today's Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden. Since Hurricane Katrina, and through the cooperation of the Besthoffs, the New Orleans Museum of Art, Sculpture Garden Manager Pamela Buckman, and the Greater New Orleans Iris Society, Louisiana irises have today been reestablished. They line the banks of the lagoon, much as they must have in 1932 when the Rainbow Memorial was dedicated.

25 Letter to Mary Nelson on November 1939, E. J. Alexander, an associate of Dr. Small's at the N.Y. Botanical Garden said: "I am glad to you know some of you ladies are still growing these irises down there, as the whole collection that we brought back up here has been lost through neglect." Dr. Small had fallen ill in 1937 and died in 1938. Ira Schreiber Nelson Collection, Box 10, University Archives and Acadiana Manuscripts Collection, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.