

Changing of the Guard at Briarwood

By Patrick O'Connor

Briarwood – the Caroline Dormon Nature Preserve near Saline in North Louisiana – has long been a special place. It has drawn the interest and support of many, and for many reasons. The persona of Caroline Dormon is an attraction for some and, certainly, for all who know about her. Her accomplishments were so extraordinary and varied that there seems no end to the descriptions of her interests: naturalist, conservationist, preservationist, ornithologist, archeologist, to name a few.

The place itself – the native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers – is justification enough to be drawn to Briarwood. Although interesting plants were indigenous to the North Louisiana sandhills, Caroline Dormon embellished the woods with many “wild things.” As a result, the congregation of native plants in the Preserve is unique. Briarwood is priceless.

Briarwood moves those who love Louisiana irises because its iris plantings represent a snapshot of the natural history of these plants, their discovery, and early cultivation. Caroline Dormon found wild irises as early as 1920 when she first saw them near Morgan City. She joined with others equally taken with



PHOTO BY LINDA TRAHAN

the irises to collect, trade, and preserve unusual specimens. She recognized the horticultural potential of these plants and was among the first few hybridizers. Many Dormon hybrids are lost, but others have endured. Her irises and others at Briarwood – including species and natural hybrids -- represent a window into an earlier era. There undoubtedly are some Louisiana irises that survive at no other place than Briarwood.

Caroline Dormon died in 1971. Fifty years later, Briarwood at its core remains much as it did when she left it. Acreage has been added, and monumental obstacles created by the forces of nature – including crippling droughts and devastating tornados – have been endured. Recovery from nature’s choices never ends, and it continues to present tremendous challenges to those charged with the care of the place. It is a tribute to many, but especially the past curators, that the soul of Briarwood has been preserved.

The new year began

with a new curator at Briarwood, a time for both a welcome and thanks. If a young person with energy, dedication, and imagination is an advantage, Bayli N. Quick fills the bill. If thanks are due for the stewardship that delivered Briarwood to this new year with the vision of Caroline Dormon intact and thriving, then Richard and Jesse Johnson and Rick and Denise Johnson’s names should go on the marker.

Goals for Briarwood

Bayli Quick can best introduce herself in her own words, at right, and their tone is reflected in a list of priorities that she provided. In addition to the immediate need to restore the tornado-damaged Writer’s Cabin to support overnight guests, the priorities flow from a strategy to systematically involve more youth at Briarwood. In Bayli’s view, the Preserve is filled with opportunities to learn, connect, become engaged, and volunteer. A few of her objectives include:

- **Create a campground to support youth education.** A campground would enable such organizations as Boy and Girl Scouts to spend a weekend at the Preserve.
- **Hold competitions and meetings at Briarwood targeting high school students** and involving Forestry, Nursery and Landscaping, Agronomy, and Floriculture. This will require continuing work with state and local Agriculture Education officials. Bayli cites such activities as the main reason she developed an interest in agriculture and horticulture, and Briarwood is the perfect place to host high school students to further their education.
- **Create additional volunteer opportunities at Briarwood** by



'Full Eclipse' and 'Sea Wisp' in the Bay Garden.



Top, right of Caroline Dormon: Jesse Johnson, Rick and Denise Johnson and Richard L. Johnson, all curators of Briarwood.

The New Curator Introduces Herself

I was born to Angel and Ronnie Quick and raised in Chestnut, Louisiana. My father was a deputy and detective of the Natchitoches Parish Sheriff's Office, and I had the goal to follow in his footsteps. I went to Northwestern State University and received my Bachelors in Criminal Justice and a minor in Social Science.

During my last year of college, I felt that I was in the wrong place and couldn't figure out what I wanted to do with my future. I always had a goal of a full-time job before I graduated college. In September of 2021, when the position opened for the Curator of the Briarwood Preserve, I immediately applied and did not tell anyone right away.

I wasn't sure if this was a good career for myself, as I had been away from the horticulture scene for almost five years, but I knew deep inside that my heart and soul are in the piney woods of Natchitoches Parish.

In high school, I spent just about every weekend wandering around Kisatchie National Forest, studying the pine trees and undergrowth. If I was not in the woods, I was sitting around looking at books and articles regarding native plants of all states. When I applied for the Briarwood job, I immediately pulled out all of my notes and books from high school and began preparing as if I had already gotten the job. I



Bayli Quick

wrote down ideas for Briarwood, drew T-Shirt designs, and started memorizing the scientific names of plants again.

I was so eager to begin working, and I hadn't even had my first interview. Something kept telling me that this was where I was meant to be. Fortunately, I received a phone call the day before my college graduation offering me this position. I have very large shoes to fill, but with dedication, support, and patience, I believe I can also have an impact here at Briarwood.

Bayli Quick



Bayli with fiancé Travis Brossette

working initially with organizations at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, the site of the Caroline Dormon Archives. The larger goal would be to make every student feel invited and welcomed at Briarwood, whether in middle school, high school, or college.

Briarwood's Community of Friends and Supporters

These visionary goals will pay off in the long run, but the immediate task of maintaining the Preserve and ad-



The Writer's Cabin PHOTO BY LINDA TRAHAN

ressing structural problems requires reliance on existing friends and volunteers and financial support. Briarwood is large and diverse. A growing core of helpers and supporters will be essential to maintaining the Briarwood qualities that most reflect Dormon's vision.

The next volunteer event is the traditional Tom Sawyer Day on February 19, 2020, beginning at 9 AM, probably before the date members will receive



Above, *R. alabamense* and the Louisiana iris 'Royal Velour' (Conger 1953).

this issue of the *Fleur*. But, watch for an upcoming plant sale and other volunteer opportunities on Facebook and the Briarwood website. Regardless, plan to visit when the weather warms and the wild azaleas or irises bloom. In every season, there are fascinating things to see at Briarwood.



A clump of Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) and Mountain Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*)

MORE INFORMATION

The Society has many members in North Louisiana within a reasonable driving distance from Briarwood, and they and others are encouraged to visit. As the seasons change, there constantly are new things to see.

There are opportunities to tour, volunteer by helping with light tasks or in other ways, and to contribute financially. But first, learn more about Briarwood.

Here are a few places to start.

The Briarwood website: www.briarwoodnp.org/

Contains information on history, upcoming events, photo gallery, group tour arrangements, and a storefront with merchandise you can purchase. The merchandise available includes books by Caroline Dormon and cards and mugs with beautiful examples of her artwork.

Facebook: www.facebook.com/briarwoodnp/

A source for the latest information on events at Briarwood and interesting posts. The "Shop On Facebook" button links to a more complete storefront than on the website.

"Shop On Facebook Store": If you are not on Facebook, use the following link to go to the storefront that offers clothing, plants, and other items not on the website store. This store is also the place where you can sign up to be a Member. <https://tinyurl.com/5bmz9t3p>

Greater New Orleans Iris Society. www.louisianairisgnois.com/Briarwood/

Contains a series of photos from a 2014 visit to Briarwood, and also links to articles over the years on Briarwood in SLI publications.

Contact the Curator for additional information about Briarwood:

Bayli N. Quick, Curator

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The Irises of Briarwood

by Richard L. Johnson*

Since the early 1920s wild irises have been collected from the wild and brought to the wild gardens of Briarwood. If nothing else, the fact that some of these irises have survived the passing years of flood, drought, and pestilence should bear witness to one of our most unique wildflowers.



'Sheer Delight' (Chowning 1953). One of the beautiful old cultivars that probably can be found only at Briarwood.

In the early 1930s, Caroline Dormon decided to dabble with some of the select specimens of these iris and chose a spot locally termed a "bay head," an area with high shade provided by *Magnolia virginiana* (Sweet Bay) and *Nyssa sylvatica* (Sour Gum). A very apt name, "The Bay Garden," was selected and so it has been ever since.

Now, we have no magic formula for growing Louisiana iris and are plagued by every curse possible to a gardener, but since this garden was reactivated with help of many loyal friends in 1972, we have enjoyed a bountiful harvest of blooms each spring.

Our water supplied by nature is excellent. Slightly acid in content, it activates the cottonseed meal which we use for plant food. We do have some problems with rapid leaching of commercial nitrogen. In September, we start building new beds and reactivating old beds and continue until cold weather comes. Our favorite mixture for the iris beds is soil that has 8-8-8 commercial fertilizer and cottonseed meal disked into it about a month in advance.

Our area soil, being very sandy, seems to be improved if some of the clay or mineral subsoil is added. To this bedding soil, we add 20 percent well-rotted hardwood sawdust.

The iris beds follow the contour of the hill with small drainage ditches to carry away excess soil moisture. Logs, six inches in diameter, are used to retain the soil in these raised beds. The iris beds are about thirty inches across. Applications of cottonseed meal every two or three weeks are begun immediately after planting and are continued until there is a danger of a killing frost.



'The Kahn' (Dormon 1947)



'Creole Can-Can' (Granger, 1956)

Along with the Louisiana iris, we grow Cardinal Flowers, yellow and purple Pitcher Plants, native orchids, the rather rare Closed Gentian, and many other bog plants and shrubs. These plants benefit from the culture and add immensely to the beauty of the garden out of season. The ferns, mock bishops cap, and sedges can become a nuisance and must be hand weeded when overabundant. Ferns and violets particularly can be very greedy eaters and also harbor the insect pests that are a bane to flowering plants.

Of the insects, the most damage is done by leaf miners. Less damaging because they hit in August and September are the amaryllis grasshoppers. This black and red scourge feeds on the mature foliage of the iris with little damage to plant health but literally destroys every Cardinal Flower in the garden.

Deer can be extremely damaging in late winter when they tend to move in herds. In one night, we can lose the foliage of an entire planting to these pests. They prefer fast-growing, tender plant shoots at this time and at Briarwood that spells

trouble for the Louisiana irises. The only known control for the deer is population control, and here that is impossible.

Rabbits have always been a serious problem. A “Cane Cutter” can wreck a bed of vigorous growing iris in one night. The animal will usually “set up camp” in the garden and, even when chased far away, will return the next night. Fried rabbit is the only feasible control!

The pesky armadillo can root up a well-mulched iris planting in a matter of minutes! This dim-witted brute can work the best “animal-proof” fence and water gap and even learns to open-spring loaded gates! Once the armadillo finds the beautiful worm-filled iris beds, you can bet on his being back until he has been dealt with properly.

At times we wonder why do we go on, when all of nature seems, as Caroline Dormon was fond of saying, “dead set against.”

Well, then we see the expressions of our guests’ faces when the garden gate closes behind them, and they see the beauty before them — rows of Charles Arny’s select hybrids, the Calcasieu strains of Marvin Granger, those hardy varieties developed by Frank Chowning, and the beauties developed by Sidney Conger and Joseph Mertzweiler. Then they see the beginning, the collected iris that started the movement to “tame” them, and the works of the pioneers such as Caroline Dormon, G. W. Holleyman, W. B. MacMillan and Ira S. Nelson. Most people are moved deeply by the loveliness of these iris in such a natural setting. More than one has remarked that this garden should be renamed— EDEN.



*Reprinted and adapted from the SLI Newsletter, December 1980.



'Noblesque' (Conger, 1956)



'Sidney Conger' (MacMillan, 1965)



'Charlie's Evangeline' (Arny, 1976)



'Saucy Minx' (Dormon, 1949)

All these irises and others at Briarwood are identifiable. Others could be, with effort, study, and luck. Many more will remain beautiful mysteries but they reflect a bygone era in the evolution of Louisiana irises, a photograph of times past.



'Golden Sheaves' (Dormon 1953)



'Aurora Borealis' (MacMillan, 1945)



'May Roy' (Granger 1969)



'Haile Selassi' (MacMillan 1943)



'Joyce' (Arny, 1958)