

Karl P. Jones and the People's Royal Court
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Early in the eighties, we were driving down Rumstick Point in Barrington, trying to find a public path to the shore. We never made it to the beach, but we did see a sign saying "Llys yr Rhosyn Gardens, All Visitors Welcome" in front of a large rose garden. At the time, Ed and I were living in an apartment and while we grew vegetables, we had no interest in roses. Despite that, I'll never forget some of the roses I saw that day.

The beds were neat and the varieties all clearly labeled. There was a perfect high centered spiraling opening bloom of "Command Performance", (the 1971 AARS winner, apparently no longer widely grown). There were orange and apricot colored roses, a new concept to me. As we were leaving, we saw and smelled Double Delight, with its beautiful white petals stained with strawberry red and its rich fragrance... unforgettable! The next time we visited, the rose garden was a shadow of its former glory, with just a small section filled with roses.

Years later, searching the local Rhode Island library listings, I found that many of the books I wanted were locked in something called the "Jones Collection" in the Barrington Public Library, and could only be viewed there. It was there, from the reference librarian and the Barrington Historical Society files, I found out about the man whose garden we had enjoyed.

Early Life

Karl P. Jones was born in 1894 and died in 1990 at the age of 96, having spent most of his life in Barrington, Rhode Island. His father had a vast knowledge of horticulture but apparently not of roses. "I wanted to do one thing better than him so I chose roses."² He recalled that he started caring for his father's roses at age 11, hauling manure-tea to feed them. His father praised his results to all who visited and "well, that set me up, the roses were mine from then on. That was the beginning of my rose career."³ He served in the railroad artillery in World War I in France,² and then worked as an engineer for the Grinnell Company, a job that required him to travel all over North America. "It always annoyed me that so many of the fine private gardens were behind stone walls."⁶ The gardens never seemed to be open when he was able to visit. He came to the conclusion that if he were ever able to have the time and money to have such a garden, "it would be available to everyone without fee or appointment."⁶

Eventually he purchased the Walter Seymour property on Rumstick Point, at the head of Narragansett Bay in 1937 and started his rose garden. He met Dr. Walter Brownell at this time and they became great friends. "The first climbers we put in at our new home were Brownell hybrids, many of which have unfortunately vanished from the market."⁹ He started buying roses on his business trips to plant at home.

It wasn't until he retired in 1951 that he began to transform his property in earnest to a major rose garden. He bulldozed the bullbriar and dug out the undergrowth "then discovered he was confronting solid hardpan. He designed a tool to break up the ungiving soil. When he removed the hardpan layer he found a gift beyond price: virgin soil."¹²[authors note: perhaps poetic license here by the reporter] He took another year to plant rye and oats and ploughed them under as green manure. The next year he was ready for the roses.

He opened his rose garden to the public in 1953. Karl was studying Welsh, the language of his father Llewellyn Jones' people, when he was considering a name for the garden. He wrote to a Welsh horticulturalist to see if his choice was suitable. The garden was then named Llys-yr-Rhosyn, the Royal Court of the Rose.

The Garden

His collection grew quickly after retirement. He began hiring help for the garden, starting with his late father's gardener. This "choleric little 'north of Ireland' man."³ was the first step along the long hard road he was to face finding skilled help. He then also hired a gardener who had worked for Dr. Brownell and was an expert at rose propagation. Unfortunately "the man with the knack of grafting 'had a disposition like a full grown porcupine-the other men didn't like him'"³

The garden continued to grow and he began to import roses from all over the world. "He'd buy his understocks from Holland, 'and I'd buy a few roses from Germany, a few from France a few from England and a few from Ireland, and I'd graft those.'"³ At its peak the garden reportedly held 8500 rose bushes, and was the nation's largest private collection.³ The gardens covered a total of about eight acres with roses of all sorts planted on five. Visitors came from all over the country, often by the busload in peak bloom season in June.¹⁷

"In his garden there had been a wealth of rare antiques, but his appetite was omnivorous. Any rose of merit he came across, new or old was granted a spot in his beds. His favorite rose he said was 'New Dawn'"³ He was impressed with its resistance to disease and frost and had "to whack out stacks of canes each year in the spring and throughout the season to keep it in bounds, but this blush-pink DR. VAN FLEET sport has no equal."⁹

He had a chief gardener and up to four full-time helpers for the day to day rose maintenance. He was in charge however and "before his back and leg gave him trouble, he would work from morning to night tending the flowers."⁴ Each fall, they'd "cut back the low-bush roses to 16", strip off the leaves, and mound up the earth around them. Bean hampers are then placed over them to protect them from the cold."⁶ Labor intensive indeed! The cost of maintaining the garden in the eighties was about \$50000 a year for this hired help and garden supplies. Yet he never charged admission, nor a fee to hold public events. "Couples married amid the roses. Barrington High School Seniors held their annual baccalaureate near slopes massed with brilliant flowers."¹³

His passion for roses did not leave him blind to other botanical beauties. He was known for his King Alfred Daffodils and his collection of clematis. Blueberries and apples were grown, though pilfering by local children was a problem. Eventually, he pulled them out. "Roses with their thorns could defend themselves, so Karl returned to his first love."³

ARS

Karl was a frequent contributor to both local and national rose publications. He had three articles published in the American Rose Annual, the American Rose society's yearly selection of important articles for its members.

The first of these, in 1948, paid tribute to the breeding efforts of his good friends, Walter and Josephine Brownell. He credits the Brownells as the successors to Dr. Van Fleet in their goals and their use of *R. wichuriana* in their breeding program. "His work and that of his family is giving us new and continually improved group of hardy, disease-free roses that can be grown with a minimum of effort in our queer New England climate."¹¹ The climbers he lauds are the earlier Brownell hybrids, mainly once bloomers. His last sentence in this article is prophetic; he says "perhaps some day the Brownells will create... an everblooming companion for New Dawn with brighter color."

¹¹ It was only a few years later that Dr. Brownell began introducing his sub-zero pillar roses, including Rhode Island Red, White Cap, Golden Arctic and Scarlet Sensation.

His article for the 1949 annual was entitled "Modern Hardy Climbers in New England" (see the article section of www.rirs.org for a reprint of both of these articles). In this article, he lists the 80 climbing varieties he was growing in 1949 and rates their cold hardiness. He found the *Wichuriana* hybrids to be most reliably hardy and had a long list of Brownell climbers of this type listed. He recommended use of "silo paper" (a fiber-reinforced, waterproof paper), to protect even the hardy climbers in New England from winter sun and wind.

The 1973 American Rose Annual included his article "Roses As Shrubs". His love of all types of roses is evident in this article, at this time he had over a thousand cultivars. There are some great descriptions of the use of species roses as garden shrubs in this article, which then progresses to OGRs, and then newer classic shrubs, including "Golden Wings" and "Fruehlingsmorgen" (both *R. spinosissima altaica* hybrids). He suggests using an eight foot iron cattle fence stake, painted green, in the center of many large shrubs to help support them against high winds. Karl also cautions growers to give shrubs, like climbers, two or three years in the ground before judging their worth.

Karl P. Jones voice was found in far more than these two American Rose Annual articles however. He contributed his experience yearly in the ARS "Proof of the Pudding" (now called "Roses in Review"). These reports on rose varieties were, and still are, compiled from the personal growing experiences of ARS members. In these earlier versions of "Proof of the Pudding", where presumably there were far fewer ARS members, each member's comments on the rose varieties were sorted by state and printed in full; Karl P. Jones was often the lone voice from Rhode Island!

He wrote articles for the New England Rose Society's bulletin as well. One from after 1968 was entitled "Standing Tall: A Report on Climbing Roses". He notes that climbers make the "most spectacular displays and were the most admired by our visitors."⁹ This article adds many more climbers to the list in his 1949 article. New Dawn remained a favorite but Cadenza and Rhonda were included. "Bobbie James" a very fragrant hybrid *wichuriana*, was recommended as a tremendous grower with vicious thorns, which made it "a complete deterrent to youngsters who wish to climb over the fence around my fish pond."⁹

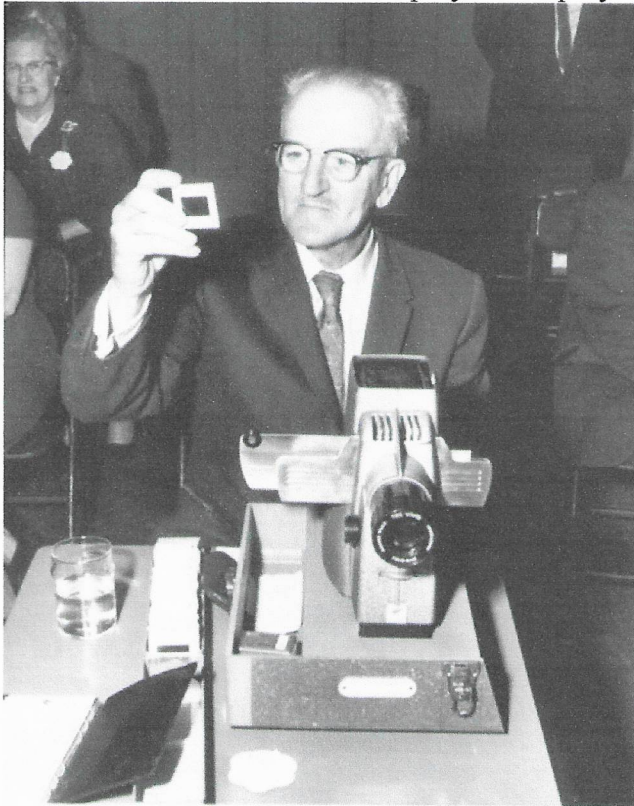
As you can imagine, a number of newspaper articles were written about his rose garden. Alice Koller of the Globe apparently was also struck by "Double Delight", after a bloom was given her "from among the half million blooms in the achingly beautiful rose garden".¹² Its fragrance and long lasting nature as a cut flower won her over. She saw the garden when it was down to 3500 plants and recommended that people go even if

they don't love roses. "It will be a long time before you will ever again see people so unequivocally happy for the sole reason that they are in the presence of beauty".¹²

In turn, he also wrote for the newspapers. A 1968 Providence journal article was headlined "There's nothing quite as beautiful as a rose unless its hundreds of roses". In this he was somewhat before the times in extolling the virtues of easy care shrubs. The article begins with the earliest bloomers in his garden, R. Hugonis, R. Ecae, and R. Primula. "All three grow into large graceful plants that require no spraying and little attention."¹⁰ It was surprising to me that these roses bloomed for him as early as May 15, as typically here in zone 6 our peak bloom is mid June. Another he particularly recommended as "nearly foolproof" was the 1934 hybrid musk "Gartendirektor Otto Linne". He planted beds of these in a shopping center in Barrington and in back of the Episcopal Diocesan House in Providence and found they needed no spraying and little care. He considered it "a very excellent plant for producing a large show of color with a minimum of effort."¹⁰ We also have found that to be true in the Roger Williams Park Victorian Rose Garden.

Local Memories

Karl P. Jones was awarded an ARS Silver Medal through the New England Rose Society in 1967, where he was an active member. He was also awarded the Outstanding Consulting Rosarian Award both in 1960 and 1966.¹ He served as its President from 1954 to 1962¹⁵ and also as Executive Secretary. The NERS still has a rose show trophy in his honor for floribunda and polyantha sprays.



Karl P. Jones presenting a slide show in 1962 courtesy of the Maine Rose Society.

While searching HelpMeFind.com online to see if he had hybridized any roses (he did not), I did note one listing of a rose species with his name, *R. xanthina* 'Karl Jones', still being sold by Heritage Rosarium. Presumably, it is a variation of the Canary Rose that he found and described. Mike Lowe, former ARS Region 0 and Yankee District director, known for his enormous OGR collection and expertise, considers Karl P. Jones to be one of his mentors. Karl also provided Mike with many rarities but persisted for years in calling him "the kid."³ Mike recalls that his gardeners would fill the rose show at "Mass Hort" with vases of blooms to beautify the hall. He remembers that even the ice cream he served his guests was shaped like roses. Both Mike and Manny "Bigboy" Mendes remember how Karl was reluctant to hire a young woman as one of his gardeners. Soon he freely admitted that this URI graduate taught him a thing or two about roses and what's more, was a lot easier on the machinery than his previous male help. Both remember him in his motorized cart, a concession to age and the size of the gardens.

Donna Fuss, director of the Elizabeth Park Rose Gardens, recalls well the hedge of roses that he planted for his wife. "Her favorite rose was 'Sweet Afton'... it's too loose for a good hybrid tea, and not enough petals for an old garden rose form...but the scent is incredibly sweet... damask." She also loved the huge specimen of "Chevy Chase" he had, covering his two story carriage house. When the rambler was blooming, "the entire wall was covered in scarlet."

Friends benefited from his knowledge and generosity. The Yankee District's "Rose Window" bulletin mentioned that when "Clara and Stanley retired to Cape Cod in 1976... Karl Jones... gave Clara some roses that would 'flourish' on the Cape."¹⁶ These specimens of Chaplin's Pink, Cadenza Illusion and Ilse Krohn Superior are still winning blue ribbons locally.

Dorrie Nichols, grand-daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Brownell, recalls that he was a great collector of Brownell roses and cited his passion for collecting roses from all over the world. It was "the vastness of the fields" that impressed Claire Homan, one of the founding members of the Maine Rose Society. "He just loved to show off his roses."

Loss of the "Court"

Things became more difficult for Karl and Llys Yr Rhosyn. He lost his wife Betty in 1977. His back troubles worsened. Manny Mendes recalls that he called in his friends and the members of the New England Rose Society and let them dig up and take what they wanted, shrinking the garden to 3500 plants. "I've never sold any, and I never will."¹⁴ In 1985 he lost his head gardener to heart surgery and another to Florida. His "dearest cousin... requires constant nursing attention, which has had a considerable thinning effect on my purse."¹⁷ The city of Barrington reassessed properties and his taxes shot up. "He threw in the trowel with an abruptness that astonished Barrington"¹³ and sold the land to developers. The community was shocked and a group called "Save the Garden" worked to have the garden preserved. Karl is recorded in the Providence Journal as saying "They're nutty as fruitcakes... they haven't any conception of what it takes to maintain it."¹⁴ William Piccerelli, one of the developers, hoped he "see a wealthy individual offer to buy the lands and keep the gardens open."¹⁸ That year, he and his partner's family even "got those roses put to bed... I've still got the cuts on my hands to prove it."¹³ However he had no intention for selling the property at less than its

developed value. The community group was unsuccessful in getting funding to preserve the gardens and as no alternative was found, the garden was bulldozed. Karl kept only the property around his house, which in itself had a thousand bushes. He continued working as trustee of St. Andrews School for boys and as warden of St. John's Episcopal Church. He expressed no regret at the passing of Llys-yr-Rhosyn, "I know what I had"¹⁴ and "it was good fun."³

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