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Stephanie Shreffler

University of Dayton, sshreffler1@udayton.edu

Jillian M. Ewalt

University of Dayton, jewalt1@udayton.edu

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The John Stokes and Mary's Gardens Collection

Introduction

The John Stokes and Mary's Gardens Collection documents the research of John Stokes and the history and activities of Mary's Gardens, a unique movement in twentieth-century American Catholicism. The collection is housed by the Marian Library, a special library devoted to the study of the Blessed Virgin Mary, located at the University of Dayton. Mary gardens, a practice with roots in medieval Europe, includes planting flowers symbolic of the Blessed Virgin Mary and dedicating gardens to her. In 1951 the modern Mary's Gardens movement was revitalized by John S. Stokes and his associate Edward A. G. McTague. Through Stokes and McTague's tireless research and promotion, the movement proliferated among American Catholics during the mid-to-late twentieth century.

In addition to the organizational records of Mary's Gardens, the collection includes Stokes's personal papers. Correspondence, manuscripts, ephemera, and audio recordings give evidence to his heterogeneous yet seamlessly concomitant interests that included, for example, biblical plant symbolism, comparative religion, environmental issues, civil rights, and Catholic social teaching. The collection presented several challenges in archival management and preservation but also an opportunity for the library to share the history and continued relevance of this distinctive movement and the interdisciplinary vocation of its founder, John Stokes.

Biography of John Stogdell Stokes



John S. Stokes, Jr., circa 1952. (John Stokes and Mary's Gardens collection, University of Dayton.)

John Stogdell Stokes, Jr., was born on October 21, 1920, in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania. He earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Lehigh University in 1941. Raised as a Quaker, he registered as a conscientious objector after the breakout of World War II. During the war he worked for Proctor & Gamble in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he met his future wife, Helen Schriever.¹

In 1946 Stokes converted to Roman Catholicism. The next year he moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and married Helen. Before their marriage ended in 1972, they had five children together.²

Stokes possessed a great deal of energy and fervor for his Catholic faith and constantly sought new ways to share it with others. In addition to promoting the Mary's Gardens movement, he also became involved in civil rights and social-justice movements, and he served as the director of the Wellsprings Ecumenical Center in Philadelphia. During this time he met Marion Metelits, whom he later married.³ Despite these other interests, some of which will be discussed later in this essay, Mary's Gardens remained his greatest passion throughout his life. Stokes died in Philadelphia on November 14, 2007.⁴

¹ Gayle Ronan Sims, "John Stogdell Stokes Jr., 87, engineer," *Philly.com*, November 20, 2007, http://articles.philly.com/2007-11-20/news/25225382_1_conscientious-objector-seed-packets-backyard-garden accessed April 24, 2016.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Stephanie L. Soule is Collections Librarian and Archivist for the U.S. Catholic Special Collection in the University Libraries, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH. Jillian Ewalt is Metadata Archivist, Special Collections and University Archives at California State University, Sacramento, CA.

History of Mary's Gardens

In 1950 Stokes read of a “Lady-garden” Mrs. Frank R. Lillie had established in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in the early 1930s. This “Lady-garden” contained only flowers and other plants which, in medieval times, had been given names honoring Mary. Stokes greatly admired the purpose and intent behind the creation of the garden. In a 1955 article he explained,

Not the Mary names, but the spirit behind them was the important thing to Mrs. Lillie. She saw that in their origin these names were things of the heart. She realized that before the invention of printing the people of the country-side had no books telling of Mary. . . . In their day the Mary-named plants may have been more potent than any book of theology. Consider the shamrock. And she believed — as our Mary's Gardens experience has borne out — that they can still have such potency today.⁵

Inspired by Lillie's idea, Stokes and his associate Edward A. G. McTague began the Mary's Gardens movement. From 1952 to 1954 they met with many people from Woods Hole to learn about the design of Lillie's garden and the types of flowers it included. They also supplemented Lillie's original list of Mary-names with names they discovered through research at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Philadelphia Public Library. They conducted this research not merely to compile an ever-larger list of Mary-names of plants but also to “help others start Gardens for Mary and to heighten the prayerful religious sense of their gardening work.”⁶

In order to help others create their own Mary gardens, Stokes and McTague began to sell the seeds of common flowers that had biblical symbolism. They developed literature on creating a Mary garden and included lists of plants named in honor of Mary. As they began their ministry Stokes and McTague experienced great success. They started advertising by placing six-inch ads in the Sunday gardening sections of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *New York Herald Tribune*. They also placed an ad in the program for a play performed by the Catholic Interracial Council of Philadelphia. This ad was seen by the Philadelphia archdiocesan Chancery Office, which granted an informal imprimatur to the Mary's Gardens project.

Several articles about the project appeared in Catholic publications over the next few years. The first was published in the February 1952 issue of *Perpetual Help* and was followed quickly by a March 1952 article in *America* and an article in the Catholic diocesan newspaper *The Catholic Free Press of Worcester* in April 1952. The *Catholic Digest* printed an article about Mary's Gardens in March 1953, which was subsequently translated into French, Belgian, Dutch, Italian, German, Spanish, Japanese, and Braille.

In 1958 Bonnie Roberson of Hagerman, Idaho, learned of the Mary's Gardens movement and created her own Mary garden at her home. This garden received high acclaim, and Roberson displayed a miniature replica of it at the 1962 Herb Society of America exhibit. She also helped develop dish Mary gardens, thus further expanding the ministry to people living in cities or other areas without the outdoor space necessary to plant a traditional garden. Stokes later called Roberson's involvement in their business “the most important providential augmentation” of the Mary's Gardens movement.⁷

Stokes placed a high value on the theological foundations of Mary gardens. He reflected on these ideas throughout his life, finding inspiration from a few particular sources. His perspective rested on Romans 8:19-21: “For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.” He supplemented this verse with the philosophy of the French Catholic apologist Auguste Nicolas, who wrote in 1869 that “when we take images from nature to explain the truths of faith, to explain Jesus Christ, we do not make such a far-fetched and indiscreet borrowing as one might suspect. On the

⁵ John S. Stokes, “Mary Garden Research: A Progress Report,” 1955, page 55, Box 34, Folder 1, John Stokes and Mary's Gardens collection, circa 1938-2007, Marian Library, University of Dayton Libraries, Dayton, Ohio [hereafter cited as Stokes collection].

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 52.

⁷ Stokes to Jane A. McLaughlin, 13 August 1981, Box 34, Folder 4, Stokes collection.

contrary, we make nature serve its principal purpose, which is to manifest the perfection of God”⁸ Stokes found evidence for these philosophies in the survival of Mary-garden devotions after Vatican II:

The thing that struck us was that concurrently with the massive falling off in Marian devotion which occurred between 1965 and 1970, as measured in the attendance at Marian Shrines and services and in the sale of religious articles, interest in and action on promoting Mary Gardens seemed to continue. Mary Gardens evidently survived the ‘pruning’ of Vatican II because they were based on the natural correspondences between Mary, the flowering heart, and nature . . . rather than on organization, programs and artifacts.⁹

Stokes never lost his faith in the power of Mary’s Gardens devotions. In 1995 he continued his outreach through a website, mgardens.org, in which Stokes shared his research into the biblical symbolism of plants. He donated his papers to the Marian Library at the University of Dayton in 2007, thus ensuring his work would remain accessible to future scholars and devotees of Mary. The library took physical possession of the collection in 2013, after Stokes’s death.

The John Stokes and Mary’s Gardens Collection



John Stokes with nuns at Mary's Gardens Exhibit, circa 1965. (John Stokes and Mary's Gardens collection, University of Dayton.)

The John Stokes and Mary’s Gardens Collection consists of sixty linear feet of materials. It is organized into twelve series: manuscripts and research; correspondence; articles and press; Mary’s Gardens records; Mary’s Gardens movement; Catholic pamphlets; gardening literature and ephemera; subject files; Bonnie Roberson’s papers; photographs, slides, and artifacts; and audiovisual materials. Throughout the collection there tends to be a great deal of overlap between Stokes’s personal papers and the official records of the Mary’s Gardens organization because the Mary’s Gardens movement was a personal passion for Stokes as well as a business venture.

The bulk of the collection consists of articles, correspondence, and manuscripts documenting the Mary’s gardens movement. Stokes’s manuscripts and articles cover Marian and biblical plant symbolism, gardening, Catholic mysticism, and promotion of the Mary’s Gardens movement. The final forms of his published articles on Mary gardens are also compiled. Stokes’s correspondence from

1944-2007 provides comprehensive documentation of the Mary’s Gardens movement as it evolved over the decades. The collection contains catalogs, pamphlets, and other promotional materials produced by Mary’s Gardens as well as many pages of personal testimonials which tell of successful Mary gardens around the world. A great deal of material concerning the Mary garden Mrs. Frank R. Lillie created has also been collected, including some of Stokes’s own notes concerning the history of Lillie’s garden and how it inspired Stokes and McTague to begin their own Mary garden ministry.

Of special interest is the correspondence that document Stokes’s collaboration with Ade Bethune. Bethune designed two statues Mary’s Gardens sold: one of Joseph the Worker (the patron saint of Mary’s Gardens) and another called “The Seat of Wisdom,” which depicts the Christ Child sitting on Mary’s lap. The correspondence discusses their plans for the Joseph the Worker statue and reveals the detailed thought that Stokes and Bethune put into its design. “If Mary Seat of Wisdom is the focal point of the garden, conceptually as well as physically,” Stokes wrote, “it would appear then, that Joseph, his statue that is, would be behind, or off to one side, alone and without the Christ-Child.”¹⁰ Stokes also

⁸ Auguste Nicolas, “La Vierge Marie Dans La Plan Divin,” quoted in Stokes to McLaughlin, 27 July 1981, Box 34, Folder 3, Stokes collection.

⁹ Stokes to McLaughlin, 27 July 1981, Box 34, Folder 3, Stokes collection.

¹⁰ Stokes to Ade Bethune, 2 March 1958, Box 23, Folder 1, Stokes collection.

reflected on the nature of Joseph the Worker, commenting, “In his newly proclaimed role of patron of workman [sic], St. Joseph is patron of garden and farm workers. Secondly there is a unity between the concept of stewardship for plant life, stewardship for the holy Child and his Mother, and stewardship for grace and his own soul and interior life. Truly, then St. Joseph is the Model for all Mary Gardeners.”¹¹ Bethune’s final design depicts Joseph kneeling and holding a tool and a flowering lily, pausing from his work to contemplate Mary and the Christ Child.

Included in the Catholic pamphlets and subject files are papers that reveal some of Stokes’s broad interests and activities. Stokes participated in several social-justice organizations, both Catholic and non-Catholic, such as the City-Wide Black Community Council, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, and the National Catholic Society for Animal Welfare. He also had an extensive pamphlet collection. These include, for example, publications by the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in the 1930s and 1940s. One pamphlet, “Our Rural Proletariat,” criticized the economic status of farmers in the United States, who had suffered “vanishing ownership” and “insecurity of tenure” and struggled to confront their new “inability” to “climb the agricultural ladder.”¹² Another pamphlet called for Americans to confront “the mote in our own eye” and critically examine the social and economic conditions of African Americans in their country, who suffered from widespread unemployment after the Great Depression.¹³ As part of his work with the Wellsprings Ecumenical Center, Stokes and his second wife, Marion, also produced a television show, *Input*, which aired from 1968-1971. The show discussed a variety of current topics, including war, Native American rights, religion, the prison system, slavery reparations, women’s rights, and astrology.¹⁴ The *Input* production tapes currently reside with the Internet Archive in San Francisco, California.

Management of the Stokes Collection

The collection presented both challenges and opportunities in terms of processing, preservation, and access. The initial donation included 125 large cardboard boxes (over 220 linear feet) of archival materials, approximately 80 boxes of books from Stokes’s personal library, several pieces of fine art, and two three-foot plaster-cast molds for the Joseph the Worker and the Seat of Wisdom statues designed by Bethune. The initial donation was too large to deposit at the Marian Library so it was delivered to a nearby warehouse for off-site processing. Another factor in the decision to process off-site was the generally poor condition of the collection. This included the presence of mildew, dust, rodent damage, bugs, and other particulates. By processing off-site the library prevented any potential preservation issues from impacting existing collections. Mitigating the ubiquitous mildew and dust included the use of a NilfiskGM80 Variable Speed HEPA Vacuum, recommended by a conservator, along with basic cleaning and rehousing into archival enclosures.

The first phase of processing included arrangement, preservation, rehousing, and transferring the collection from the warehouse to the Marian Library. This phase was completed over the course of eighteen months, with one archivist working an average of one day per week off-site. Processing time included 240 archivist hours along with over 50 hours of student-employee assistance. The rehoused collection consisted of 106 document cases and archival enclosures (sixty linear feet). A finding aid was created to describe the collection and includes a folder-level inventory.¹⁵

Upon completion of arrangement, rehousing, and description of the collection, the library proceeded with digitizing prioritized materials. Digitization allowed for this distinctive collection to reach a broader audience. Selection of items for the libraries’ digital collections was driven by several factors including the item’s uniqueness, research value, copyright and/or permissions, and use in a future exhibition. Garden photographs, plant lists, Mary’s gardens designs, literature,

¹¹ Stokes to Bethune, 30 March 1958, Box 23, Folder 1, Stokes collection.

¹² Edgar Schmiedeler, “Our Rural Proletariat” (1938), 5-6. *Social Justice Pamphlets*. Book 3. http://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_stokes_socialjustice/3.

¹³ Francis J. Gilligan, “Negro Workers in Free America” (1939), 3. *Social Justice Pamphlets*. Book 2. http://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_stokes_socialjustice/2.

¹⁴ Trevor von Stein, “Input – Marion Stokes & John S. Stokes, Jr. - About,” <https://archive.org/details/marionstokesinput&tab=about>, accessed April 3, 2016.

¹⁵ “Guide to the John Stokes and Mary’s Gardens Collection,” http://ecommons.udayton.edu/finding_aid/78/ accessed March 22, 2016.

and promotional materials were digitized first. These items are foundational to understanding the primary content of the collection and are free of copyright restrictions. Second, a selection of archival pamphlets on social justice, vocations, Catholic rural life, and gardening were digitized. These original primary source materials were not available anywhere else and also help support the university's commitment to social justice and the Catholic intellectual tradition.¹⁶ The archivist contacted Paulist Press and Catholic Rural Life, both of whom gave permission for the library to digitize and provided access to copyrighted pamphlets. Currently documents on the history of the Mary's Gardens movement and additional ephemera are being digitized. Through the library's digital platform, users have access to over one hundred items from the collection. So far items in the digital collections have received over 550 downloads from users around the world.

Lastly, an important aspect to the management of the Stokes collection concerns preservation of the Mary's Gardens website, mgardens.org. Stokes transferred the website to the custody of the Marian Library, along with the donation of the physical collection. In 2015 the University of Dayton Libraries implemented the web-archiving platform Archive-It. This software allowed the library to archive mgardens.org, thus preserving and providing access to Stokes's original website. Next the Marian Library will redesign the site to allow for more user-friendly navigation and an updated interface.

Future collection management will include continued digitization and conversion of audiovisual materials in fragile formats. The library plans to convert over one hundred quarter-inch reel-to-reel audio tapes and fifty cassette tapes. Once converted, these important audio resources will be both digitally preserved and accessible to researchers via the library's online collections. Additionally, the library is planning an exhibition of the collection for spring of 2017. The exhibition will highlight the Mary's Gardens movement and John Stokes's vocation as a gardener, Catholic, researcher, environmentalist, and social-justice and civil-rights activist.

Conclusion

The John Stokes and Mary's Gardens Collection documents a unique form of Marian devotion that developed among American Catholics in the mid-twentieth century. The Mary's Gardens movement encouraged Catholics to practice a natural, heartfelt form of devotion to Mary which survived the dramatic changes of the Second Vatican Council. In addition, the biblical and medieval names for plants Mary's Gardens promoted demonstrate the modern appeal of Catholicism's centuries-old traditions to its followers.

The increased space, personnel, and budgetary demands of holding archival collections in addition to book collections in theological libraries can present a real challenge. Despite the difficulties, this collection also offered outreach options such as digitization, exhibition, and programming. The John Stokes and Mary's Gardens Collection serves as important documentary evidence of a niche-yet-relevant movement in American Catholicism and provides new opportunities for researchers of American religious practices.

¹⁶ University of Dayton, General Education, "Catholic Intellectual Tradition," https://www.udayton.edu/gened/thematic_clusters/catholic_intellectual_tradition.php accessed March 22, 2016.