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6th letter from John S. Stokes, Jr., to Jane A. McLaughlin

John S. Stokes

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August 13, 1981

Ms Jane A. McLaughlin, Parish Historian
25 Nobska Road
Box 187
Woods Hole, MA 02534

Dear Ms McLaughlin:

This will complete the series of letters I have been sending you as I pull together historical information on the St. Joseph's Angelus Tower and Garden of Our Lady, and on the Mary Garden Movement inspired by the Garden, as I have been going through my Mary's Gardens files.

First, I have found a few more letters from my correspondence in the early 50's with Mr. Wheeler, Mr. Butler and Mr. Emerson, and also a letter I wrote to Alfio Fagg (unanswered - I wish I had telephoned him) relative to our quest for information about the Tower and Garden, and to our hope of seeing a wider collection of Flowers of Our Lady restored to the Garden planting (1).

Secondly, I have gone through our press collection and organized it in the form of a chronological file, from which I have prepared the attached list (2). This file includes over 200 items, almost half of which are articles, and some 29 of which (which I have asterisked on the list) make specific mention of Mrs. Lillie and/or the Garden of Our Lady at Woods Hole as the first public Mary Garden in the United States and/or the inspiration for the undertaking of Mary's Gardens of Philadelphia by Edward McTague and myself in 1950-1951. In this connection, it should be noted that the Garden of Our Lady at Woods Hole was mentioned not only in the early mass circulation articles about our work, such as the Catholic Digest and Columbia in 1953 ... but also in the first articles written about the Flowers of Our Lady and Mary Gardens by Bonnie Roberson in 1971 and Sean MacNamara in 1980, showing the permanent place the "Mother Garden" at St. Joseph's has in the hearts and minds of us who are carrying this work forward through the years.

The other side of this is that this thirty years' review has impressed upon me how many other extensive public and private Mary Gardens have come and gone during this period - as the founding gardener moved, was transferred, became ill or weakened, or died - yet the Woods Hole Garden of Our Lady continues on as an attractive, well-maintained garden ... thanks to Mrs. Lillie's wisdom and providence in establishing the trust fund endowment for its continuity.
Also, so much of what I have sent you has had to do with my interest in seeing the St. Joseph's Garden of Our Lady restored to a fuller planting of Flowers of Our Lady, that I don't want to leave the impression that I am "looking at the hole instead of the doughnut". The Mary Garden is something which exists first of all in the heart, and it was the very fact of this Garden of Our Lady, as I learned of it through reading Father Galvin's "Lillie Tower", that gave birth to the Mary Garden in my heart. And once the Mary Garden is given birth in the heart, then every Mary Garden encountered in life quickens that interior Mary Garden to love and life... and how much more is my interior Mary Garden quickened to love and life by this Garden of Our Lady at St. Joseph's which engendered it in the first place!

Thus, as I enter this Garden I see first of all that it is indeed a Mary Garden of plants surrounding Mary's sculpture, in her honor. The fact that it is set apart from everything else by the hedges and Tower immediately calls to mind that it is an apt symbol of Mary as the "Garden Enclosed" of the Song of Songs. Then, bearing the variety of religious plant symbolisms in my heart, I look eagerly (each year) to see which unique tableau of Mary's praises is presented by the plants in bloom. After rejoicing and joining in these praises of Mary, I am moved by these flower symbols to meditation on Mary's life and mysteries, on her excellences, and on her prerogatives bestowed on her by God for her place in the divine plan for creation and the human family... such that I am freed from all my immediate mundane pressures and concerns, and re-opened and re-attuned to the will of God, the mind of Christ and the promptings of the Holy Spirit for my life this day, here and now.

No matter what the particular plants are, the white plants quicken me to meditation on Mary's joys; the red ones to her sorrows; and the yellow and gold ones to her glories. Then, turning my thoughts to her excellences, the white plants quicken me to meditation on her purity; the violet and lavender ones to her humility; the orange ones to her openness to the flame of the Holy Spirit; the green foliage to her obedience; the red ones to her love, and in particular, the pink ones to the love of her Immaculate Heart; the yellow and gold ones to her glorious heavenly fruitfulness; and the blue ones to her perpetual virginal purity. Finally, the particular plant symbolisms quicken me to meditation on her prerogatives: to her motherhood, her intercession, her mediation, and her nurturing; and on her as our model, mold, matrix and way of spiritual formation.

This July the particular symbolical tableau presented to me was:

- White, purple, red and pink petunias ("Mary's Praises"): praise of Mary's purity, humility and the love of her Immaculate Heart.
- Orange marigolds (Marygolds): Mary's soul aflame with the Holy Spirit.
- Green grass and foliage: Mary's obedience and fiat.
- Red roses: Mary's love of God, as the Mystical Rose
- Day lilies ("St. Joseph's Lily"): St. Joseph's love and service of Mary.
- Ageratum and privet (both "St. John's Flower"): the Visitation and Magnificat.
- Pink geranium ("Mary's Pins" seed pods): Mary's domestic work at Nazareth.
- Yew: "Christ's Cross"
- White alyssum (cross-shaped): Mary's pure attunement to Christ's Passion
- Red alyssum: Mary's compassionate sorrows
- Delphinium: "Mary's Tears"
- Red Heliotrope ("Holy Drops"): Christ's blood drops from the Cross.
- Yellow marigold: Mary's glorious Assumption and Coronation as Heaven's Queen
- Patient Lucys ("Mother Love"): Mary's Motherhood of Christ, Church and Souls.
One of the beautiful things about the work of Mary's Gardens is that wherever you see a figure of Our Lady surrounded by some of her flowers in someone's yard, you know that whoever tends that garden has a Mary Garden in his or her heart, to which you know you can enter into immediate spiritual rapport and communion. And when we first began promoting the planting of Mary Gardens we of course hoped that people would write us for the literature and seeds . . . but we just had no idea that gardens would be planted in hearts, which would open up to us in all those beautiful testimonials, of which we sent you a small portion in our letter of August 5th.

It is our hope that gardens will take root in hearts in St. Joseph's Parish and Woods Hole . . . because then these interior gardens will want to see themselves mirrored in ever greater richness and diversity of Flowers of Our Lady in Our Lady's Garden. However, we well know that this is a matter of prayer and providence, rather than any sort of persuasion or "promotion" in the usual, secular sense.

In this connection, I would like to enclose with this letter, copies of my early correspondence with Bonnie Roberson (3), 1958, 1959, and with Sean MacNamara (4), 1972, showing how they came to join in this work in the love of their hearts. Also enclosed are copies of articles they, in their turn, came to write, articulating their particular concepts of the work . . . as they came to understand that the work of Mary's Gardens is open-ended, and essentially the cultivation of a rich tradition that belongs to all of us. We would hope that from time to time through the years, in Woods Hole, persons would emerge in similar providential fashion to participate freely and spontaneously in this work . . . and it is to this end that we hope the materials we have been sending you will be preserved and available in some appropriate way through the years. Also, I can envisage that some little leaflet might be developed telling the story of the Angelus Tower and Mary Garden, which would be available at the back of the Church, and at the Tower or Garden, for people to take with them . . . much as the leaflets I sent you are available at the National Herb Garden in Washington and the Lincoln Cathedral Cloister Garden in England (and as Mrs. Lillie's Angelus and Garden of Our Lady leaflets were available in Woods Hole). I would envisage that such a leaflet would be the fruit of hearts in Woods Hole, of people who would live with it year round, and not the product of someone from elsewhere, like myself, although I would of course be happy to consult and cooperate with any local initiative . . . just as we have in so many other parts of the country.

Finally, I would like to give a little more intelligibility to the listings from our press file, with a brief step-by-step summary of how our original modest initiatives, under God's providence, grew into several hundred pieces of publicity generating 30,000 inquiries and orders.

As I indicated previously, we decided to spread the idea of planting Mary Gardens by the concrete act of making the means for starting a garden from seed available, and advertising this. Since we hoped to reach persons who were gardeners, as well as devoted to Our Lady, we decided to concentrate our limited resources in 6" ads in the gardening sections of two metropolitan Sunday papers, the Philadelphia Inquirer and the New York Herald Tribune (5). However, concurrently with this, I was approached by Mrs. Anna M. McGarry, President of the Catholic Interracial Council of Philadelphia, with which I was active, asking me for a contribution to the program for a play the Council was sponsoring. I told her about Mary's Gardens and made my contribution in the form of placing a Mary's Gardens ad in the program. The main thing this ad produced was a "visitation" from the archdiocesan Chancery Office, which resulted in our receiving an informal "imprimatur" and "toleration" to the effect that nothing objectionable was found in our project. But about a week later, we received a response to our New York Herald Tribune ad from Black Philadelphia inmate in a New York State prison in need of a Philadelphia job offer and sponsor so he could qualify for parole. We then went to Mrs. McGarry, who found a Catholic contractor who provided such a job. Following this, Mrs. McGarry invited me to speak at a Communion Breakfast of St. Elizabeth's Parish, headquarters for the Council, on Mary's Gardens, which I did.
On the basis of my notes for the Communion Breakfast talk, I developed my first article on our work, "Gardening for Our Lady", which - out of appreciation of the inspiration of his "Lillie Tower" - I submitted to Father Galvin for possible publication in PERPETUAL HELP Magazine. Father Galvin thought it wasn't "popular" enough, and wrote his own article, "My Garden Prays", published in his February, 1952 issue... the first article on our work (5). In the meantime I submitted my article to AMERICA, who published it in their March 8, 1952 issue... our first article in print. Then came the first article on our work in a diocesan paper, THE CATHOLIC FREE PRESS of Worcester on April 11, 1952; and in May OUR LADY'S DIGEST reprinted Father Galvin's article... to round out the spring season publicity, building on our first year's seed offering, leaflet, prayer card and blessing card, (enclosed with our July 15th letter (5), and our few ads. (A copy of the AMERICA article, or, rather, a re-set reprint, was enclosed with our July 27th letter (10).)

Then, as the project was gaining momentum, Father Galvin felt it was ready for articles in mass-circulation magazines in 1953, and put us in touch with an author who wrote "West Pocket Gardens for Mary" for THE CATHOLIC DIGEST, March 1953, which is translated into French, Belgian, Dutch, Italian, German, Spanish and Japanese, as well as a braille edition, and brought us hundreds of orders and inquiries. (6)

Concurrently, our ads and articles brought Daniel J. Foley, Editor of HORTICULTURE Magazine into contact with us, who, in his article, "Mary's Gardens", in the 1953 HERBARIIST got us our start in the horticultural press; and also Father James Keane, who became intensely interested in our work, of which he published extensive articles in the February and May issues of his magazine, QUEEN OF THE MISSIONS (Q.M.), Chicago, in 1954, (copies of which I included with my July 15th letter (3),(4)).

Throughout this period we kept writing articles of our own, (July 27th letter (10)), culminating in the article "Mary's Gardens" for the hard-cover, THE MARIAN ERA VOL III, published in 1962. Generally speaking our articles, which were provided to all authors writing to us for information, enabled us to remain a "pure source" for the basic idea and inspiration... with the exception of the CATHOLIC DIGEST and COLUMBIA articles, which fell into the more "popular", "everybody's doing it" mode, which we could see were a providential facet of the movement.

Undoubtedly the most important providential augmentation of our work came when Bonnie Roberson joined it in 1958 (3). By the next year she had planted her famous Mary Garden at her home in Hagerman, Idaho, which I described in my article, "A Garden Full of Ave's" (July 15th letter (9)). This garden so quickly became renowned that she was asked to display a miniature replica of it at the Herb Society of America exhibit in Washington in May of 1962 (7), and almost immediately she began to develop Dish Mary Gardens (8), which we then replicated and exhibited in Philadelphia (9).

I have attached a number of photos and articles relative to these Dish Mary Gardens, because they make possible outward manifestations of the Garden of the Heart for vast numbers of people in cities etc. who don't have any ground for a garden, or the time, or the strength, of the money... and because, from the viewpoint of the 50th Jubilee of the St. Joseph's Garden of Our Lady, they represent still further offspring, sort of a "third generation" from the "Mother Mary Garden" in Woods Hole.

And, as a further outgrowth of these Dish Mary Gardens, Mrs. Roberson now, as of 1981, has a Mary's Solar Greenhouse... made possible by doubling the size of a solar greenhouse she won for growing vegetables through an Idaho energy conservation program competition - in which she is able to grow larger flowering Plants of Our Lady, and thus compose larger tableaus of potted plants around figures of Our Lady (10).
To provide a wider variety of plant materials with historically authentic religious names and symbolisms, Bonnie Roberson and I undertook extensive research into the names of tropical and semi-tropical plants, from which we published the attached 6-page 1965 list (11) for the indoor Mary Garden program. This has subsequently been substantially augmented.

Having become an apartment dweller myself in the past few years, I now have an East Windowsill Mary Garden in my study (12).

This, then, Ms. McLaughlin, provides a sort of framework against which you can interpret the press file list, and get a sense of how it was generated. The one thing that doesn’t show up here directly is the vast amount of time Ed McGough (who died in 1973), Bonnie Roberson and I, and now Sean MacNamara in Ireland, have spent corresponding and consulting with all kinds of people from all over the world to help them get plant materials for Mary Gardens, or get group Mary Garden programs started in their communities or organizations . . . and also all the research time we have spent in libraries, and in developing experimental seed and nursery beds for rare varieties of seeds obtained through botanical gardens etc. . . . and all the time spent photographing plants and flowers in such a way as to make intelligible their symbolical names.

The Woods Hole correspondence copies provided in my July 22nd letter provide a sample of the kind of correspondence and consulting I refer to, which is also such an important part of our work . . . that of human cooperation.

One thing I failed to mention above was the importance of the Mary Garden Exhibit we were asked to prepare for the 1968 Philadelphia Spring Flower Show, of which I enclose a photo and some press reports (13). The beauty and perfection of this exhibit garden were due largely to the contribution of Mrs. Jane Garra of Philadelphia, a prominent horticulturalist who assisted us greatly in developing our very first seed offering - both in the selection, and also in preparing the horticultural instructions and in locating cooperating seedsmen and nurserymen - and who has had a lovely 30 year Mary Garden of her own.

Also, we did a 1-hr presentation of the Flowers of Our Lady and Mary Gardens, with discussion and slides, on the Philadelphia CBS Channel 10 program, INPUT, entitled "Flower Power" in the Spring of 1969, which elicited a lot of mail inquiries.

Bonnie Roberson also designed and established a large garden for the blind at Gooding, Idaho in the mid-sixties, of which the photos and press reports are not immediately at hand.

As a final attachment I am including (14) two copies of articles having to do with Marian devotion before and after Vatican II. Not being a theologically credentialed person, I was not able to participate in the formal dialogues relative to the role of Mary in the Church, but I was able to provide some insights to Fr. Marion A. Habib, editor of THE MARIAN ERA, arising out of my reflections on Mary arising from the work of Mary’s Gardens, which he used in the last 2½ pages of his article, "True and False", in Volume V of TME, 1964. 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. This was also reflected in Fr. James Gilgien’s article on Bonnie Roberson’s work, "Catholic Ecology in the Home", in OUR LADY OF THE CAPE, March-April, 1973.
As I was going through the photos of Bonnie Roberson's dish Mary Gardens in the course of writing this letter, a thought occurred to me: would it not be possible to make a miniature "Dish Angelus Tower and Mary Garden", using miniature replicas of the Woods Hole Tower and Garden sculpture, surrounded by some small flowers... which would set forth the relationship between the Angelus Tower and Garden of Our Lady, per my letter of August 2nd? Miss Pyne's Centennial Tile is so tastefully done, that I can envisage this done somehow in three dimensions. The Tower could stand separately, with the Hannel sculpture replica placed in a rectangular dish of planter. By way of their copies of this letter, I submit this thought to the attention of Miss Pyne and Mrs. Roberson, in case it has some feasibility.

In sum, we rest with the thought that just as the Mary Garden in the heart has to precede the Mary Garden in the soil, so does the face of the earth first have to be renewed in the heart... which is why we pray:

Come Holy Ghost,
fill the hearts of thy faithful
and kindle in them the fire of thy love.

Send forth thy Spirit
and they shall be created,
and thou shalt renew the face of the earth.

It is our hope that the Mary Garden movement will make a contribution to this end. Therefore, we look for others to carry this work on...and on...and on...as long as the earth shall last and, in heaven forever. We are confident that Mary will provide gardeners forever... and we believe that in one way or another she will mold gardeners through her Garden at Woods Hole.

Sincerely yours in Our Lady,

John S. Stokes Jr.

copies: Fr. Dalzell
Miss Pyne
Mrs. Roberson


Today, as I assemble this letter for mailing, I think it appropriate to add (15) the Harvest Prayers and Blessings For The Feast of the Assumption from "The Rural Life Prayervbook" of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

Also this short translation from "Sacred Legends of Plants" by "A Priest of the Diocese of Paderborn", Germany, 1891 (my translation):

"In various German dioceses there is the custom, on the Feast of Mary's Assumption into Heaven, through well-established local practice, to bless plants (as a rule twenty in number)... which then, like other blessed objects are brought home by the faithful for religious use... Through the blessings bestowed upon them their misuse is atoned for, their healing power enhanced, and their growth commended to God's protection.

"Their gathering is relegated to the schoolchildren and thereby gives occasion to a botanical excursion, which has great appeal for them. The plant names by which the children identify them are to an extent quite original and reveal, so to speak, the propensity of folk culture... Our Lady's Bedstraw, Our Lord's Little Fingers..."