

THE ROSE MAP

BY KATHLEEN CAIN

Foreword by Peggy Williams, Denver Rose Society

There are many advantages to participating in the Speaker Outreach Program that Betty Cahill has done such a great job developing. For instance, I always learn a few new facts as I tailor the program to the audience. Did you know that Lady Beetles don't taste very good? From the audience questions I reaffirm what I know and learn what I need to spend time studying. I've met some very interesting people and heard some great rose stories. Recently, I had the pleasure of reading this essay and was given permission to share it with all of you. It struck a very personal note with me because my father kept his bird watching life list on our garage door.

On one wall of the garage, a few feet from the patio door, our father has left a map. Six of us have walked through that door for more than twenty years, opening and closing it, securing it for the night, double-checking to make sure it was locked before setting off—on a quick trip to the grocery store, or maybe on the way out of town. Yet not even our mother has ever noticed the penciled scribbling in the crimped and telling hand that reminds me of the peaks and valleys of an EKG—an appropriate penmanship for a doctor.

I squat down on my haunches to decipher it, as he would have done to draw it.

It's unlike his usual practical Nebraska maps. *N* sits on the left. Strange for him to indicate *North* anywhere but at the top. The capital letters proclaim that he wanted to remember: *ROSES*

Queen Eliz
Montjeune
Poinsetta
Peace

Strange to see him misspell *poinsettia*. "Orthography," as his father always used to call it, was a minor form of entertainment for him. No day was complete without



working at least one crossword puzzle. He pursued the spelling and meaning of exotic words with the

precision of a collector and the enthusiasm of a fortune hunter.

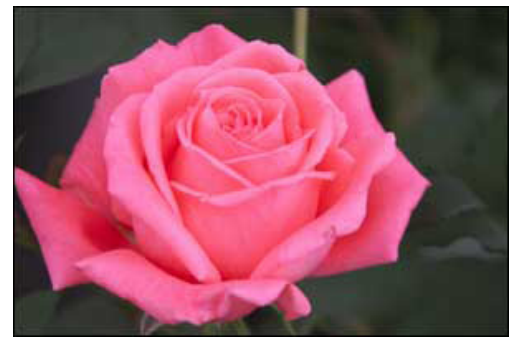
Another year, he was more precise. 4-16-88. That *N* still on the left, but this time near a treasure map of circled X's:

Blue Girl
Chicago Peace
Pink Peace
and *Tropicana*

surround *Q Eliz*. like ladies-in-waiting.

This floral court grew not in the garden of the house whose garage wall has kept the map secret all these years—even though it's in plain sight—but in the garden of our old house on Mulder Drive, in the suburb of Eastridge in Lincoln, Nebraska. It's the house the five of us still think of as "home"—the place where we grew up.

How did he do it? Tend roses? I can remember once going five days without seeing him. He was often up and away to make



left: Poinsettia, above: Tropicana

morning rounds at the hospital before we had rubbed the sleep out of our eyes. After evening rounds it wasn't unusual for him to return home far past our bedtimes. There were house calls, too, an important part of practice in those days. Like emergencies, babies arrived at all hours—he delivered almost 2000 of them, sang "Happy Birthday" to every one. How did he maintain his practice as a family doctor (then called a general practitioner), raise a family of five children—well, my mother did most of that—and still find time to pay attention to roses?

I cherish all the members of the *Rosaceae* family brave enough to live in my yard, even if they have some picky dietary habits and seem to faint at every blight, moth, and fungus that drifts by. And if one of those dangers doesn't put my roses under the weather, a host of predators always seems to be lurking nearby.

(Though I've learned they're not harmful) migrating bees chew perfectly round half moons into the leaves. Aphids, like the British heading for the New World, are always ready to colonize. And as for the thrips, well. .eww!

My father's roses occupied a reserved space on the plateau of garden atop the hill of lawn that rose up out of our back yard. The plot was off limits. He attended them with the same thoughtful care he did his patients. Always water from the bottom, he directed—during the one rare time I remember I was allowed to help—so their leaves won't turn yellow. They don't like to get their leaves wet. Always cut them after five o'clock in the evening. At an angle. Feed them regularly. Be sure they get enough sun. Roses have to have sun to survive.

With his new Contaflex camera—an antique in our digital age—he began taking 35mm slides, teaching himself about light and shutter speed and the use of filters. He snapped dozens of pictures of his roses—portraits, really. And as I recall them I realize one is missing from the map on the garage wall: *Sterling*. It comes to mind because of the care with which he posed



those blooms in my mother's vases on the dining room table. Against the mahogany, milk glass created a startling complement to a crimson blossom. A salmon-colored frill drifted across

the tiny pond of a cut crystal bowl. He appropriated a sterling silver vase to match the *Sterling*. He loved that kind of corny irony. We all do.

I know the soft gold and creamy pink gaze of the *Peace* because one lives in my own garden. But the *Chicago Peace*? Or the *Pink Peace*? What distinguishes them? Well, this is, after all, a map pointing the way to a distant country. I can try to follow it and learn to read it. Come next June (it's October as I write) I'll try to find the varieties at the Denver Botanic Gardens. In the meantime, since I can no longer ask my father—my own terrestrial guide—I'll seek ethereal direction—from the internet.

The Peace Rose has always delighted me with its

duplicity of color, of gold seeping through dawn-pink petals. How like him to find beauty in repetition. The Chicago Peace was discovered by a grower in the city it's named for; makes sense. Chicago takes her own stand on the path of beauty.

Her pink could have colored the cheek of one of the French writer Colette's



mature mistresses—and might have, since the original Peace Rose was grown by one of Colette's countrymen. Chicago's secondary color brings copper to gold. Yet like any hybrid, she has her flaws. Left alone she tends to revert to one or another parent. Her stems need constant watching and judicious pruning, which explains my father's constancy. She loves heat and doesn't mind wind, and so must have felt at home on that recently domesticated hillside carved out of eastern Nebraska prairie. In spite of being thorny, vulnerable to fungus, and lacking the fragrance of other *Rosa* sisters, she flourished well enough to be remembered years beyond her time. He wouldn't have liked that scentless feature, but would have reconciled himself to some amount of sacrifice for beauty's sake.

Not hard to imagine the restrained azure of *Blue Girl*. And yes, there she is, on the Michigan Bulb Company's web site, in full digital glory. I remember her now. At five inches or more, her "silvery lilac" blooms would more than cover the palm of my outstretched hand.



left: *Sterling*, top: *Peace*, above: *Blue Girl*

Small as a plant, though—at three or four feet, no taller than a child. She was introduced in 1964, so I can date both garden

and map. As an amateur naturalist, I know that Blue flowers were once rare in nature. He would have been drawn to her for that reason alone. But if her blue was uncommon in those days, it's less so now with the

ability to manipulate genetic material: to lift pigment from one species and insert it into another. Blue roses are getting *truly* bluer. As a man of science, I suspect he would disapprove, or certainly have mixed feelings about “Frankenrose” as he would probably declare, before thinking out loud about the pros and cons of artificial creation versus cultivation by hand. Still...he admired the rare and unusual.

And *Queen Eliz*, what of her? Was it a lace collar of white petals for the Virgin Queen? Oh, I see I have got the wrong Elizabeth; not I, but II. *Q. Eliz.*, as he shorthanded her, is as frilly and fresh as one of her current Majesty’s hats for the Ascot races. And regal,



above: Queen Elizabeth

too, summoning herself to a height of from five to eight feet. For that reason, experts urge that this well-loved favorite of more than forty years (he was ahead of his time back there in the Sixties) take

center place in an “island bed” surrounded by blues and deeper pinks. He was reading the fine print all along!

Tropicana probably wild and multi-colored, a real show-off.

And *Montjeune*? My impoverished French allows me to translate *Mont* to mount, but what of *jeune*? The word for the summer month is *Juin*. A place name, perhaps? Easy enough to find out, even though the map points the way to a now-vanished country. Ah, I remember now: *jeun e*= young.

That garden of fine rose ladies disappeared decades ago, when new owners bought our old family house. And for some reason unknown to me, my father never took up rose gardening again with the same enthusiasm he did in those early, busy years of our family life and his working life. He never stopped loving roses, though, and loved to visit the rose garden at Antelope Park each year. But he just took what was growing in the new house and left it at that. Whenever we had a family

slide show, though, those Mulder Drive rose portraits were always a feature. My brother Dan has inherited the love of roses, and taken time to learn what it takes to care for them properly.

As time would have it in the settling of estates and affairs, a man was called in within a few months to paint the garage walls a fresh flat white. The original treasure map was lost. I’m glad I found it before that happened, so that, as the family historian, I could make the only copy. Part of our family history through roses. I feel lucky that I was taught to pay attention to small things, especially where *N* should be located on a map.

KATHLEEN CAIN loves roses better than she knows how to care for them—although after attending a lecture by Denver Rosarian Peggy Williams, she has no more excuse for the latter! Cain is a poet and writer and the author of a nonfiction book titled *The Cottonwood Tree: An American Champion* (Johnson Books/Big Earth Publishing. 2007).

Notes and Resources

Blue Girl: Family: Rosaceae (ro-ZAY-see-ee)

Genus: Rosa (RO-zuh)

Cultivar: Blue Girl

Additional cultivar information: (aka Cologne Carnival, Kölner Karneval, KORgi)

Hybridized by Kordes; Year of Registration or Introduction: 1964

Note from: www.amityheritageroses.com/HybridTeas
Sterling Silver Fisher 1957 Most nurseries have dropped this lovely rose from their offerings because it is disease-prone and not particularly vigorous. Well, I have to have this first of all purple Hybrid Teas in my garden and so we offer it for those who see things our way (typically we run a waiting list even after warning about the disease and vigor problems). Strong citrus fragrance, not too many thorns, medium green semi-glossy leaves. Upright 3 x 2 ft. when it’s doing its very best. A bit hardier than your average HT. Does best in a dry climate. 30 petals.

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Photos courtesy of Heirloom Roses, Jackson & Perkins and Vintage Gardens.