

Azaleaphile

Along the Garden Path: Memories of My Grandfather, Frederick Paddock Lee, and His Azalea Garden

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When I remember my grandfather, I think of his garden; or rather, I think of him in his garden. He always wore khaki pants and a long-sleeved shirt, old navy blue tennis shoes, and a cap, which appeared to be similar to an English or Irish navy wool seafaring cap with a leather brim. He worked diligently and methodically, weeding, mulching, and transplanting, a wooden bushel basket or two always nearby. In later years, a small metal tripod stool stood nearby where he would rest between jobs, surveying the garden he created and loved.

As a child, I believed that working in his garden was all he did or had ever done. By then he was retired from his law practice and spent most of his time on horticultural matters. I did not learn of all the other accomplishments in his life until after his death in 1968. My grandfather was born in 1893 in Lincoln, Nebraska, and shortly thereafter moved with his parents to Rutherford, New Jersey. When asked at a later book signing party for *The Azalea Book* what started him on plants, he responded, "I was brought up in Rutherford, New Jersey, and as a boy I used to take walks in the Hackensack meadows, identifying plants."

My grandmother was fond of saying that my grandfather really should have been a scientist in the field of botany, but alas, his formidable mother had other plans for her eldest

son: After graduating from Hamilton College in 1915, he enrolled in Columbia Law School where he obtained a M.A. in 1916 and a law degree in 1918.

The following year my grandparents moved to the Washington, DC area. Grandpa was first hired for the position as legislative counsel to the US

recognized for his skill and expertise in constitutional law. In the early 30s, he went into private practice and later formed his own law practice, Lee, Toomey and Kent.

Taking Root

With a personal loan from Professor Chamberlain, Professor of Public Law at Columbia University, my grandparents built their lovely family home in 1929 on Glenbrook Road in Bethesda, Maryland. In 1911, Professor Chamberlain had given a generous gift to Columbia to establish the Legislative Drafting Research Fund. Out of this Fund grew the Office of the Legislative Counsel. Mr. Chamberlain, therefore, figured prominently in providing my grandfather with not only his first job out of law school, but also his home, and indirectly, the beautiful garden of my childhood memories.

My grandfather designed the house and specified which building supplies would be used. An architect drew up the plans based on his specifications, and the home was built for the cost of \$29,000. The initial landscaping was an additional \$5,000, mostly for retaining walls and drainage, but did not include the purchase of plants. I have no record of the cost of the plants he bought over the ensuing years. However, I do have an extensive list of all the "shrub and herbaceous plants (including bulbs) on the pre-



The pathway into the Lee garden in the 1960s.
(Photo supplied by Marian Klenk)

House of Representatives and later moved to the US Senate. Washington, DC, at that time was still a sleepy southern town that closed up for most of the summer when legislators went home to their constituents. My grandfather made quiet inroads in government service and was soon

mises in August of 1965 whether or not the shrub or plant is mature or young, large or small, in poor condition or growing well.”

My grandfather had over 450 azalea varieties alone, including: Gable, Glenn Dale, Ghent, Kaempferi, Kurume, Mollis, Pericat, Ryukyu, Satsuki, Southern Indian, Yerkes-Pryor, and other miscellaneous hybrids. This was in addition to a combined total of 700 bulbs, perennials, annuals, and other shrubs including 36 rhododendrons. He kept two extensive plant lists, one alphabetically by plant name, the other by location of the plants in the garden. The lists were updated in 1968 prior to his death.

I never felt Grandpa's garden was planted for show. Even now as an adult looking back on all the pictures and plans for the layout of the plantings, it is clear to me that the garden came directly from his mind's eye—where it was already in full bloom—long before he put one plant in the ground or set one stone in the pathway. This is not to say he did not experiment and change his mind, transplanting, adding new hybrids, and dividing overgrown plants to give some away. However, the basic structure of the garden remained the same and lovingly framed the house he had designed. Although my grandfather had a keen scientific mind, the garden was his soul's work. I asked him once why he never went to church. He replied, “I feel closer to God right here in the garden.”

Weeding and Mulching

A year after I was born, my parents returned from overseas where they were stationed with the US Foreign

Service. We spent the next few years living with my grandparents until my parents were able to buy their own home. We moved to a home close by, and I spent a great deal of time visiting my grandparents and playing in the garden. My father would help out in the garden and soon started his own with plants given to him by my grandfather. My father really took to gardening, and our various homes over the years were always nicely landscaped with azaleas. However, Dad started out on shaky ground when he was the soon to be son-in-law before his marriage to my grandfather's youngest daughter, Bar-



The Lee Home and front garden in full bloom. (Photo supplied by Marian Klenk)

bara. To ingratiate himself with my grandfather, my father offered to help out in the garden a few days before the wedding. “All right, you can weed, but watch out for the azaleas,” said my grandfather.

“Which ones are the azaleas?” asked my father.

“Maybe you'd better mow the grass instead,” replied my grandfather.

In the garden, I could play and do whatever I liked as long as I stayed on the paths and didn't pick the flowers. I only strayed once, when at the age of five or six, I decided the little wooden stakes with metal tags and funny writing on them would be fun

to collect. I pulled up quite a few and proudly showed my collection to my grandmother who gasped in disbelief. I was not allowed to keep my bounty, and I trust my grandfather's knowledge of his plants was sufficient to put the nametags back in the proper places. He always wrote the scientific instead of the common names of the plants, which annoyed me because I never could pronounce them. I was, however, familiar with one particular Morrison Back Acres azalea hybrid. This hybrid was named the Marian Lee azalea after my grandmother. I just called it my grandma's azalea.

Speaking of plant tags, how

Grandpa eventually procured the ties to attach the tags to the plants is an amusing story my father likes to tell. One evening Grandpa asked my father to join him for dinner at a restaurant near his office. Mr. Saul Alinsky happened to be at the restaurant and joined Grandpa and Dad for drinks. Saul Alinsky, who penned *Rules For Radicals*, was one of the most radical political and

labor organizers in the 50s and 60s. Over martinis Mr. Alinsky tried to enlist my father in his political crusade saying, “We can always use bright young men like you.” Before my father could even think of a response, Grandpa leaned over and said, “Over my dead body. You have a wife and child to support.” I don't think my father ever seriously considered the offer. He ended up working for AT&T (Ma Bell) for 28 years. As it turned out, Ma Bell was instrumental in supplying Grandpa with wire ties for his plant labels. Grandpa's potting area contained several bundles of brightly colored batches of thin telephone wire, which

he found far superior to any other tie. If my father had heeded the siren call of Saul Alinsky, Grandpa would have been out of great wire ties for his plant tags.

My grandfather also shared the love of gardening and azaleas with his younger brother George Sterling Lee (Ster), who edited the American Horticultural Society's *Daffodil Handbook* and grew an extensive azalea garden at his home in New Canaan, Connecticut. I remember Grandpa and Ster working for hours silently side by side in whichever garden they happened to be visiting at the time, with only an occasional nod to each other. They also kept up a lively correspondence on plants, horticultural articles they were working on, US National Arboretum goings on and the like, but one passage in a letter to my Uncle Ster particularly amused me. My grandfather wrote:

Dear Ster,
...*The Montgomery County Sentinel* is sending around a photographer in the morning to take a color picture of the garden. They wanted to know if I couldn't wear a complementary color such as a yellow jacket or shirt. Unfortunately, I have no yellow wearing apparel. I mention this so that you can acquire suitable garments in case you have your picture taken with azaleas in New Canaan.

Regards,
Fred

I loved the fieldstone and brick house my grandparents built as much as the garden. Grandpa designed the house with several wings and lots of

nooks and crannies, which provided great hiding places. He had beautiful southern pine beams placed in almost all the rooms. The house also had a lovely step-down living room and built-in bookcases and cabinets in almost every room. Of course all the windows opened onto lovely views of the garden. The house proper, however, was my grandmother's territory, and I spent many hours happily in her company.



Frederic P. Lee and wife Marian Armstrong Lee on the terrace over-looking the garden in 1967. (Photo supplied by Marian Klenk)

My grandmother shared her husband's passion, but not his knowledge of azaleas. She did become an expert on local wildflowers and won many blue ribbons over the years for her flower arrangements. She also served for years as president of the Montgomery County Women's Garden Club, during which time she oversaw the planting and landscaping of many community buildings such as Suburban Hospital and a local library. During the spring and summer eve-

nings when it was not too hot, she would sit with my grandfather on the garden terrace where they would have drinks. Friends would often join them and stay to dinner. Dusk was also my favorite time in the garden, when the colors were at their loveliest as the day drew to a close.

How Does His Garden Grow?

I knew my grandfather during his retirement during the 1960s, when his garden was mature and the azaleas literally cascaded over the retaining walls. I felt I really was in a magical land, with many of the azaleas twice my height and the tall oak trees forming graceful arches over the pathways. But aside from the actual work of gardening, his intense interest in horticulture led him to devote countless hours to researching and writing articles for several horticultural publications, such as *The American Horticultural Magazine*, where he also served as an officer and editorial advisor, and the American Rhododendron Society's quarterly bulletin. His horticultural expertise extended to other shade-loving plants

as well, such as hostas. In addition, for 22 years from 1946 to 1968 he served as the chairman of the Advisory Council of the US National Arboretum. I remember driving with my grandmother many times to pick Grandpa up from a board meeting at the Arboretum, although I never visited the gardens until the dedication of the Lee Azalea Garden.

While my grandfather had an extensive legal career, and horticulture was a hobby, it was as close to a profes-

sion as one could come without being paid. My grandfather's legal abilities and connections did come in handy for the benefit of the US National Arboretum when, from time to time, my grandfather had to appear before the appropriate congressional committee to secure funding for the US National Arboretum. My grandmother recounts one such time when the person scheduled to go before the committee on another matter prior to my grandfather was given a difficult time by the committee members. My grandmother was not so sure the Arboretum would fare well. But apparently, my grandfather was either well connected or very persuasive, because his testimony went off without a hitch and the Arboretum got their funding.

In 1958, a few years before retirement from his law firm, he wrote *The Azalea Book*. My mother, who had been a secretary in the Foreign Service, had the required skills to type up the original draft. I remember being left with a sitter (which did not please me) while she happily went off to "work." Actually, I think she was thrilled to be doing something other than childcare and working for such a great "boss." He paid her too, and she was always pleased to have been a part of the work it took to put the book together.

I have a copy of *The Washington Star* newspaper column, "The Rambler," which covered a book signing party for my grandfather held at the "Georgetown home of Joseph A. Seeley," who was an attorney with the Federal Trade Commission. Henry T.

Skinner, a close friend of my grandfather's, was Director of the US National Arboretum at the time and was considered one of the country's foremost azalea experts. Mr. Skinner was quoted as saying, "This is a most amazing feat. Here we have a new volume on azaleas which is probably a closer approach to the definitive than anything written by a horticulturist and it's by a lawyer." Actually, this quote is funnier today in light of the reputation acquired by lawyers in the past several decades.

After his retirement, my grandfather kept up extensive correspondence with old colleagues, friends

you for Christmas. As you know, it was already eaten up before you left here, and I didn't give anybody else a bit except the teensy one that you had. I am really shocked that you do not like maple sugar as well as I do; it shows that your mother and father have not brought you up properly.

With love,
Grandpa

The demise of his goldfish was a tragic event in our young lives. There is nothing quite so startling as coming upon goldfish floating on top of the water just as you are about to give them nourishment. At the time I thought my grandfather was blissfully unaware of these childhood happenings. Apparently not; he sent this to my cousin and his oldest grandchild.

Dear Kathryn,

I have sorrowfully to report that the goldfish are no more. However, they created a lot of excitement and interest while they were on hand. Your grandmother thinks that their demise was due to Liza's having put a tremendously excessive amount of fish food in the bowl. Your grandmother had taken over the responsibility

for changing the water and the like, and I hope she's not trying to use Liza as an alibi...Despite the said outcome, thank you very much for the present. It was a noble experiment while it lasted and has certainly contributed to my knowledge of goldfish.

With love,
Grandpa

During his retirement, my grandfather also received many invitations to speak at various association and club events, but in later years he turned most of them down. By then his rheumatoid arthritis was so severe he



The Lee garden contained formal elements as shown in this photograph of Lee and a friend taken by the fish pond in 1946. (Photo supplied by Marian Klenk)

and family members. Many letters to friends and family were sent in jest, but with sincere thanks, for family and friends were always sending him candies, cookies, jam, nuts, and all sorts of goodies. However, the letters to his grandchildren show his quiet, teasing humor at its best. I couldn't understand why my mother laughed so much when reading them. I always took them quite seriously.

Dear Marian,

I think maple sugar candy is the best candy there is, and I was delighted to receive the two boxes from

could barely walk and only with the help of a cane. I would race by him on the stairs impatient with his slow progress, never realizing the constant pain he had to endure. His hands were badly deformed by the disease, which made it difficult for him to do anything with them and impossible for him to garden. He lamented this condition many times in his correspondence. The best he could do was sit and supervise the various handymen he hired from time to time. However, the painful arthritis did not diminish his sense of humor. One invitation he turned down was from the local women's garden club. In this correspondence he showed his mischievous side that I did not always recognize as a child. I took him much too seriously at his word. I hope Mrs. Ernest Lewis did not.

Dear Mrs. Lewis,

I am sorry to be unable to attend the luncheon on May 17th. The presence of so many lovely ladies would stimulate two unfortunate present tendencies of mine. One is to wriggle like a small boy when having to sit still; the other is to drop all the best china and silver that comes to hand.

Sincerely,
Fred Lee

Transplanting

My grandparents traveled extensively in the 1950s after their children had grown. They took regular trips up and down the eastern seaboard stopping at the major nurseries along the way. My grandfather would spend hours talking to the owners, trading advice and information. He brought home many new and interesting plants and somehow managed to squeeze them all in.

When the garden became too crowded, he dug up and gave many plants to friends, to family, and to the grounds of various private and public institutions. My grandparents took me to lunch at one such private institution, the Cosmos Club in downtown Washington, DC. As we drove in by the garden, Grandma pointed out the

azaleas and said that most had come from Grandpa's garden. I found this mildly interesting, but I was more preoccupied at having to go in the side door. Women were not allowed in the front door at that time. Even when Eleanor Roosevelt was scheduled to speak before the members, she had to go in the side door to enter the Club. My earliest feminist tendencies had been insulted. This just made no sense to me, but Grandma seemed content enough, and I enjoyed the rare pleasure of a meal out by myself with my grandparents.

In spite of all my grandparents' travels, home was certainly where the heart was for both my grandparents, and never more so than at Christmas. The garden was blanketed in snow, which always seemed to come in time for the holiday. My family stayed over and all the other grandchildren came by on Christmas Eve. The house was always decorated with fresh greens, our favorite being the small lollipop tree with real lollipops inserted in the greenery. My grandfather sat in the living room keeping an eye on the tree decorating and enjoying, but staying out of the way of, all the commotion. These times formed some of my fondest memories. Although it was too cold to be outside, the winter garden was beautiful in its own right. The winter snow in Washington was usually wet and would gracefully bend the branches of the trees and plants, forming icicles on the tips.

Full Bloom

One spring in the early 60s, the garden looked magnificent. All the shrubs and flowers were in full bloom, all at once and set off by the backdrop of a crisp blue sky. That year, the garden was on the Montgomery Country Garden Club tour. I recall dressing up in my best Sunday dress and patent leather shoes. I was determined to play hostess with the mostest that day offering all comers a private guided tour. After all, I knew all the best secret hiding places—behind the compost bin on top of the

driveway wall, behind the cold frames in back of the house, and the crawl space under the house in back of the cement dividers in the basement. Forget the azaleas! Guests were going to get their money's worth with me. I was thanked, but politely refused by all.

My grandparents must have been amused but never said anything. I hovered around the visitors until I got bored and went over and sat by the fishpond. I remember looking up and seeing my grandfather sitting on the stone bench behind the fountain talking with friends and other azalea enthusiasts for most of the day. I did not realize then that I was seeing him in his element at his happiest. It's funny what you remember that actually happened in times past and what you sense but cannot articulate until years later. I sensed a peacefulness in that moment that has stayed with me all these years.

My grandfather once wrote, "Beautification is more important than most people realize. Much of the fighting going on today would disappear if people were trying to make the world a more beautiful place." No matter the season, the beauty of my grandfather's garden has stayed with me as I fondly remember my time along the garden path.

For Further Information

Contact Marian Klenk directly for more information on the garden:

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Marian Lee Klenk is a free-lance writer and lives in Palm Harbor, Florida, with her husband, Jonathan, and her two active boys, Walker and Joey. She is in the process of growing an extensive herb garden in the sandy, inhospitable Florida soil and heat, but alas, it is not the same as growing beautiful azalea plants.