

# *Camellia Personality*

## **A Pioneer's Search for Camellias**

### **Robert O. Rubel, Jr.**

*Joseph H. Pyron*

Upon starting Longview, a nursery specializing in Camellias and Azaleas in the Mobile area in 1915, Robert O. Rubel, Jr. of Kentucky soon tired of propagating the few named varieties then available. In Mobile itself and within a 60-mile radius of his nursery, Mr. Rubel found many interesting but unnamed old varieties. Possibly many were old lost label plants imported from Europe, the Orient or the Atlantic Seaboard prior to the War between the States. Some of them had acquired local names meanwhile.

According to Mr. Rubel: "the earliest documented evidence of camellias brought to Mobile was found at the Mobile customhouse. An original invoice, dated December 18, 1838, listed thirty double camellias of five sorts, from Jas. & Chas. Walley, Liverpool, England, shipped on board the "Minerva" Marshall to A. B. (Abraham Bartlett) Homer, Mobile, Alabama." There probably were earlier shipments unrecorded.

This old letter from Mr. Rubel's correspondence files expresses the difficulties with which he was confronted:

July 21st, 1930

Mr. H. H. Hume  
P.O. Box 2877  
University Station  
Gainesville, Fla.

My dear sir:

Acknowledging yours of the 19th inst.

It would be a great help to the trade if the camellias of the present day were correctly named, and some means of establishing a standardized nomenclature brought about.

In my search for camellias in the South, I have located more than one hundred distinct double flowering sorts, with the addition of many semi-double and singles. In very few instances, the names were known

to the owners of the old plants, however, I have found the same variety of plants under different names, although they have been growing in the same immediate neighborhood. For instance, local nurserymen sell a semi-double under the name of 'Augusta Delphonse', while Mississippi nurserymen offer the same variety under the name of 'Jenny Lind' or 'Lynn'; and in Georgia it is offered as 'Hermes' at one nursery, and as 'Prince Albert' at another nursery, and on the west coast it has still another name which at this writing I do not recall.

This is only one instance of many such, where two or more names are given the same variety of camellia.

Even the so-called common 'Sarah Frost' is offered locally as a double red, rose, cerise, scarlet, and deep pink, by various nurserymen, and I have noted three distinct varieties of camellias sold as 'Sarah Frost'.

The variety I know as 'Pope Pius IX' is a full double rose form, rather flat flower of the water lily type of deep rose to crimson color, 120 petals diminishing in size to the center, and occasionally the outer petals are marked with the stripes of light pink or white, but never noticeable unless the flower is pulled apart. It is a vigorous grower with distinct foliage, easily recognized by the foliage, flowers naturally January 15th thru February in this section. I know of three trees 12 to 20 feet high near here. 'Kelvingtonia' I do not know.

Within the next few years I expect to have a monograph, illustrating all the varieties of camellias I have located in the South, and I now have most of the 100 or more varieties photographed on 5 x 7 films, but lacking experience in handling a camera, I find it necessary to re-photo quite a few varieties.

In addition to photographing these camellias, I have records showing number of petals, structure of flowers, colors as

compared with an imported color chart, and in many instances have made a pH determination of the soil in which the plants were growing. Some varieties show a distinct color variation either by dark shades or light tints, depending on the hydrogen Ion value of the soil. It has required considerable work and time to gather this information together, and sometimes I wonder if it is really worthwhile?

While I have purchased a number of old books in Europe containing illustrations and descriptions of camellias that were popular 60 or more years ago, I have not been able to locate copies of Berlèse Monograph or the Belgium Monograph, that could be purchased.\* There are several sets of the monographs in the U.S. and I hope some day soon to compare my notes with these old works with a view of straightening up the name situation.

My observation of local nurserymen who propagate camellias have been that they go out and buy cuttings from bushes without ever seeing the flowers or the plant when in flower. They simply take the word of the owner, that it is a "Beautiful Pink, Red or Whatnot". I have known thousands of camellias to have been propagated locally from trees that fail year after year to open their flowers, and from single flowering sorts of no merit whatever. So long as these methods are pursued by nurserymen, we can hardly hope to build up an interest in these fine plants.

Should you have occasion to visit in the vicinity of Mobile, and will let me know of your coming, I will be glad to show you the photo's, and drive you about and show you some of fine old specimens in this section. Mobile was fortunate in securing a fine lot of camellias from France 60 or more years ago, thru a French florist who located here. Then too the Langdon Nursery, established in 1854 also imported many fine varieties which were sold over a large territory in the South.

The majority of the camellias in Alabama are distinct from those found in Louisiana, at least that has been my observation. The latter state has some wonderful camellias in size of plants and flowers, but most of these camellias run in peony form rather than the full double without sexual organs.

As far as I have been able to determine, there are 65 named varieties of camellias in this section, but I am equally sure the names of very few are correct. Many years

ago, a nurseryman imported camellias to Louisiana and peddled them from a wagon, naming the varieties after prominent people of that state, without regard to the true name. Such instances as this only brings about more confusion at this time, making it almost hopeless to establish correct names. I issued an illustrated catalogue several years ago on camellias, but have none available at this time. Your name will be added to my list and a new copy sent you when published.

The sale of azaleas has enabled me to collect and build up a stock of camellias, which I sometimes doubt if it is a wise hobby, but I have given in to this weakness regardless of the ultimate profit.

Sincerely,  
Robert O. Rubel, Jr.

"LONGVIEW"

Home of Robt. O. Rubel, Jr.  
CAMELLIA SPECIALIST

Mobile, Ala., U.S.A.  
4710 Moffett Rd.  
June 22, 1965

Friend Joe:

If you have a file on camellia price lists and catalogues in this country, check some of the named varieties offered by nurseries in the early days. Actually there were very few camellias offered by horticultural names, and no evidence given for the authority of the names.

Local nurseries sold them by color. One nurseryman sold 'Sarah Frost' offering it by name, and if any one ordered a red, crimson, dark pink, cerise or any color shade or tint in that range, 'Sarah Frost' was so labeled by that color and shipped. In addition there were some three different varieties of plants sold locally as 'Sarah Frost'.

'Mathotiana Alba' was dubbed 'Blood of Christ', by the gardener of/at Bellingrath Garden. Frankly, I located a 'M. Alba' about 5 miles from my home around 1930 and contracted to buy cuttings for propagation. No name was known for this plant at that time. From one of the cuttings propagated, the pink sport developed in my nursery. EUREKA! Naturally I thought I struck the jackpot in a new one. A visiting New Orleans woman who saw the flower raved over the beauty and wanted to buy my only plant. It was this visitor who suggested it should be called 'Queen Victoria Blush'. Certainly the name struck my fancy.

It was my intention to propagate it heavily and put on market, but never had more than a dozen plants propagated.

True I had heard of C. 'Souvenir de Bahaud Litou', but had no knowledge of its being a sport of 'Mathotiana Alba'. Incidentally, this latter plants sports a pure pink flower, similar to 'Pink Perfection'.

My first sight of 'Souvenir de Bahaud' was early August 1954, while visiting the nursery of De Bisschop at Ghent, Belgium. Their plant grown in a large tub, heavily shaded greenhouse was about 10 ft. high, compact, and had one blossom left over from spring blooming. Remember its cool in the summer months, and flowers can be had much later in the season.

My error in date of seeing that bloom. Just checked my records and it was September 15, 1954 of my visit. Enclosing snapshot taken of Rodger De Bisschop in front of a greenhouse that afternoon, also a copy of camellia varieties they propagate.

Propagation is by side graft, on very small plants grown in 2 or 2 1/2 inch pots. They propagate 25,000 annually and sell budded plants to the florist trade in European countries, average height 18-24 inch. In their 4 page folder they describe 'Souvenir de Bahaud Litou': Imbricated light rose, beautiful variety. The only flower remaining on the plant was delicate light pink such as I sold as 'Queen Victoria's Blush'. Mr. De Bisschop told me they bought from the old French sisters nursery 65 years earlier when starting their business at Ghent.

Rubel

A man of boundless energy, Mr. Rubel determined to collect plants or cuttings of the best of the many old varieties in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. He advertised in the state Agricultural Market Bulletins for cuttings and plants, asking for a flower and a few leaves with instructions on how to ship and its history and name if known.

#### WANTED—TO BUY

Double flowering japonica plants. State color, height of plant and cash price wanted. P.O. Box 702, Mobile, Alabama.

Often these proved to be duplicates of varieties in his collection, but occasionally he came across something different. Many were badly infested with scale or showed lack of fertilizer. Mr. Rubel often sprayed

such plants without charge if nearby or gave specific information on their needs. He always reimbursed the sender for postage.

On each specimen received he numbered, kept detailed notes and tracings of petals, buds and leaves. On those he thought worth propagating, he purchased cuttings, usually at \$2.00 per hundred.

Mr. Rubel often explored unpaved, deep rutted sandy roads in the back country in search of worthwhile varieties. When he found a variety worth purchasing or propagating he often paid cash in advance with the understanding that it would remain in its location until he could clear it of scale, fertilize and root prune.

Here is one of the replies to one of his ads for cuttings:

Grand Bay, Ala.  
Mar. 5, 1930

Mr. Robert O. Rubel  
Crichton, Ala.

Dear Sir:

Have at last succeeded in obtaining some kodak pictures which I am enclosing. The bush being in the shade, we had to catch it when the light was best.

If you wish to come to my place, pass thru Grand Bay and continue on down the concrete road until you come to a cross-road, on one corner of which is a small square cottage with a galvanized roof: turn to your right there, and go a block, turn right again, go on across the creek bridge to the first turn which is a left-hand turn, then keep on about 3/4 mile, bearing to the left when you will be in sight of the place, can tell it by the trees when still 1/2 or 1/4 mile away.

We are in the backwoods proper, and it would be best to come when the road is dry. The county has allowed a road and will begin to work on it soon, so I am not doing any work on it this winter.

As to the price of the bush, of course I wish to get as much for it as I can, for I certainly need the money, but when you see it if you think \$50.00 is too much I will let you set the price at what you think is right. Went past your place a couple weeks ago, wanted to stop, but did not have time.

Sincerely,  
E. B. Holland

As a part of his deal he usually offered

to give the seller a rooted plant of the variety or if the seller had more than one plant of the variety he would give them a plant of a different variety.

Special shipping cartons and postage were provided the seller of cuttings. In the carton Mr. Rubel sent a few cuttings showing size desired and exactly where to cut at a node.

One of Mr. Rubel's greatest contributions to camellia culture was making these old unnamed or locally named varieties available to collectors and nurseries.

When he encountered the numerous duplications in names and varieties, he realized the need for straightening out camellia nomenclature. Forty years ago there were few books on camellias available. This led to Mr. Rubel's hobby of collecting all available books of color plates such as *Berlese* and *Verschaffelt*. He advertised directly and through rare book dealers and eventually assembled a very fine camellia library. Fortunately through his generosity and that of Mr. and Mrs. William P. Kemp of Goldsboro, North Carolina, this outstanding library has been donated to the American Camellia Society. See Keeton's article: "Robert O. Rubel, Jr. . . . He has Collected the World's Finest Camellia Library" in the *American Camellia Yearbook* for 1967.

While this library is very interesting the color plates were not always of assistance in identifying the old varieties he found along the Gulf Coast. He often made accurate sketches or tracings of the petals, petaloids, leaves and flower forms to supplement the detailed descriptions of the various varieties he encountered. As a further record of his findings he trained himself as an expert photographer. These photographs were black and white, for color photography had not developed to a satisfactory stage at that time; however, these photographs record many details. Hundreds of these prints and negatives have been given to the ACS Library.

The study of nomenclature is a slow, painstaking process, necessarily a widespread study, involving many people, much research and exchange of information. Mr. Rubel was one of the first to realize the need for a truly national, even international camellia organization primarily devoted to such study. He was thus one of the enthusiastic supporters of the American Camellia Society upon its organization in 1945 although he could not

attend the discussion and organizational meetings in Savannah and Macon. Rather than arbitrarily assign local names or rename the old varieties he was collecting and propagating, assigned lot numbers to these until their correct names could be determined. Many have never been identified with Old World varieties. An example of the compounding of nomenclatural confusion is found in Mr. Rubel's account of the variety presently known as 'Blood of China' †.

The Brothers Industrial Gardens, founded in 1885 as a Catholic boys institution, raised nursery stock, flowering plants and vegetables on Lafayette Street north of Dauphin in Mobile. Mrs. Henry Stoutz told of her husband buying a small potted *Camellia* from the old nursery in 1905. The variety was not sold under name nor was the original source known.

Mr. Stoutz presented the plant to a friend, a Mr. Hammel, also of Mobile. Following the deaths of the Hammels in 1923 the plant was returned to the Stoutz family. From this Mrs. Stoutz rooted thirty cuttings. A few of these were selectively disseminated by Mrs. Stoutz during the 1930's. Mr. Rubel, realizing the commercial value of this fine variety, secured cuttings from Mrs. Stoutz's original plant in 1929. He released the variety to the trade about 1934 as Lot no. 107, an unknown variety. By 1940 the variety was very popular and in great demand. It was readily available from several nurseries.

Mrs. W. D. Bellingrath in 1935 purchased and moved the original plant to Bellingrath Gardens. The variety still remained unidentified and unnamed until 1936 when an old French gardener at Bellingrath Gardens, Paul Thublin, who declared it to be 'Victor Emmanuel'. This misidentification was quickly picked up, followed and even compounded by many nurserymen although Mr. A. A. Hunt who had formerly been associated with E. A. McIlhenny's Jungle Gardens at Avery Island, Louisiana, but at that time on the staff of Bellingrath Gardens, contested this identification. Mr. Hunt, a knowledgeable plantsman, was familiar with the true 'Victor Emmanuel' which Mr. McIlhenny had imported for Jungle Gardens, then the finest *Camellia* collection anywhere. Nevertheless the name stuck as no one else came up with a name and the variety was widely sold as 'Victor Emmanuel' for a number of years and in fact is still too often

sold under this name.

Meanwhile Mr. Rubel challenged the name and proposed the name 'Blood of China'. In May 1938 he published a 4 page brochure giving evidence that this name, originally spelled 'Vittorio Emanuele' as published and illustrated in *L'Illustration Horticole*, Vol. XIV in 1867, could not be applied to the Stoutz variety. This was a Verschaffelt introduction propagated from a plant sent to them by Mr. Palazzi of Venice, Italy. This is described as a flesh color with rose undertone and occasional red stripes, medium size and formal double. Certainly this should have never been confused with the Stoutz variety. The McIlhenny Catalogue of 1937 listed both 'Victor Emmanuel' and 'Victor Emmanuel II'. Neither of these names can be applied to the variety in question. Mr. Rubel proposed the name 'Blood of China' be used until the correct name could be ascertained. This name still stands unchallenged after 30 years. At that time China had been invaded by Japan and the United States had great sympathy for the Chinese people. How times have changed!

The old catalogs of Mr. Rubel's Longview Nursery, long ago discontinued, list many varieties by lot number accompanied by photographs and descriptions rather than by some trumped up name as many nurserymen did. This practice by some other nurserymen tended to confuse nomenclature and many popular varieties as a result have numerous synonyms. For example 'Mathotiana' has numerous synonyms and there is still considerable argument as to whether the variety we know in America as 'Mathotiana' is the true variety. Possibly the problem will never be solved to the satisfaction of all concerned. Old descriptions and illustrations are rather vague. Mr. Rubel carefully avoided compounding the confusion in nomenclature by assigning lot numbers.

Mr. Rubel wrote and published *Camellia Culture under Glass for Florists* in 1936. This little book has long been out of print and is now a collector's item. In the foreword he writes:

"It has *not* been the author's personal ambition to write a book. This one was undertaken because of the insistent requests for such a treatise, from numerous sources during the past ten years."

*Practical Camellia Culture: A Treatise on the Propagation and Culture of the Camellia Japonica* by Robert J. Halliday,

1880 was long out of print but considered very practical by Mr. Rubel. At his own expense he published a facsimile edition in 1945. This also is long out of print.

In one room of the office at Longview is a well equipped chemical laboratory for testing soils. There is X-Ray equipment used in treating camellia seed in an effort to induce mutations. These treatments were failures as were those made by scientists and amateurs. Mr. Rubel says that he killed bushels of camellia seed during the years of his experimentation. Still another room was especially designed as a photographic studio with a northern exposure skylight for photographing under natural light, also elaborate spotlights and filters for special effects were installed. There is also a well equipped dark room where Mr. Rubel did his own developing and printing.

Although Mr. Rubel planted hundreds of thousands of seed from his own crosses and those imported from Europe, China and Japan he considered few of the resulting seedlings worthy of introduction. One of his introductions, 'Roosevelt Blues', a muddy purplish red of no special merit, was purposely put on the market merely as a reflection on President Roosevelt whose New Deal policies Mr. Rubel thoroughly disapproved. Oddly this variety became much in demand because of its name and Mr. Rubel's reputation as a nurseryman.

Wishing to be relieved of his responsibilities for operating the nursery, Mr. Rubel leased it to Mr. Cliff Harris, a Mobile businessman and Camellia hobbyist, for a few years. During this time Mr. Harris selected, patented and introduced several of Rubel's better seedlings including 'Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II', 'Walter D. Bellingrath', 'Harrison Jones', 'Augusta Equen' and its sport 'R. O. Rubel'.

Mr. Rubel specialized in and developed special techniques for growing plants in containers. These were shipped to Camellia collectors all over America and several foreign countries. He refused to sell his plants to Alabama residents, partly due to the state sales tax he would be required to collect from Alabamans. Local and other Alabama residents—anyone with an Alabama license tag—were asked not to visit his nursery. He had no intention of trying to compete with the many camellia nurseries then springing up in the Mobile area who specialized in mass production of commoner varieties. He also feared that

scions of his rare varieties might get out if his nursery were open without restrictions. He erected high barbed wire topped fences equipped with an elaborate burglar alarm system. On entering the front gate an electrical contact is made starting a police car siren and two headlights come on at night at the far end of the entrance road, enough to frighten away any intruders. He also has an unlisted telephone so as to discourage visitors, yet if he is expecting a wanted visitor he is most hospitable.

Robert O. Rubel, Jr. is truly a remarkable man who over the years has done much to further Camellia culture.

\*EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Rubel eventually purchased two sets of the 3 volume Berlèse: *Iconographie du Genre Camellia*,

one set of which is now in the American Camellia Society Library. He also acquired four volumes of the thirteen volume Verschaffelt: *Nouvelle Iconographie des Camellias* (1848, 1849, 1852, 1854) now also in the ACS Library. Some years ago Mrs. S. J. Katz and the late Mr. Katz donated a rare twelve volume set of Verschaffelt to ACS. Within the next few years ACS hopes to publish a complete catalog of the Rubel Library and other acquisitions comprising the Society's Library.

‡See Rubel: History of Camellias in Mobile Area. ACS Yearbook, p. 239, 1952; also Griffiths: Nomenclatural notes 4. American Camellia Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 23-27. 1953.

