

Edmond Riggs: The Real Man

by Richard Sloan*

My mom was born in 1891. She was the youngest of eight, the only one born in a “modern” house, not in a log building, in southern Iowa. This was a prosperous, frugal family, part of a group of extended family and friends who had moved into the area within five years of it being taken from the Native Americans. On the farm they cut pond ice and stored it in sawdust for summer cooling; plucked geese for feather beds and pillows; quilted for use, not show; made their own clothes, with help from a widowed aunt working for her keep; fed harvest crews; had no heat in the bedrooms; took produce into town, a day long round trip, to return with oranges, sugar, shoes, etc.; tacked rushes under the rugs for the winters; learned from the McGuffey’s readers at Halfway Prairie, a one-room country school; and helped bury rows of people, dead of some contagion within the same week, at Pleasant Divide, a country cemetery. They moved into town in 1900 when her brothers left home. They experienced a life we can scarcely imagine.

Her father was wounded at Shiloh, one of his brothers killed beside him, another died at 18, of dysentery, in prison at Tyler, TX, captured in southern Arkansas in the last year of the Civil War. “We are coming Father Abra’am, three hundred thousand more!” What were they fighting for—to free the slaves? The extended family entered the country at Charleston, SC during the 1820s. They soon moved west and north to Indiana, then Iowa. The story is they hated slavery, having been treated as slaves by the English before they left Scotland. Stories get embellished and the “truth” is subject to spinning. We can’t comprehend the way people lived and thought that long ago.

But the slaves were freed, and about forty years after 1865, in the first decade of the 20th century, Edmond Riggs was born black, in south Louisiana. What did life hold for him? My African-American contemporary friend here in west central Arkansas wasn’t allowed to go to high school when he was young, and we were born over twenty years after Edmond. Prospects were bleak, and the future for young blacks continued to have severe limits for over fifty years after his birth. Few of his generation could rise to their potential. What could he accomplish?



‘Edmond Riggs’

Photo by Patrick O’ Connor

I “met” Edmond Riggs when I read an extensive interview: “Edmond Riggs: Man of Memories, Stories”, written by Christine Word, which appeared in the Lafayette Advertiser April 12, 1987. The article is preserved in one of Marie Caillet’s scrapbooks of the history of Louisiana irises, collected over six to seven decades, and now in the SLI archives at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette. Marie taught there, and early on had students who had the “drop of black blood” that would ever relegate them to a lower status, girls whose appearance gave no indication they were “colored”.

At the time of the article, Edmond was 80, living alone in a one-room house in the Projects of St. Martinville, LA. He was a mix of the peoples who have lived in south Louisiana. His father provided for his family by making railroad ties. His mother lived to 106, and was expert at making and administering home remedies. His grandfathers had fought on opposite sides in the Civil War. Edmond learned the ways of the swamps, fished with his dad for spoonbill catfish, whose eggs were sold north for caviar, and began to grow plants to

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sell, out on islands in the swamps, where they wouldn't be stolen. Marie showed me now fragile handouts he used to advertise his azaleas and other plants.

Tom Dillard found a folded pamphlet among our society archives. It contains a reprint of an article by Perry Coppens, from *Gardening Magazine*, about various native irises, an iris poem by Helen Swanson, from *The Flower Grower* magazine, and two iris pictures—one dated 1936, so it dates after that year. The front page is titled “Our Native American Iris Worthy of Greater Use” and shows of picture of a group collecting irises in Louisiana, including Dr. Small. At the page bottom, is printed “Edmond Riggs St. Martinville, La.”. Clearly, this was a quality item, and Edmond Riggs presented the irises as significant additions to gardens.

In 1944, he registered 22 Louisiana irises, plus one registration is by “Mrs. Riggs”. Mrs. Riggs is a mystery. Neither Barbara Nelson nor Marie Caillet, who visited his rural home near St. Martinville more than once in the 1940s, remembers any sign or mention of Mrs. Riggs, and there is no mention of a wife in the newspaper interview. When I tracked down and talked to Christine Word, she didn't really recall her interview, so I have no information. He lamented that he had no one to bury him. “Mrs.” may simply be an error in the 1940's AIS checklist.

Edmond became an a library assistant and traveled with the bookmobile for 18 years. This is probably how he met Ike Nelson, when Barbara checked out books for the family, but Riggs got to know others prominent in the white community through his plant sales.

His irises, probably mostly *I. nelsonii*, are quite likely extinct or have lost their identities. They were collected plants or seedlings chosen from bee crosses among those grown in the garden. Cultivars with such wonderful names as ‘Evangeline,’ ‘Lafayette,’ ‘La Louisiane’ and ‘Sunrise Lights’ are probably forever lost. Edna Claunch requested his ‘Lafayette’ for the Rochester, NY planting, but received no response.

It may well have been impossible for Edmond to have been a SLI member, attend society meetings, or enter the iris shows during those years. He couldn't attend high school since there was no high school for blacks in St. Martinville. Social restraints didn't keep him from wide reading and self-education. “I travel in books. I think about Russia, read a book, and I'm there. I've walked the Great Wall of China.” He credited one of his teachers at the black Catholic school he attended with his philosophy that there are two important things in life. “Education and religion—those two things—they can't ever take that away from you, no sir.” His library work was like that of a missionary.

Marie relates a good story on Edmond's interaction with Minnie Colquitt. They had corresponded about irises grow-

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ing in the swamps. A collecting trip was arranged, and it wasn't until the Shreveport ladies arrived for the adventure that they realized he was a black. That didn't stop the trip, and I like to think some of those very collected irises are in the family trees of modern award winners.

If you ever explore the archives of our society, read the full article. Christine Word wrote well. You will receive an impression of the real man, as you read what he knew of the Native Americans of south Louisiana, his experiences as a “grave digger”, of the body buried in a barrel of whiskey at St. Martinville, of his being present at a hanging and a lynching, of the attempted electrocution which merely tickled the subject, of his deep and wide learning, and of his wit and personality.

Our loss is he was forgotten when the social barriers dropped. He could have been invited to share in the modern society, and results of advanced hybridizing, a gentleman from whom we would have learned and enjoyed knowing. He might have known our respect for his accomplishments, so much achieved during an era when skin color remained more important than content of character.

Edmond Riggs, American, died an elderly man. With his passing in 1993, a wealth of iris knowledge and experience went mute and was lost. I don't know the circumstances, if he had a funeral, those attending, where he is buried, or if a stone marks his grave. I do know we need to remember and appreciate this man, a significant participant in, and contributor to, the lore and history of the flowers we so enjoy. My Louisiana iris introduction, Edmond Riggs, hopefully, does honor to his memory.

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