LUTHER BURBANK

A Biographical Sketch

Many of us first learned about Luther Burbank as school children when we celebrated Arbor Day each year on Luther Burbank's birthday, March 7th. Today, particularly in Sonoma County where Luther Burbank lived and worked, we find many places named in honor of this great man: Burbank Avenue, Burbank Highway, Burbank Plaza, Burbank Savings and Loan, and Burbank Center for the Performing Arts to name only a few. Without doubt, Luther Burbank is Santa Rosa's best known citizen.

This world-renowned horticulturist was a young man of New England when he emigrated to Santa Rosa, California, in 1875. His dream was to make the world a better place in which to live by improving the plant foods we eat. As a student, Luther Burbank discovered the teachings of Charles Darwin whose theories he was determined to apply to plant breeding and plant improvement. By carefully selecting plants with desirable characteristics, then hybridizing them, he would develop bigger and better plants, That he succeeded is, of course, history. In his fifty-odd working years he single-handedly developed over 800 new plants; and it is partly because of the sheer scope of his experiments that he achieved success and world acclaim.

When we review his life and work, we must place Luther Burbank against the backdrop of his time. His work created many controversies in the scientific community of his day, with his competitors in the field of horticulture, and later in the religious community. But he captured the attention of the public at large, and they loved him.

As a result of his pioneering work in developing so many new plants, Luther Burbank emerged to rank with other giants of his day, such as Henry Ford and Thomas Edison as one of the American heroes of progress.

His Early Life

It is of interest to note the scope of American history covered by Luther Burbank's family. His father was born during the presidency of George Washington, and Luther's widow died in 1977 during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. This indicates the breadth of the man. He knew people born in the 18th century and married a person who lived into the latter part of the 20th century.

Luther Burbank's family came from England in the 17th century and settled in Massachusetts. Luther's father, Samuel Burbank, outlived two wives. His third wife, Olive Ross, the mother of Luther, was a member of the well-known Burpee seed family of Philadelphia, founders of the company which one day would be one of Luther's best customers and supporters.

Samuel Burbank sired fifteen children, half of whom died in early life. Olive bore him three children: Luther, Alfred and Emma. In time, Olive and her three children would all migrate from Massachusetts to Santa Rosa. Luther was born in Lancaster, Massachusetts on March 7, 1849,

during the Gold Rush in California. His family was not poor but neither were they rich. His father was a farmer and brickmaker with a high respect for education. During the period of Burbank's youth, Massachusetts was the most literate state and the Burbank's lived in proximity to famous people of the day, many of whom were visitors to the Burbank home and included Emerson, Thoreau, Webster, the Alcott's and Longfellow.

Luther's mother had a strong influence on him all his life. It was evidently from her that he inherited his love of gardening and feeling for growing things. He claimed that one of his earliest recollections was of the beauty, peace and fragrance of his mother's old-fashioned garden. She had the uncanny ability to make anything grow. (Her father, too, was amateur horticulturist who had originated several new varieties of grapes.)

As a young boy, Luther was insatiably curious--a curiosity he retained throughout his life. Between the ages of ten and fifteen he began to learn about nature first-hand from his older cousin, Levi Burbank, a college president and professor of geology who resided at the Burbank farm at the time. Together they roamed the countryside investigating the wonders of the natural world.

Luther said, "It was Levi who may have crystallized my formless thinking and shaped my vague theories until he made me want to know, not second-hand, but first-hand, from Nature herself, what the rules of this exciting life were."

Luther was a shy, sensitive child. He attended school in a red-brick schoolhouse and was taught by two of his older sisters. In 1864, at the age of fifteen, he entered the Lancaster Academy which was a prep school for Harvard and Yale.

During the summers, Luther learned wood turning and a patternmaker's trade in a Worcester plow factory and showed considerable mechanical aptitude. His supplementary lessons in drawing quickened his observation and gave him a facility for making accurate measurements which later proved valuable in his work with plants. While attending the Lancaster Academy he did well in English composition and math, but was excused from delivering committed speeches because of his shyness and had to compensate by writing double the required number of themes. In later life when he was called upon to speak, as he often was, he usually began by saying, "I would rather make a flower than make a speech".

At the Academy, Luther spent much of his time at the Lancaster Library where he discovered the writing of Charles Darwin. Darwin's Origin of Species had appeared in 1859 and caused a furor all over the world. Interestingly enough, Luther Burbank never read that work; however, he credited Darwin's work on Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication with being the turning point of his life. Public controversy ran strongly against Darwinism in rural New England at the time, but this merely added fuel to young Luther's enthusiasm. The book piqued

his curiosity regarding the ability to grow earlier, bigger and better vegetables and fruits by careful selection and cross- breeding. In later life Luther would never cease to say that Darwin was the master in whose steps he walked.

After working the summer of 1868, he gave up his job at the plow works because he was unhappy working inside with all the sawdust and noise, and it was decided he should become a physician instead. Because of his father's illness, he did not return to the academy in the Fall. In December 1868 h.is father died, and Luther knew he was faced with earning a living.

Luther's mother and her three children sold their portion of the Burbank home in Lancaster to one of Luther's uncles and they moved to the small town of Groton Junction.

Farm at Lunenburg and Potato Story

Then in 1871, when Luther was twenty-one years old, he used his inheritance from his father's estate to buy seventeen acres and an old house at Lunenburg, near Lancaster.

He planted a truck garden and sold vegetables to make a living. Shortly thereafter, his mother and sister Emma sold their home in Groton Junction and purchased a house in Lunenburg with property adjoining Luther's. This was a pattern which they would follow in later years when they came to join Luther in Santa Rosa.

It was on the truck farm at Lunenburg that Luther, through an amazing stroke of good fortune, developed the famous Burbank potato. While tending his potatoes one day he noticed a seed pod ripening on an Early Rose potato. For centuries potatoes had been reproduced by cutting them apart and planting the pieces, each of which contains an eye. This is called cloning--the plants produced will be an exact replica of the parent plant. Because of this form of propagation the potato had long since lost the necessity o! producing seed pods.

Luther knew that a potato seed ball was rare. He also knew that there was a need for a new large, white, fine-grained potato that would keep well because the potato blight of the l840's which caused the potato famine in Europe had spread to the United States. In 1861 the Early Rose potato was imported from Chile; and though it was small, watery, and kept poorly, it was the only potato available at the time of Luther's seed ball discovery.

Luther anxiously watched the seed ball grow. From his reading he knew that potato seeds do not grow potatoes true to type, and once in a while, they produce good new varieties of potatoes. You can imagine his distress when he went to his garden one day only to find the seed ball had disappeared. He dropped to his knees to search the ground, thinking the wind or a dog had knocked it off; and sure enough he found it.

The seed ball contained 23 seeds, 10 of which would fit on the head of a pin. Luther planted them and then used the only two plants which produced a different type of potato. From these

two plants he built the Burbank potato from which is descended today's Idaho Russet--the most important potato variety in the United states today.

Burbank was twenty-four years old when he unearthed the first Burbank potato.

The following year he sold his potato stock to James Gregory, a seed man from Marblehead, Massachusetts, for $150 and ten tubers to keep for himself. The luckiest part of the whole incident was the fact that Mr. Gregory named the potato the Burbank Seedling. This had a great deal to do with Burbank's name becoming a household word.

Arrival in California

In the 1850 1 s two of Luther's older half-brothers, George and David, had come to California and settled in the area of Tomales. Then in 1874, Luther's younger brother Alfred left Massachusetts and settled in Santa Rosa to work as a carpenter. From correspondence with his brothers, California sounded to Luther like a gardener's paradise. So he sold his Lunenberg truck farm, paid off his mortgage, and set out by train for the nine-day trip to Santa Rosa. He had $660, which included the $150 from Mr. Gregory, and his ten potato tubers. He arrived in the Fall of 1875 and was astounded by the natural wonders of California. It was upon his arrival in Santa Rosa when he wrote home his famous quote, "I firmly believe from what I have seen that this is the chosen spot of all the earth as far as Nature is concerned." In those days letters from other places were shared with friends and townspeople in the East, so Luther wrote this on a special piece of paper which ended with the request that his family not tell anyone how wonderful it was for fear that "all the scuffs would come out here, get drunk and curse the whole country"

Santa Rosa in 1875 was really a small town with 6 hotels, 7 churches, 22 saloons and 726 houses.The population was 3,000, half of whom were under eighteen years old. There were wooden sidewalks, and Bell and Edison had yet to provide the world with electric light and telephone.

California was in the middle of a recession due in part to the bankruptcy of the Bank of California. When Luther arrived in Santa Rosa he found Alfred unable to find carpentry work. The winter rains came, and they lived together with several other immigrants from the East in a shanty, pooling their food and doing whatever odd jobs they could find. Despite these early disappointment, Luther continued his great sense of optimism and entertained a genuine belief that this was a place where he could do what he wanted to do. He spent many hours hiking around Santa Rosa in areas which we now know as Doyle Park, admiring and collecting seeds of wildflowers, becoming acquainted with the native plants and trees. He also spent several weeks with his brothers in Tomales and it was in Tomales that he planted his ten tubers on George's property. He was never able to do anything important with his potatoes since at that time there was great resistance to white potatoes in California. (Later on, the white potato became the chief potato sown on the Pacific Coast, but by that time Luther had ceased to grow it.) On his return to

Santa Rosa Luther found his brother Alfred moving out of the shanty. Several of the immigrants had decided to return home to the East, but Luther was determined to stay on. He walked the 19 miles to Petaluma over muddy roads and fields and there persuaded W. H. Pepper, owner of Petaluma Greenhouses and Nurseries, to take him on. He seemed very satisfied to have found a job and remained through the winter of 1876 until Spring 1877. During this time Luther had been living over a steaming greenhouse at Pepper's which adversely affected his health. He gave up his job and returned to Santa Rosa where he stayed in a crude bachelor's cabin until his mother and sister Emma arrived in the summer of 1877.

Olive Burbank bought a house with four acres at Tupper and E Streets for the three of them. Luther's health soon returned. During the day Luther worked as a carpenter, and in the evenings raised fruits and vegetables for the market on part of his mother's property. That first yeas he earned $15.20; the next year S84.

Prune Story

Once again, fortune seemed to smile on Luther. The time was favorable for the establishment of a nursery in Sonoma County. Because of the depletion of the soil by extensive wheat growing, local farmers were turning to fruit growing. Now that the railroad, which had first come to Santa Rosa in 1870, was available fruits could be safely shipped out of the area to the East. The prevailing newof most Californians of the day was to achieve immediate financial success and Mr. Warren Dutton, a prominent Petaluma banker and merchant, was no exception: he wanted an instant prune orchard.

Dutton in early 1881 asked for an orchard of 20,000 bearing prune trees by the end of that year. He had been told by other nurserymen it couldn't be done. Luther Burbank, however, agreed to tackle the :project and succeeded, because of a procedure he had read about called "June budding." He first set up tables in a greenhouse and on them placed almond seeds on wet sand covered by burlap, then more sand which he had carried from Santa Rosa Creek. When the almonds sprouted, he planted them on two acres of his mother's nursery property and rented another five acres nearby. He asked a friend, who bad a prune orchard, to supply him with 20,000 prune buds when the buds first appeared on his trees. Luther grafted the buds to the young almond seedlings, then broke off thin tops above the graft so all growth would go into the graft. This process had been used extensively for peach trees in the South, where the growing season is longer and warmer, but Luther was the first to use it in California. In

nine months he had delivered all but 500 of the trees and was proclaimed a "Plant Wizard" by Mr. Dutton. He earned Sl,000 that year and as a result of the prune feat was "made" in California as a nurseryman.

Purchase of Burbank Home and Goldridge Farm

By 1884, Luther Burbank was well established as a reputable nurseryman who offered a wide variety of high-quality merchandise. He made $10,000 in that year, enabling him to buy the present Burbank property (then four acres) for his experimental gardens. The Burbank family moved into the small white frame house we know today as the "Burbank Home." There they would live for over twenty years.

Once again, Luther's library reading was to pay off. While perusing the stacks of Mechanics Library in San Francisco, Luther came across a sailor's description of a delicious red plum from the Satsuma area in Japan. He sent !or some seeds. In December of 1885, just eight days after the plum shipment was received from Japan, he purchased his eighteen acre Goldridge Farm in Sebastopol which offered a milder climate and more room than his nursery in Santa Rosa. He now bad enough space for large-scale experiments with his plum trees, and he began developing the hybrids that first brought him worldwide recognition. The still-familiar Wickson and Santa Rosa plums are just two of the many he would produce.

Luther used his Santa Rosa nursery for experiments that required close observation.

Because he had irrigation and a greenhouse there, he could grow plants from seeds and cuttings near his home, then later transplant them to the Farm. After being tested and perfected at the Goldridge Farm, the new introductions were then displayed in his Santa Rosa gardens for the amazement of his many visitors and customers.

Luther made the trip to Sebastopol several times a week from his Santa Rosa home.

At first he traveled by bicycle or by horse and buggy. The journey took up to ninety minutes each way and he usually arrived at the Farm about 5 A.M.

In 1888, three years after his purchase of the Goldridge Farm, Luther decided to give up his lucrative nursery business and devote himself entirely to plant breeding. He sold his Santa Rosa nursery business to R. W. Bell, who marketed standard varieties of fruit and shade trees. Mr. Bell took over an acre of the old sales, ground which became known as Bell's Nurseries. Luther retained control of the remainder of his Santa Rosa gardens and retained control of the novelties he had developed. Burbank's gardens became known aa the Santa Rosa Nurseries.

First Wife: Helen Coleman

The same year that Luther turned over a portion of his nursery to Mr. Bell, he decided to make a return trip to his home in Massachusetts. It was a happy trip for the successful nursery man and this time he wasn't so reluctant to sing the praises of California. He encouraged the local farmers to come out to this land of opportunity.

In Lancaster he learned that Mr. Gregory, to whom he had sold his potato, would erect a monument where the Burbank potato originated. He joined a tour group to visit the sights of Washington, D.C., and throughout the tour he collected rare wild and cultivated seeds.

On the return train trip to California he met a woman from Denver by the name of Helen Coleman, who was so impressed by the small-town-boy-made-good that she followed him to Santa Rosa and "allowed him to woo her until she caught him two years later." They were married in Denver in 1890, when Luther was 41 years old, and they moved into the small Burbank home together with Luther's dominating mother. You can imagine it was not a very comfortable situation. His sister Emma had married in the meantime and lived in Healdsburg.

Luther soon returned to his habit of working seven days a week, ten hours a day, and avoided social events at all costs. There are stories of Helen throwing things at him; and one day after she slammed the kitchen door in his face, blackening both eyes, he moved upstairs at the Carriage House and lived there for the remaining four years of their marriage. In 1896 they were divorced. There were no children of the marriage, and her name was stricken from all Burbank family records except for one humorous incident years later when Luther sat laughing at his desk reading a letter, and upon being asked what was so funny, he replied that the letter was from Helen's current husband asking advice of Luther as to how to get rid of her!

New Creations Catalog 1893

Meanwhile, despite domestic discord, Luther had been carrying on thousands of important experiments at his Goldridge Farm in Sebastopol. In order to appreciate the mass scale of his experiments, try to picture Luther at work in his fields. He would review as many as 10,000 seedlings in a half-hour, two workers following behind and tying white cloth to the 50 or 100 plants which he felt to be worth keeping. Everything else was burned. Neighbors would count fifteen bonfires a year on the acres around his property. They would frown in dismay when 65,000 three-year-old hybrid berry bushes or Sl0,000 worth of cherry trees would go up in smoke. It was because Luther had so many thousands of varieties from which to select that he increased his chances of finding useful specimens, and made greater improvements in a shorter period of time than other nurserymen.

His first experiments, apart from plums, were with berries and lilies. Gradually he built up an enormous collection of plantings, importing flora from around the world. Long rows of roses, watsonia, gladioli, poppies, and countless other flowers joined ranks with apples, nectarines, cherries, pears, quince, chestnuts and walnuts. From this dazzling profusion, Luther produced enough new hybrids to offer the most important publication of his career, an 1893 catalog which he called "New Creations in Fruits and Flowers." The catalog was sent from Burbank's "Experimental Gardens" to a few hundred prominent American and foreign firms.

From the time of its publication, "New Creations" began to draw reactions from botanical and horticultural institutions throughout the world. The concept of a 52-page catalog listing over a hundred brand-new hybrid plants, all of which were produced by one man, was looked upon with surprise, wonder and disbelief. Burbank's booklet was even denounced by some religious groups who claimed that only God could "create" a new plant. Nevertheless, "New Creations" made

Burbank internationally famous. It announced , some of the best and most lasting things he would later produce. The catalog was in great demand, and was then translated into foreign languages. The new edition in 1894 offered a number of new varieties, including the Wickson plum and the white blackberry. Praise poured in from all over the country and abroad. The popular press lauded his accomplishments. Further supplements to "New Creations" appeared in 1898 and 1899. By 1901 Burbank plums were sold around the world, Burbank potatoes were eaten coast to coast, and he produced his famous brilliantly white Shasta daisy, after seventeen ;rears of development.

By the early 1900's Luther was at the height of his career. In 1906, just before the "San Francisco" earthquake, he contracted to have a new two-story stucco home built on Tupper Street directly across from his small frame house using the proceeds from the sale of spineless cactus to a dealer in Australia. Prior to the 1906 earthquake Luther and his mother moved into the new home. Downtown Santa Rosa was leveled in the earthquake. The old frame house suffered some damage but remained in use as office space and for seed storage. Remarkably, the greenhouse, which is still standing today suffered no damage.

Many people of his day felt that this substantiated the belief that Luther Burbank possessed some special God-given powers.

One of the reasons Luther built this larger home was to welcome the many visitors who flocked to his doors. The public loved him as a folk hero, and visitors from far and near continued to come to Santa Rosa for a visit with Luther Burbank. Among some of the most notable were Ignace Paderewski, Polish concert pianist and champion of Polish independence; Helen Keller; William Jennings Bryan; Edwin Markham, the poet; Harry Lauder, the comedian; Helen Hull Jacobs, the tennis player, Carrie Jacobs Bond, the songwriter; and countless others. Jack London, a frequent visitor from his Valley of the Moon Ranch, was a great admirer of Luther Burbank.

Interest of the Scientific Community

Luther Burbank had no formal scientific training, but he was a believer in the power of science to make the world a better place. He had a number of! friends in the scientific community who admired his work. Among them were Dr. Edward J. Wickson, Head of the Department of Horticulture at the University of California; David Starr Jordan, President of Stanford University, Dr. Walter Howard, Director of the College of Agriculture at the University of California at Berkeley; and Liberty Hyde Bailey, Dean of New York Agricultural College (Cornell). All wrote articles for popular magazines and journals acknowledging Burbank's ability to do what others had not been able to do. They recognized that he was not making experiments for accumulating scientific knowledge, but was successful in obtaining new plant varieties through his own careful techniques of cross fertilization.

In honor of his accomplishments, in 1905, Luther was awarded an Honorary Life

Membership in the California Academy of Sciences and in that same year Tufts College (now Tufts University) bestowed upon him an honorary Doctor of Science degree.

Perhaps one of the greatest recognitions of his work by the scientific community was a grant from the Carnegie Institute. In 1900, Mendel's laws of genetics (which had been hidden away for many years and never translated from the original German) were rediscovered by a group of European scientists. Luther's success in developing new hybrid plants and flowers attracted the Carnegie Institute to an inquiry of his methods as they might relate to Mendel's laws. ln 1905, the Carnegie Institute awarded Luther a ten year grant at $l0,000 a year to further his experimental investigations and to interpret his work to men of science. George Harrison Shull, one of the foremost plant geneticists of his day, was appointed to work with Luther and submit the scientific findings of his work.

Shull made many trips to Santa Rosa in this endeavor, but he found it difficult to obtain any scientific data from Luther. Luther would walk through his gardens quietly, communicating with his plants, and find Shull's presence upsetting to his work. Remember that Burbank's method was principally to select, then to hybridize for production of variations, not to study mutations scientifically. It is not surprising that Shull soon became frustrated over Burbank's "unscientific methods." Shull found, too, that Burbank's record-keeping appeared haphazard or nonexistent. But Luther's record-keeping was certainly satisfactory to meet his needs. For example, on fruit records Luther used single sheets of paper.. He would cut the fruit in half, press it on the sheet, and pencil-trace the impression. On the sheet he would note his comments, and when he felt highly of a product he put cross marks(###) on the sheet. Then when he felt it was fit for market he would stamp the record sheet BURBANK.

Despite Shull's frustrations over Burbank's methods, he was impressed with Burbank's ability to sense slight variations in plants and to visualize the results he was after. He admired his patience and found honesty to be one of Burbank's strong characteristics. He felt that Burbank had a powerful sense o! self-esteem and a keen eye for what the market wanted, But, as a scientist, he found it difficult to apply Burbank's methods to his scientific inquiry and delayed publishing reports of his observations to the Carnegie Institute.

In December 1908, the president of the Carnegie Institute extended Luther's grant for only one more year, ostensibly because of misrepresentations of his work which were beginning to appear in the public press and which were creating doubts about the scientific basis of his work. Shull returned to Santa Rosa in the Spring of 1909 to complete his work with Luther, In the end, Shull published only one paper on the Crimson Rhubarb.

No scientific report on his five-year study was ever published.

It is interesting to note in this connection that Andrew Carnegie personally wanted the grant to continue stating that scientific results were purely secondary and that the economic aspects of the

case were its sole justification, by which he meant practical benefit to mankind, not profit to Carnegie.

It was during the period of the Carnegie grant that Hugo de Vries, a world-famous· Dutch botanist and one of the rediscoverers of Mendel's laws of genetics, was a guest of Luther Burbank. He reported that he had come expecting Luther to answer technical questions. Instead, he found Luther nearly unaware of recent scientific advances (including the rediscovery of Mendel's genetic research). What he found was a quiet, gentle, down-to-earth, regular sort of fellow who had the common touch and a touch of genius besides. He had been practicing genetics for years without realizing it. De Vries said he had found a man with no formal training in science but a man who was very good at what he did. He left, admiring Luther for his patient, persistent inquiry into all forms of life.

Eugenics Movement

Luther claimed his college was the "School o! Nature" and his plants were his pupils. He saw all life in terms of Nature; he felt he could teach and train his plants, often by the power of suggestion. He firmly believed that with selection, love, and the proper environment, plants could acquire improved characteristics which could be passed on to future generations. With this cast of mind, it is easily seen how Luther could be led to flirt with the Eugenics Movement, so popular in the early 1900's.

The Eugenics Movement has largely been discredited in our own time because of the abuses of Nazism. But we must remember that in the early 1900's there was serious concern about the "overtaking of the great white civilization" by races of color and a belief that the problem could be overcome through the proper breeding of the white race. It .was in this climate that Luther wrote an article in the Century magazine, in 1906, entitled "The Care and Training of the Human Plant." In that article he stated his belief that living things are molded by careful nurture. Burbank's philosophy here was more humanitarian than those Eugenicists who put forth that the upper classes were more biologically fit. Secondly, Luther felt that immigration had strengthened America, whereas the Eugenicists felt it was weakening the country. And, thirdly, Burbank always thought of survival of the fittest. Because of immigration, he believed that Americans were more cross bred than any nation and all the worst and beet qualities were brought out through selective environment, care, and the influence of surroundings. Interestingly, he firmly believed that the only way to avoid leaving children of the poor in their evil surroundings was to give state and national aid. His advice was to give children sunshine, love, good food, and a love of nature. The result of all these things, he said, would produce honesty, fairness, purity, loveableness, industry and thrift. It is no wonder that his article was well received by educators, parents and clergy of his day. Luther also believed in prohibiting marriage between physically mentally and morally unfit persons, a belief the Eugenicists were to enforce by the enactment of the California Sterilization Law of 1909.

Judge Ben Lindsey, a forerunner in children's rights, became a fan of Luther's as a result of his Century magazine article and in fact delivered the eulogy at Luther's funeral. Margaret Sanger, an American leader in the birth control movement dedicated one of her books to Luther Burbank because of what he had come to represent, in her view, to the American people.

"Spineless" Cactus

Despite the many demands on his time, Luther introduced one of his favorite projects the "spineless" cactus in 1905 after many years of experimentation. He had hoped to develop a spineless cactus to be fed to cattle and possibly to make profitable use of large areas of arid wasteland here in the West. There was controversy over whether he really had eliminated the spines. The Department of Agriculture looked on the "spineless" cactus as a phony promotion, pointing out that they would be devoured by desert rodents and grazing animals; and furthermore, if they were to grow as fast as Burbank claimed they would require irrigation in which case alfalfa would give greater nutrients and tonnage. The "spineless" cactus later contributed adversely to damaging Luther's reputation through no fault of his own.

With the termination of the Carnegie Grant and the skepticism of the scientific community about Luther's accomplishments, articles began to appear regularly in the popular magazines and journals of the day about the famous "Plant Wizard." Many were extravagant, distorted and untrue accounts of Burbank's motives expectations and methods. Horticulturists and nurserymen labeled him a publicity-seeker and were quick to point to his failures, more of which occurred the busier he became.

Commenting on these press accounts, Burbank stated in an article appearing in the San Francisco Chronicle in August 1910 that "The extravagant estimates of my work have been the bane of my existence. Much has been written about me by sensational writers who know nothing either of me or my work. He disavowed all responsibility for these things and stated, "Anyone with any knowledge of horticulture could discern that much of the stuff is nothing but space-writer's chaff".

Promotional Schemes

All the publicity and consequent spreading of Burbank's name and fame brought numerous offers of partnership, or to buy him out, and led to several unhappy experiences with big-time promotion.

The first scheme to "market Luther in a commercial way occurred in February 1909, about the time the Carnegie grant was terminated. The two owners of the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, who formerly had been promoters of patent medicines, visited Santa Rosa to persuade Luther to sign a contract for a corporation to be headed by them to market everything Burbank had produced. They brought with them a man by the name of Oscar Binner, who had had an association with Luther several years before in the editing of some proposed books on Luther's

work. In 1906, Luther had entered into a contract with the Cree Publishing Company of Milwaukee to publish ten volumes on his accomplishments. During that period Luther was busy with his plants and could give little time to the endeavor. The editors were left only with sister Emma's collections of scrapbook clippings and miscellaneous articles, and so Cree Publishing gave up the project. But believing that Luther's story should be told, Luther's good friend Dr. Edward Wickson persuaded Oscar Binner to return to work on the volumes. Binner, operating as the "Luther Burbank Publications," returned to work on the books, but they again were not accomplished speedily enough and the publishing project was dropped.

Fortunately, Luther had his suspicions about the offer from the owners of the Fairmont Hotel, and nothing ever came of it. Then in 1912, the Luther Burbank Press and the Luther Burbank Society sought to capitalize on the Burbank reputation, with disastrous results to the stockholders and to Burbank's peace of mind. The Luther Burbank Press, which had as its aim the preparation of a many volume history of Luther Burbank and his labors, was incorporated in May 1912. A few months earlier the Luther Burbank Society had incorporated as part of the promotion for a flood of advertising literature and stock promotion of advertisements were sent out.

Membership in the society was to be held to 500, the first 100 to be Charter Members. Originally there were to be ten volumes, but twelve volumes were eventually published. The books were copiously illustrated with colored photographs. Some sets were ornately leather bound, with deckle edges and heavy paper watermarked "Luther Burbank Press." Henry Smith Williams, who was hired to edit the work and who was the ghost writer for most of it, padded all descriptions of techniques and embellished the material with boastful adulation of Burbank.

National headquarters were set up in the little white frame house we now know as the "Burbank Home. It was in this venture that Elizabeth Waters, who later became Mrs. Burbank, was employed as a secretary.

In 1915 the company moved its headquarters from Santa Rosa to New York City. But the bubble soon burst. Demand for the books had not met expectations and the firm collapsed a few months later leaving Burbank still owed $l00,000 and with great loss to stockholders, many of whom had been Luther's friends.

In 1912, the same year the Luther Burbank Press and Luther Burbank Society were formed, Burbank entered into an agreement with Rollo Hough, an Oakland banker and attorney, and W. Garner Smith, a stockbroker, to turn over the commercial side of his business to a corporation to be known as the Luther Burbank Company, Inc. Under the terms of the agreement, Luther would be provided $300,000 for the exclusive rights to sell his products, $30,000 in cash to be paid in the beginning and thereafter the remainder in increments of $15,000 a year. This arrangement would allow Luther to give all of his working hours to the labor of his life.

Headquarters of the corporation were in San Francisco and capitalization was assured through prominent bankers and businessmen of San Francisco, Oakland and Santa Rosa. $3750,00 worth of stock was sold to the public.

-Signs of trouble surfaced when the first catalog was published in 1914. The problem was that Hough and Smith had had no experience in the seed and nursery business.

They had set up the Universal Distribution Company for the purpose of multiplying stock for market so Burbank's products could be sold in large quantities. This was a change from Luther's policy when he had control. He had sold his plants to nurseries who then would propagate, advertise and distribute his products. Hough and Smith told their salesmen to fill orders whether they had stock on hand or not. They bought stock wherever it could be found. So called "spineless" cactus, for example, was brought in from places like Livermore. Problems appeared when the plants began to grow, and Burbank was then unjustly accused of fraud by his customers. The 1914 catalog included thirty pages of standard varieties of seed which had been purchased from an Eastern firm, but being in the catalog implied they were Burbank productions.

In December 1915, a little more than three years after it was incorporated, the Luther Burbank Company foundered in bankruptcy after Burbank filed suit to recover monies he said were owed him for a promissory note. A short time before the failure of the venture, Burbank told his good friend Dr. Walter Howard that "they swindled me out of everything I had and I shall now have to start all over again."

It is a commentary on Burbank's own reputation for integrity and the esteem of his fellow citizens that little bitterness was felt toward the man himself as a result of the stockholders' losses in these two failed promotional schemes. Perhaps because he himself had suffered a severe financial setback they realized he had been the victim of exploitation.

Visit of Henry Ford and Thomas Edison

One of the happier occasions of Luther's later years came in 1915 when Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and Harvey Firestone visited Burbank in Santa Rosa. They had been attending the Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco and came to Santa Rosa in Ford's private railroad car. All the school children were allowed out of school and the city stage-managed the welcome for the famous trio upon their arrival at the railroad station. Burbank entertained them at his large Santa Rosa home with the assistance of his sister Emma and his secretary Elizabeth Waters.. Pathe/Newsreels recorded the festivities to show at the movie houses of America.

At that time, there was a strong interaction between Ford, Edison and Burbank in the public's mind. All were successful individuals who worked largely alone, who by sheer force of their examples revolutionized, in their own ways. American society.

As an example o! Ford's great admiration for Luther he presented him with the first Fordson tractor to roll off his assembly line. Luther used it at his Goldridge Farm in Sebastopol. In 1929, Henry Ford also left a perpetual memorial to Luther Burbank at his Ford Institute Museum at Dearborn, Michigan, where are located thousands of displays representing the scientific and technical progress of America up to that time. At the entrance to the museum the first display a visitor sees is Luther Burbank's garden spade embedded in concrete in the original foundation slab, together with Thomas Edison's footprints and signature which he placed into the wet cement. Then in the Greenfield Village at Dearborn where Ford literally moved buildings of significance to American history, the visitor finds the original wood wing of the house in which Luther Burbank was born. Ford had it removed from Lancaster, Massachusetts , and reconstructed on the site. The larger brick home which was constructed by Burbank's family for his family and which adjoined this wooden structure was not moved from Lancaster by Ford but a reconstruction was made at Greenfield Village. Appropriately surrounding the Burbank home is the Burbank garden - a lovely place for the public to enjoy the old fashioned flowers. In the corner of this garden Ford has placed the original small building known as Burbank's editorial office which originally stood on the corner of Santa Rosa and Tupper Streets in Santa Rosa on the old property. With Mrs. Burbank's permission it was taken down, shipped to Dearborn and reconstructed there. The large brick home which Luther's father built in Lancaster for his family was used during World War II as a firing range. The land on which it was situated is now part of Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and a plaque now marks the site of Burbank's birthplace.

Second Wife: Elizabeth Waters

Luther's secretary, Elizabeth Jane Waters, became Luther's wife a year after the visit of the famous trio. Elizabeth Waters came to California by way of Michigan. .She was a Seventh-Day Adventist and, incidentally, spoke fluent Spanish. She began work in 1914 with the Luther Burbank Press, working in the old Burbank Horne, and following the collapse of that enterprise became Luther's personal secretary. In 1916 they were married in the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco and spent their honeymoon in San Diego. She was then 29 and he was 67 years old. They lived happily for ten years in Burbank's large hor.ie across the street from the present "Burbank Horne."

Later Years

In 1917 the United States entered World War I. Burbank was an ardent pacifist, but during the war he introduced several varieties of grain to answer the food shortage. In 1918 Burbank was named to the National Emergency Food Garden Commission which aimed at inspiring the planting of a million home food gardens.

In the early 1920's plans were laid for a Burbank Memorial Park in Santa Rosa. Despite fund-raising efforts insufficient funds were raised for land purchase and the project was never completed. That land is now occupied by tie Santa Rosa Junior College. A part of the purchase

agreement and as a memorial to Luther Burbank, the oak trees along Santa Rosa Avenue were spared and no buildings may ever be constructed on that frontage area. -

0f particular interest to Santa Rosa.is is the fact that in 1921 Luther Burbank gave $5,000 to the development of Doyle Park, which was dedicated by banker Frank Doyle of the Exchange Bank as a memorial to his fourteen-year old son. Luther had spent many of his early days in Santa Rosa collecting wildflower seeds under the trees at Doyle Park.

Also in 1921, Luther began work with his friend Wilbur Hall on a book of his life and work entitled The Harvest of the Years. (It was published by Wilbur Hall a year after Luther's death in 1927.)

Then, in 1923, when he was 74 years old, Luther gave up part of Goldridge Farm, selling the three westernmost acres to a cemetery association. With this sale came his bitter realization that much of his work, including thousands of unfinished experiments, would probably be lost. His concern prompted serious consideration by both the University of California and Stanford University of the idea of purchasing the Farm.

Infidel Speech

During most of Luther's life, Darwinism and religion had existed aide by side in America. But as science moved forward by leaps and bounds, Fundamentalism rose to do battle, the focus being the Scopes Trial of 1925. Luther was always being asked his opinion on every conceivable subject and unfortunately, as it turned out for him, he couldn't resist expounding upon his thoughts.

In the Santa Rosa Republican of January 19 , 1926, there appeared a headline that "Luther Burbank Gives Views on Reincarnation Theory." Burbank had been asked by a reporter to respond to an article in Cosmopolitan Magazine, wherein Henry Ford's views on reincarnation were set forth. Burbank told the reporter, at some length, about several aspects of his own religious beliefs. The interview in its entirety was sent out over press service wires, and the world reaction started to roll. In the copyrighted interview, Burbank had said he was an infidel--a nonbeliever in many of the accepted tenets of the day. Burbank blamed much of the ensuing criticism on the public's misconception that an "infidel" and an 'atheist" were one and the same thing. He asserted his strong belief in a Supreme Being, though he admitted being a disbeliever in the established order of religious thought. In every corner of the country, and especially in religious, scientific and editorial quarters, controversy raged.

On Sunday, January 31st, Burbank drove down to San Francisco and over a nationwide broadcast, spoke from the pulpit of the First Congregational Church. He entitled his talk, "My Beliefs--Views on Human Immortality." It was a very touching, well-thought-out, intelligent sermon and if heard with an open mind should have quieted all his detractors. Luther was a very optimistic man who felt that science held all the answers; he wanted to believe in God as

revealed to him by science. The idea that a good God would send people to a burning hell was utterly unacceptable to him, and he felt that religion of the fire-and-brimstone variety was tottering. He said: "I am a lover of man, of Christ as a man and his work, and all things that help humanity. Nevertheless, just as he was an infidel, then I am an infidel today." Infidel to Luther meant not being faithful to a particular religion. He aaw Christ as an inspired dissenter. However, for once in his life the time wasn't right, and his luck seemed to have turned. In truth, he was ahead of his times.

Less than two months later, in March 1926, Luther suffered a heart attack. Despite the efforts of his good friend and family physician, Dr. Shaw, he succumbed at age 77, on April 11.

Quite naturally, Burbank's death so soon after the embroilment with the theologians over his views on formal religion surrounded the funeral preparations with an interest not entirely rooted in sorrow for the passing of a beloved man. Public ceremonies were held in Doyle Park on April 14. It is said there were 5,000 people in attendance, with automobiles standing in a mile-long double row on Sonoma Avenue.

Judge Ben Lindsey, the Denver jurist and free-thinker, fulfilled a promise made many years before to speak at his friend's funeral. Many in attendance were surprised that in his eulogy the judge defended Burbank's opinions on theology and the hereafter Following Judge Lindsey's address Wilbur Hall, a close friend and Burbank's primary biographer, read the eulogy that Robert Ingersoll had spoken over the body of his brother in 1879 which Burbank had asked be read at his funeral.

Private rites were held that same day at the Burbank Home, and Burbank was buried under the Cedar of Lebanon tree which he himself had planted in front of the old house. The Reverend Caleb Dutton, the Unitarian minister from San Francisco who had officiated at the wedding of Luther Burbank and Elizabeth Waters, performed the ceremony. "He built his life on human values, "said Mr. Dutton, "not on the values of the pedants and abstract thinkers. He was, above everything, a humanist."

The Luther Burbank Home Gardens attracts an increasing number of visitors from near and far. Through our volunteer commitment, each of us is doing our part to keep alive the memory of Luther Burbank.

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Lynne Collins, Archivist Luther Burbank Home and Gardens February 1984

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