

Oren: 1803-1895  
Nancy: - 1891  
Elihu: 1845 – 1937  
Clara: - 1928  
Edward: 1884 – 1956  
Grace: 1890 – 1975

### **The Root Glen Story:**

Whenever I have talked about the Root Glen to groups of students or clubs, we have been on the spot surrounded by the flowers and the trees – one could experience the beauty of the place. Here were the iris and daffodils so carefully hybridized by Edward Root, here were Grace's primroses, here were Nancy's sweet pepper bush and Oren's trillium, and the magnificent trees planted as seedlings so many years ago. I hope you will find pleasure in a verbal walk through it today.

My connection with the Glen goes back only to five years ago when I was asked by the then-president of Hamilton College, John Chandler, to serve on the Root Glen Advisory Committee. This was a committee set up with Grace Root as its chairman at the time she gave the property to Hamilton College. The Glen is a place that most Clintonians take their guests to see and everyone who lives in this area knows how lucky we are to have a botanical garden of our own. To walk through the Glen is pure pleasure – in a visual sense – but I have found that when you have friends along, the enjoyment is greatly increased. My companions are Oren Root, a scientist who was Professor of Mathematics at Hamilton in the middle of the last century; Nancy, his wife; their son, Elihu the statesman; Edward, Elihu's son and his wife Grace – all creators of this unique and beautiful place.

Our story begins in 1850 when Professor Oren and Nancy Root bought what is now known as the Root Art Center,\* but was then known first as The Hemlocks and later as The Homestead. Built in 1804 as a tavern, they paid \$2,600 for the house and 1 ½ acres of property. He immediately planted a Hemlock hedge along the eastern side and expanded the old orchard with new stock and graftings on the old. One of the first things Mrs. Root did was to lay out her formal garden between the house and the Hemlock Hedge. In the center of the garden was a summer house, or pergola, painted yellow and white. On either side were beds made in geometrical designs with evergreens planted at their corners. One of these was a Norway spruce, 18 inches high when planted, and which came to be known at 'Mother Britannia.' It was the subject of a Charles Burchfield painting given to Edward and Grace Root in 1929 and is now in the MWP Museum. Professor Root watched over the lilac bush at the southeast corner of the house which old Deacon Williams said was already there when he worked on the construction of the house.

Professor Root was a born collector. The two collecting absorptions of his life were horticulture and mineralogy. He exchanged mineralogical specimens with scientists all over the world and his horticultural search was no less far reaching. He was one of three

Curators responsible for the landscaping of the Hamilton Campus where their goal was to obtain a specimen of every tree and shrub – deciduous and evergreen – which might be expected to prove hardy in this climate. They planted 122 varieties of deciduous trees, 75 of evergreens, 77 of shrubs. One could suppose that descendants of many of these plants found their way to the Root property.

Before Professor and Mrs. Root with their 3 sons (a 4<sup>th</sup> was born later) moved into the Homestead in 1850, the college had made free use of the land behind the house. Both sides of the Ravine were used by students to practice their commencement oratory. Directly south of the house, the ground was considered so worthless that it had been used as a dump for everything under the sun, from hoops for skirts to wagon wheels, and Professor North's dead horse! It was large enough and old enough to have been used by the Oneida Indians. This was the 3 acre piece that Professor Root bought in 1854 and right away the entire family set to work clearing out the mess. Mrs. Root got Elihu and his brothers up bright and early to remove the brush and rubbish from the brook. With a vengeance they attacked the dump and disposed of it piece by rusty piece. The only trees there at the time were the two large basswoods, nearly submerged from sight by the refuse. All the trees you now see in the Glen have been planted or are seedlings planted by one of the Roots.\*\*

Mrs. Root loved flowers as her husband did trees. She had her spring garden in the Basin – the area previously known as the Dump. There was no shade so the flowers had excellent exposure. Under the riot of periwinkle it is still possible to trace where the path once ran down the slope between her daffodils and blue hyacinths and wild spirea. She often wondered why so few people have 'eyes to see the beauty all around their paths.'

With the Basin as a center, the Wild Garden developed around it. When Elihu was eight years old, he followed his father around through the woods tugging a basket as heavy as he could carry into which his father put every possible thing to bring back to see if it would root. Landscape gardening was one of the channels through which Professor Root's love of beauty found expression. Together and separately, Mrs. Root and her husband were always transplanting and putting in plants and shrubs, attempting to reproduce in the Ravine and around the Homestead what was found in the more distant Kirkland Glen – the striped bark maples, here and there the clethra *alnifolia* (Mrs. Root's sweet pepper bush as it was called in her native Massachusetts) and the cornus you now can see all about. The leatherwood tree was also a special favorite. He was always trying to find trees which would stand a cold climate. This explains why the cucumber tree (*magnolia acuminata*), the umbrella tree (*magnolia tripetala*) and the yellow wood are found in the Glen today.

He had a special bed near the stream which he called The Gray Bed. Here were the plants sent him by his friend Asa Gray, who as Professor of Natural History at Harvard was building up the most valuable herbarium in America. You can still see these plants today in that spot – lords and ladies, moonseed (a woody vine), and American pachysandra. Each summer he visited the swamp on Paris Hill for lady's slippers (*Cypripedia*), the one near Rome for arbutus and the high bogs of southern Herkimer

County (called Mud Lake) to bring back specimens for transplanting in his own Wild Garden. Professor Root published little as a scientist. He explained his contribution to posterity this way – “I do not expect to create much excitement by my results of a problem in Probabilities. I should be satisfied with the fame acquired from transplanting into my garden the Calypso Bulbosa, a tiny plant about three inches high, with one small leaf and one beautiful flower (purple, white and yellow) which I found in my excursion last summer to the Herkimer County marshes. Now I find it comes up with me as though in its own home. I am inclined to believe there is not another plant of the species in any other garden in North America, possibly not another in any garden in the world. I look upon this as a triumph, for the botanists told me it could not be grown in the garden at all. I *was* excited when I found it in blossom for me, and when such an enthusiastic letter about it came from Dr. Gray of the Cambridge Botanic.”

In October of 1868 four more acres were purchased. This is the land beyond the stream to the top of the hill he called The Knoll.

In the summer the boys each had his own flower garden. And so the love of growing things was instilled early in the third son Elihu, who is the statesman of our story. The sources of his intellectual strength and moral force which served him in his maturity were in the Homestead and the Glen. He had given up his early interest in painting to study law. After a successful career as an international lawyer and serving his country as Secretary of War and Secretary of State, as United States Senator, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and one of the founders of the World Court, he retired to Clinton to the Lower House, next to the Homestead where his father had lived and which his brother now occupied. In all the years between college and retirement he never missed a spring visit home when the trillium was in bloom. In retirement he retained his inherited affection for the beauty of the outdoors, with his main interest directed more to trees and shrubs than to flowers. Although he considered his trees as his palette, finding satisfaction in the different shades of green, he took great pleasure in tending the flower beds his mother had planted and cherished. Elihu Root expanded the acreage of the property planting collections of different kinds of trees – chestnut, basswood, red oak, etc.

Where Oren and Elihu had been collectors of trees, Edward, Elihu’s son, was a distinguished collector of art. His collection of 228 paintings and drawings by 20<sup>th</sup> century American and his personal art library of around 700 volumes are now a part of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute. As his background might suggest, the paintings in his collection were nature oriented. Edward Root was the first person to be invited to exhibit a private collection of contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum.

Edward inherited the Glen in 1937. His interest was in the perfection of a flower and introducing color into the Glen. Grace, Edward’s wife, was a perfect partner for his interests. While Edward loved daffodils and iris, Grace’s specialty was primroses. He spent 20 years in hybridizing the daffodil to achieve perfection in color, length of stem, width of flower and length of petal. In all he had 75 varieties. His goal in hybridizing

iris was to get a true red and true blue. The red varieties he named after local Indian chieftains and the blues for his favorite heroines in fiction.

Grace Root was responsible for planting the Japanese and Chinese primroses in the Basin – that beautiful tapestry of color running down the slope. Recently it has practically disappeared – I believe as the result of a fungus infection. Last summer\*\*\* that area was cleared and what primroses could be rescued were and the rest of the area planted to Siberian and Japanese iris bordered with hosta. Seven years after Edward's death in 1956, Grace Root, with the Lincoln Fosters, designed and planted what is known as the Hemlock Enclosure, the garden. Edward's iris (25 varieties) and his daffodils and the Saunders peonies are in the two borders which run north and south. Oren Root's shrubs and a number of azaleas and 22 varieties of lilies are intermingled with many other plants. At the top of the enclosure (the north end) are two raised beds – one acid and one alkaline. When planted in 1963-1964, 175 different alpine plants went into the acid bed and 188 into the alkaline. Both are neutral now.

The Myrtle Myth – grace Root's story about the overturning of an urn on the slope reaching up to the Knoll in 1884.

1971 – Root Glen was transferred to Hamilton College by Mrs. Root.

1975 – Root Glen Advisory Committee. The work of 25 volunteers and the support of the garden clubs throughout the district.

\*This is now the Anderson-Connell Alumni Office

\*\*As of 1854.

\*\*\*Early 1970s most likely.

This interview is from the William Palmer papers.