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An Oasis with a View

Linwood Gardens

By Jolene Zanghi

A tree peony blooms at Linwood Gardens.
JOLENE ZANGHI PHOTOGRAPH

*I*t has served as the summer home of a family with Buffalo roots. The core of an experimental horticulturist with a passion for art, landscape architecture and tree peonies. A community music school. Linwood Gardens on York Road in Pavilion is all of the above – and more. Now known for its annual tree peony festival in May, throughout the decades it has served as much more than a spring and summer-time destination where green thumbs gather to soak in the beauty of its panoramic landscape.

Something happens when you step on the grounds of Linwood Gardens. Something magical. Maybe it is the property's location, tucked in the woods on a crest of a hill overlooking the Genesee Valley. Maybe it is the peaceful feeling one receives as they stroll through the several gardens that help visitors to unwind and adore all Mother Nature has to offer. Or maybe it is the respect for nature shown by one family for more than 115 years.



William H. Gratzwick commissioned architect H.H. Richardson to design this mansion at 776 Delaware Avenue. It would be Richardson's last building.

GRATWICK FAMILY COLLECTION



William Gratwick, Jr. poses with his dog on the steps leading to the Italian Garden, ca. 1920. The garden was constructed in 1909.
GRATWICK FAMILY COLLECTION

The Gratwicks' Summer Home

After moving to Buffalo in the late 1870s, William H. Gratwick founded the Gratwick, Smith & Fryer Lumber Company with offices in Buffalo, Tonawanda and Detroit. A decade later, he hired architect H.H. Richardson to design a mansion at 776 Delaware Avenue, the northwest corner where Delaware meets Summer Street. Gratwick and his wife Martha (Weare) had three children: William Jr., Frederick and Mildred. It would be William, Jr. who later decided to use the inheritance he received from his father's successful lumber business to purchase what is known today as Linwood Gardens.

Venturing 60 miles out of Buffalo on a milk train one day, William Gratwick, Jr. came across a hill that gave him an eastern view of the Genesee Valley. Deciding it would be the perfect place for a country estate, he bought the 350-acre plot in 1901, which had previously been used as farmland by Scottish settlers.

William, Jr. commissioned plans for an arts and crafts-style home from E.B. Green and William Sidney Wicks of Buffalo. Construction began shortly after the land purchase, and was completed

between 1903 and 1904. The majority of the gardens on the estate were designed by a Boston architect named Thomas Fox. Each garden was laid out in a thoughtful way, creating a flow which led from one to the next. They were designed on an axis, separated from one another by either towering hedges or concrete walls and archways. These elements generated a feeling of a garden room.

Some may have trouble believing such a place exists. After entering the driveway and traveling around meandering dirt roads under an umbrella of trees, however, a visitor finds that the landscape opens up. "The original entrance into the property was a long and winding road through plantings of maple, spruce and birch," says Lee Gratwick, William's granddaughter, who now cares for the estate and gardens. "Many of the parks at the time were highly designed to look natural." In addition to the gardens, the sprawling estate included a tennis court and a swimming pool.

Between 1910 and 1925, the Gratwicks' summer home flourished. The family hired 30 farm hands, cooks and nannies who resided nearby to help run things throughout the season. However times soon changed, and the summer estate's heyday came to an end. "The

property was on the market during the Great Depression but because nobody could afford to buy it, it never sold," according to Holly Watson, Lee Gratwick's granddaughter. "They decided to keep the property and live as best they could." When everything fell apart, the hired help left and the gardens became overgrown. Destiny, however, seemed to play its part only a few years later, and Linwood Gardens would soon become the bud of a flourishing artistic platform and an outdoor community venue.

A Rare Plant Nursery is Born

In 1933, William "Bill" Gratwick III moved his family out to Pavilion, where they lived in the old gardener's cottage on the premises year-round. An artist, landscape architect and horticulturist, Gratwick contributed sculpture and new garden areas to the Linwood landscape. Of particular interest to Bill was the subject of hybridization. Prior to moving out to the property, he attended Harvard University and worked at a nursery in Buffalo. Boxwood, a shrub that can be seen in the gardens, piqued his interests and he began to study the plant's various growth habits, researching how to breed heartier varieties.



William Gratwick, Jr. commissioned architects E.B. Green and William Wicks to design his arts and crafts-style summer home overlooking the Genesee Valley in 1901.
GRATWICK FAMILY COLLECTION



Bill Gratwick works in the greenhouse at Linwood Gardens, ca. 1940. Nearly 75 years later, his passion for the tree peony still resonates throughout the property.
GRATWICK FAMILY COLLECTION

While attending a dinner party one night, he met Arthur Percy Saunders, a chemistry professor at Hamilton College who introduced him to the tree peony. Saunders was one of the first Americans to hybridize the species in the United States. Tree peonies – native to the mountainside and forest regions of China – are shrubs that can create massive flowers up to 12 inches; the plant itself continues to develop slowly each year and can grow to be four-to-six-foot tall.

After meeting Saunders, the natural progression of a rare plants nursery began to take form and Gratwick's deep-rooted love for tree peonies began. Acting on Saunders' advice, he imported hundreds of Japanese tree peony seeds and started grafting, taking a branch of an established plant and surgically combining it with the root of a new one. Meanwhile, Saunders worked to create an entirely new range of color for the flower. White, red, pink and lavender were already available, due to Chinese and Japanese projects throughout many years, but Saunders' experiments created yellows and mauves, which offered a new color palette.

The collaborative projects developing at Linwood continued to grow when Nassos Daphnis, a friend of Gratwick's and an artist from New York City, developed a passion for the tree peony while painting them at the estate. Daphnis visited each spring for the next 60 years. The plant became a very important asset



Dennis Sheehan, "Marshland Sunset" oil on canvas

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to the property and Gratwick began to incorporate several sculptural elements into the gardens, some of them depicting the tree peony in its bud form prior to blossoming.

Today, Linwood Gardens has 120 varieties of tree peonies (four different collections) including not only hybrids from Gratwick, Saunders and Daphnis, but also some imported from Japan.

Three Generations of Gardening Curious

For Lee Gratwick, maintaining the space created by her grandfather William and embellished by her father Bill is a way to continue her family's legacy. "What makes gardening here so interesting are the many layers of the different times," she says. "You have to respect those different periods, maintain those layers and also have fun putting your own ideas in there. The bones of these gardens are very interesting and architecturally strong."

Lee moved back to Linwood in 1980, by which time the property was in an overgrown state. A 1973 chimney fire had destroyed one wing of the summer home, while two others were removed for



Lee Gratwick moved to Linwood in 1980 and has brought the gardens back to life. GRATWICK FAMILY COLLECTION



Linwood's Italian Garden overlooks the Genesee Valley and features archways, pillars and a water fountain. GRATWICK FAMILY COLLECTION

aesthetic reasons. Though the cleanup efforts in the garden areas were not easy, she slowly reworked the plots and brought the tree peonies back to life, incorporating them into several areas of the designed landscape. This not only nurtured the plants but rejuvenated the sense of dedication her family had for creating the historical gardens.

"I think we keep it tame and it is now more of a blend of the two former family members," says Clara Mulligan, Lee's daughter. "It was very formal when the first Gratwick designed it and then it went through several overgrown phases as time passed. The outline is still there, though." The gardens of the estate are listed on both the National and New York State Register of Historic Places.

One of the highlights at Linwood is the Italian Garden, which overlooks the Genesee Valley very distinctly. This area features grand archways, cement pillars and a water garden, as well as a pear tree along the north wall – the only surviving plant from the time of the garden's inception.

Then there is the labyrinth, in the midst of what used to be an active tennis

court. Lee fondly remembers taking lessons there as a child, but when she returned years later, the court needed a lot of attention and repair. So with the help of some friends, she decided to transform the court into a labyrinth instead, using stones from both nearby and around the world.

"A labyrinth has a single circular path which leads to the center," she explains. "In a maze you don't know where you're going. The labyrinth doesn't have any dead ends or wrong turns and if you follow the path you get to the center and back out again. It is more of a ritual form."

The secret-garden-style landscape includes a few whimsical elements, too. Bill Gratwick placed a few cupolas in one area and dubbed it "Dwarf Village," telling the children the reason he constructed them on the property was to provide a place of refuge for dwarves after escaping France during the Marie Antoinette days. "My father told us it was his way of letting the dwarves know there was a place for them to stay here at Linwood," Lee says with a smile. "We even have paintings of them coming in their little caravans."



This small chapel was based on a Spanish prototype discovered by Bill Gratwick and his wife, Harriet, and built from cobblestones recycled from Buffalo's Delaware Avenue.

JOLENE ZANGHI PHOTOGRAPH

During a European trip with his wife, Harriet, Bill discovered a chapel in an olive grove in Spain. Being a landscape architect, he drew it on the spot. When he returned from his journey in 1934, he set about constructing a replica of the chapel. The material used to create the building was even more personal. Having learned that cobblestones were being torn out of Delaware Avenue in Buffalo – the street where his father grew

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Bill Gratwick's wife, Harriet, was educated at the Eastman School of Music and oversaw the creation of a music school at Linwood following the Second World War.

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Harriet Gratwick directs the children's chorus at the Linwood Music School, ca. 1953.
GRATWICK FAMILY COLLECTION

up – he immediately began collecting them to recycle and use for the chapel's construction. The structure is now used to celebrate holidays, family weddings and other various events. It is open to the public for wedding ceremonies as well.

Music School in the Lily Pool Garden

In addition to its aesthetic beauty and species cultivation, the Gratwicks' Genesee Valley estate also served as the site of additional cultural activities. From 1947 to 1963, Linwood Gardens was home to a community music school, with rehearsals and performances being held in the Lily Pool Garden. Harriet Gratwick, who studied conducting at the Eastman School of Music, directed the school and hosted a variety of cultural activities during those years. She was also the founder of the York Opera Company.

The Linwood Music School grew out of a Grange chorus that had started during World War II as a morale booster. According to Harriet's daughter, Lee, "After the war, everything was in a depressed state culturally and so this was their open window to connect with the community and give something back. Many members of the local community came to these concerts." The school

offered private instrumental and singing lessons for children and adults, and the chorus rehearsed on a weekly basis. In addition, Bill wrote children's operas which were performed with an orchestra. Musicians from Buffalo and Rochester participated.

Linwood Today

After more than a century of evolution and challenges, Linwood and its gardens continue to inspire. Every spring

when the tree peonies blossom, the Gratwick family welcomes the community with their annual Tree Peony Festival of Flowers. The three generations of Gratwick women – Lee, Clara and Holly – along with a few other volunteers, weed and prep the land for the festival. A neighbor is hired to mow the lawns and work on masonry projects to ensure the garden walls remain standing and solid.

Overall, the women agree they want their family's legacy to bring a sense of serenity and reflection to those who make the trip to the estate. "The original intention for this place was peace, country and leisure," Clara says. "When people ask you 'What is Linwood?' it is hard to tell them. It is difficult for them to understand until they actually step out onto the property. As soon as that happens, they get it."

The 2015 Tree Peony Festival of Flowers will be held from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays May 16 through May 31. Refreshments and live music, including dulcimer players and bagpipers, will be provided throughout the festival. Guests are invited to make a suggested contribution of \$8 to support the preservation of the garden. Guided tours are \$12.



Holly Watson and Clara Mulligan – two of the three generations of Gratwick women whose dedication to family and nature keep Linwood Gardens alive and well.
GRATWICK FAMILY COLLECTION



Today's Linwood Gardens are the result of over a century of dedication to nature and family.
 JOLENE ZANGHI PHOTOGRAPH

In addition to the gardens themselves, visitors also have the option to flip through binders of hundreds of photos and documents related to Gratwick history. These have been compiled by the family's good friend and historian, Richard Heye, whose dedicated efforts have been invaluable to them.

At Linwood Gardens, art is everywhere you look. You simply have to experience it. For Lee, it's about absorbing the moment: "We don't have the usual concessions or vendors. When visitors come, we hope they will leave the chaotic world behind for a few minutes and simply enjoy our gardens. It's really about connection with nature. A garden is the reflection of the natural world, a place to have a quiet moment and appreciate beauty. It is an oasis with a view." ■

Jolene Zanghi is a freelance writer and Buffalo native. She currently resides in Salem, MA, and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from Buffalo State College. A former reporter for Bee Group Newspapers, Jolene has a passion for history, traveling and smelling flowers. She would like to extend special thanks to Richard Heye who contributed to some of the historical data for the story.

For more information, visit LinwoodGardens.org or call 585-584-3913.

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