

## AWARD OF MERIT WINNER

# Roses from the McGredy Family

By Nanette Londeree, Master Rosarian

Samuel McGredy had risen to the highest level his working world had to offer; he was the head gardener. At the age of fifty, with a wife and two children, he packed up and left his safe job, got a lease on ten acres of ground with a small greenhouse, and opened the firm of Samuel McGredy & Son, Nurserymen, in Portadown, Northern Ireland in 1880. The nursery's specialties were fruit trees and bushes, and show pansies, a flower that was much favored at the time.

Sam McGredy II made a modest start at breeding roses about 1895, regarding it as more of a hobby than serious business; he raised two or three hundred seedlings a year. He realized that roses promised to be better for business than pansies ever could be. In 1905, he decided to exhibit a few of his best roses in London where his first venture won a Gold Medal for his salmon pink rose *Countess of Gosford*. From that point, rose breeding became the main purpose of his life, and he produced many gold medal winning roses. He was awarded the National Rose Society's Dean Hole Medal in 1921, and the rose world dubbed him 'The Irish Wizard'. He died in April 1926, while some of his finest roses still awaited introduction. His son, Samuel McGredy III and great-grandson, Samuel McGredy IV, carried on the breeding tradition.



'Arthur Bell'

Under the guidance of Sam III, the firm expanded its production of rose plants going up to 800,000 year by 1928, then to a million on about forty acres of ground. Sam, III died suddenly in 1934 when he was only thirty-eight and Sam IV was only two years old. On top of this calamity, like other British rose nurseries, World War II intervened and The McGredy's were obliged to grow vegetables rather than roses. During this time, the firm had been run by in-laws, and nearly thirty years later, in 1952, Sam IV took over the business.



'Handel'

He knew next to nothing about roses, and when the keys to the operation were turned over to him, what he saw was half starved roses in their pot, neglected over the war and pushed aside for other crops, just barely kept alive for tradition sake. He had no idea what to do or how to do it.

He was determined to carry on the family name and the McGredy breeding strain, but with initial failures due to antiquated methods and tired breeding stock, he set out to learn as much as he could and to try new things. He went to Germany to learn from Kordes; he drew in Eugene Boerner of Jackson & Perkins while visiting in the U.K and developed a lasting friendship with Niels Poulsen, the Danish breeder. (Reimer Kordes and Poulsen were groomsmen in his wedding.) He introduced his first roses in 1958 and had his first real success in 1959 with the floribunda *Orangeade*. While his initial focus in hybridizing was on hybrid teas, brightly colored floribundas became his specialty.



'Old Master'

In 1972, discouraged by the terrorist activity in Northern Ireland and looking for a place to grow roses that would emulate conditions in his biggest market, the U.S., he moved his whole operation to New Zealand. In the following years he has won just about every international award offered for the creation of new roses. He was also the stimulus in Britain for allowing rose-breeders to obtain royalties for their roses; up to the time he started campaigning, the only way a breeder could earn a living was through the roses that were sold through their own nursery.

Sam IV is best known for what he calls his "hand-painted" roses, roses of one color splashed or striped with another. His first release was *Picasso*, released in 1971. Its red blossoms are splashed and edged with silver white. As with many great discoveries, the two-colored rose wasn't what he was aiming for. He was looking for hardiness, and using the hybrid Scotch rose *Fruhlingsmorgen*, he found something extra – a lovely red and white rose with different patterns on every petal. Because the rose looked painted, he decided to name it for Pablo Picasso. He has a rather funny tale about obtaining the rights to the name – since he wanted to patent it to collect royalties, he needed Picasso's permission to use his name. He wrote to him asking for permission,



'Olympiad'

and got a letter from Picasso's manager saying that it was OK. The patent office turned him down because the letter wasn't signed by Picasso himself. He wrote another letter asking for the artist to sign the permission note, but instead got a scathing letter back from the artist's manager, furious because he felt Sam IV was insinuating that he didn't have the authority to sign for Picasso. Only later did Sam IV discover that Picasso never signed anything he wasn't legally obliged to, because his autograph sold for \$10,000! Eventually, the patent office accepted the manager's letter.

Sam IV has produced all types of prize-winning roses – miniatures like *Little Artist* (ARS 8.5) and *Marriotta* (ARS 7.6); climbers like the lovely red *Dublin Bay* (ARS 8.6) and or the picotee white and pink *Handel* (ARS 8.0), brilliantly colored floribundas like chrome yellow *Arthur Bell* (ARS 7.5) and the hot orange *City of Belfast* (ARS 8.0). McGredy named *Sexy Remy* (ARS 8.7) for a friend who was flattered by the idea and "very amused when the British rose growers



'Stretch Johnson'

announced that the name was in most poor taste." Again, McGredy persisted, and the rose is an inter-national favorite. Within the hybrid tea arena, he created the intense pink *Electron* (ARS 7.7); *New Zealand* (ARS 7.8) is one of the most fragrant modern roses in the garden. One of his most outstanding roses is *Olympiad* (ARS 8.8), a red hybrid tea with fabulous form named for the Los Angeles Olympics and an AARS winner.

In describing his breeding goals, McGredy says when he made the crosses between two rose varieties, his first priority is color, and then vigor. Clearly his 'hand painted' roses, *Eye Paint*

(ARS 8.4), *Maestro* (ARS 7.8), *Picasso* (ARS 7.7), *Priscilla Burton* (ARS 8.3), *Regensburg* (ARS 8.0) and one of my favorites, *Stretch Johnson* (ARS 7.8) are some of his signature achievements.

About ten years ago, when the internet was in its infancy, Marin Rose Society member Judy Pineda was active in rose chat rooms and began conversing with Sam IV across the ocean. On one of his trips to the U.S., Sam IV accepted an invitation to have dinner at Judy's house with Marin Rose Society and district members crowding in to meet this maker of heavenly roses. Sam completely engaged us in his passion for rose breeding, and delighted all with his quick wit and charm. While I had a few of his roses growing in my garden, after that night, I added lots more!



'Sexy Rexy'

*Photos of Arthur Bell* courtesy of *Help Me Find That Rose* website; *Old Master* and *Olympiad* by Gail Trimble; *Handel*, *Sexy Rexy* and *Stretch Johnson* by Nanette Londeree