

Sierra Madre's 115 Year-Old Wistaria Vine

By Phyllis Chapman



In 1894, William and Alice Brugman purchased a home on Piedmont, as it was called then, but would later have the address of 201 W. Carter Ave. The house had been built one year before by builder Amos Trussell for his daughter Winona and son-in-law Edward B. Jones when they married. It was the first wedding celebrated in early Sierra Madre. The Trussells and the Jones soon had a change of plans, sold to the Brugmans and moved away.

To enhance her new home, Alice Brugman, with her neighbor Mrs. W. B. Crisp, drove by horse and buggy to the old R. H. Wilson Pioneer Nursery in Monrovia and for \$.75 purchased a gallon can of wistaria. It was the Chinese Wistaria variety (*Wisteria sinensis*). She planted it in a corner of her front porch remarking to her neighbor: "They say Wistaria

grows fast." And grow it did.

Mr. Brugman, a mining engineer, was in Mexico when the vine was planted. He died in 1899 and Mrs. Brugman sold the home in 1906. The property changed hands until it was purchased in 1913 by Henry T. and Estelle Fennel. Mr. Fennel, who was a bit of a horticulturist, loved the vine, and gave it devoted care, even building support trellises.

Although the Wistaria is a vigorous grower, the added support of the trellises may have contributed to this vine's phenomenal growth. The arbors prevented the end tendrils from hanging down and causing the tender terminal buds to die from the added weight. Wistaria requires good drainage, certainly provided by this hilly, terraced location. There may also be an underground spring providing water to the tap root.

The vine eventually destroyed the original home, growing into the walls and fireplace and causing the roof to collapse. Mr. Fennel built a new home 200 feet to the north (the present upper home) and trained the vine to grow up to, but not covering the new residence. A portion of the foundation of that original home was saved to continue to provide support for the vine as its branches extended such a distance.

When the vine was in bloom, the Fennels would invite friends to come and enjoy the blossoming plant. Others asked to come and visitors also came from Pasadena's main hotels: The Green, The Huntington, and The Raymond. In 1918, during World War I, the Fennels opened the vine to the Sierra Madre Chapter of the American Red Cross, which sponsored a very successful fundraiser to help the war effort. 12,000 people attended the event. This was the beginning of the many Wistaria festivals and the frenzy of activities that took place year after year. With this huge annual festival, a Sierra Madre main event, Sierra Madre became known as the Wistaria City.

Many local organizations, including the Board of Trade (later named the Chamber of Commerce), the Woman's Club, the Masons and Eastern Star, the Sierra Madre Volunteer Fire Dept., etc. were involved. Many homemade items, fancy work, ceramics, artwork, gift books, and Wistaria fragrancd perfume, hand lotion and bath salts were sold at booths under the vine. Luncheons and teas were served, often with young Japanese women wearing their kimonos.

The hard work and money earned at the vine by members of the Woman's Club paid off the mortgage of their first clubhouse. One year the Fire Dept. parked 30,000 cars down on the parking lot that existed in Floral Canyon. (This was later developed and is now Sierra Meadow Dr.). Easter sunrise services were among vine activities. People came from all over the world and extra street cars were added to handle the crowds. Among the famous were Fritz Kreisler, Janet Leigh, Mary Pickford, and Norman Rockwell. These two helped select the festival's Wistaria Queen. The Packard Automobile Co. used the vine as a backdrop to advertise its automobile.

On December 5, 1936, Carrie Ida Lawless purchases the vine property from Mrs. Fennel, who was now a widow, for \$17,000.00. December 5th was Mrs. Lawless' birthday, and according to one account, she was making a present to herself of the world's largest bouquet. Also a widow, her husband William J (Bill) Lawless was mayor of Sierra Madre during 1928-29. She, herself, was a successful businesswoman having founded the Weaver Jackson Beauty Co. in Los Angeles and was active in the community, serving as president of the Woman's Club and the Garden Club.

Mrs. Lawless spent a small fortune (around \$100,000) enhancing the grounds of her new property and caring for the vine. When the festivals were held they often lasted for the weeks the vine was in bloom, not just for one day. Mrs. Lawless, a patron of the arts, also sponsored vine activities all year long. She hosted art exhibits, musicales, and poetry readings. Nearby residents objected to the constant activity and took their complaints to the City Council. Nothing was done as Mrs. Lawless presented the argument that the vine existed before these neighbors purchased their properties.

In recognition for her contributions to the community, the Garden Club planted another Wistaria in the terraced garden on the west side of what is today the Solt's garden. It blooms a bit later than the original vine and the plaque commemorating the occasion is gone.

When Mrs. Lawless died in 1942, she provided for the vine by leaving a legacy to her nephew and heir, Bruce McGill, to continue care of the property with a committee headed by the Garden Club President. In 1944, the property was purchased by Richard and Marian Thayer. Marian is the daughter of M. Penn Phillips, a well-known developer of desert property. In 1944 the vine was overgrown and in poor condition. Richard Thayer planned to chop it up and get rid of it. A protest was raised and an association was formed to protect the vine, with money provided to pay property taxes and provide year-round care.

In 1961, after Richard Thayer died, the lot was split. Marian married builder Ronald Cook who developed the west side of the property with new homes (the Floral Canyon area, now Sierra Meadow St.) and built the present Solt home for he and Marian in 1962. The upper home was sold to Joseph and Marie Feeney who raised eight children there. In 1972, Ron and Marian moved to Dana Point and sold the lower home to Bob and Nell Solt. In the late 1990s, Joe Feeney died and Maria sold the property. It was purchased in 2003 by the present owners, Dan and Dana Dorrance.

By the 1970's Vine Festival activity had about ended. It started up again in the late 70's when sponsored for one day each year by the Chamber of Commerce. The Sierra Madre Beautification Committee was the yearly sponsor in the 1980's. Approximately 500-600 people attended the festival each year. In the spring of 1989, Huell Howser came to film the vine for his program Videolog, which aired on KCET. The next year, approximately 6,000 people came to view the vine. The festival organizers were unprepared for such a turnout; lines stretched for two blocks. Howser returned in 1992 to film again for his "California Gold" program. Sierra Madre and the Chamber of Commerce quickly organized and combined the annual Vine viewing with a downtown street fair. A shuttle bus is provided and people procure tickets to see the vine at a pre-scheduled time.

The Guinness Book of World Records has named the Vine as the World's largest flowering plant. It is estimated that at the height of bloom it has 1.5 million blossoms with 40 blossoms per square foot, weight of 250 tons and has branches that extend 500 feet. Wistaria is a member of the pea family though its seeds resemble a flat bean. Seed pods burst open in the summer. The plant is deciduous, losing its leaves in the winter. The Wistaria seeds were brought from China by Marco Polo in the 13th century. Plants cultivated in China can live for 250 years.

Today, the vine covers approximately one acre. Over the years, it has shown distress and seemed to be dying. Experts have been brought in from Cal Tech, Occidental College, and Cal Poly Pomona. Correct pruning, treatments with hormones, and vitamin B have helped the vine to recover and to flourish. To help maintain the Vine's health, records of vine growth and care are now kept on a computer log. The Vine seems to produce its greatest flowering after a cold winter followed by a sudden hot spell.

What is the correct spelling for wisteria? Is it wisteria or wistaria? In the Sunset Western Garden Book it is spelled wisteria. Sierra Madre has always spelled it wistaria. According to experts at the Log Angeles County Arboretum and Botanic Garden, senior biologist Jim Bauml and Librarian Joan De Fato, the plant was named to honor Caspar Wistar (1761-1818), an American physician and teacher, who taught at the University of Pennsylvania. Among his accomplishments, he wrote the first text-book on anatomy. When the name of the genus Wisteria was put into the books, it was incorrectly spelled, says De Fato. So, one could say that all along, Sierra Madre has correctly spelled Wistaria.