

The History of Spohr Gardens

By Rosemary Hoskins

The Spohr Gardens on Fells Road are the culmination of the creative efforts of Charles and Margaret Spohr, who lived and worked there for more than forty years. At one point the Gardens, which look across Oyster Pond to Nantucket Sound, included more than one million daffodil bulbs in thirty-four varieties.

Charles Dolbeer Spohr, born in East Orange, New Jersey in 1914, was the son of the head of the auditing department at J. P. Morgan and Company in New York City. His familiarity with Cape Cod went back to childhood, when he vacationed in Centerville with his family. After graduating with honors from Mercerberg Academy in Virginia, Charlie went to Virginia Military Institute and received a commission in the Army Corps of Engineers in 1938. This led to a distinguished career as a civil engineer. He worked for Humble Oil and Refining Company (later Exxon), Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA), and participated in both the Third Locks Project in the Panama Canal Zone and the building of the Texas Tower on Georges Bank. The tower was used to monitor the Soviets by radar during the Cold War. During World War II Charlie served in the Combat Engineering Battalion, 80th Division, of General George Patton's Third Army. He participated in the invasion of Normandy and continued on to the Siegfried Line in northern France, where he was

seriously wounded. He retired from the Army in 1947. Following the war, Charlie worked for the Army at Camp Edwards, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and Francis Associates in Marion, MA.

Margaret Ellen King was born in Empire, Michigan in 1915 and was a graduate of the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing in Baltimore, Maryland. During World War II she served as a Second Lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps. She also served for twenty years



Charles and Margaret Spohr in their gardens, a millstone at her feet.

Courtesy of Spohr Charitable Trust

in the Air Force and worked as head of the maternity ward at Otis Air Force Base.

Charlie and Margaret met at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, where he was convalescing from his wounds and she was serving as an Army nurse. They married in 1946 and moved to Quissett in 1950, where they bought the first two of what would become approximately six acres on Fells Road, along Oyster Pond. They called their home "The Fells." Thus began a life-long mission which transformed these acres into the beautiful and unique Spohr Gardens we know today.

Charlie and Margaret were equally involved in the evolution of the Gardens. She called him Doddie and he called her Skip. Their areas of interest differed. Margaret designed the gardens, intending them to be informal, friendly, and inviting. She laid them out by sections on paper and numbered slabs. Her plans can still be seen in the Gardens. During the winters, Charlie and Margaret would pore over catalogs together, selecting bulbs, trees, shrubs, and perennials to order. Careful records of the

purchases were kept, noting botanical as well as common names, date, nursery, and price. This information is invaluable for researching and replacing plants as needed today. Although Charlie participated in the selection of the plantings, he was particularly fascinated with what he called "the decorations": the anchors, millstones, cobblestones, chains, lanterns, and watering troughs. He acquired and integrated these "decorations" like sculptures among the flowers, shrubs, and trees. Charlie also designed an irrigation system that is still in use.



One of Charles Spohr's two bells. Note the millstone in the rear. Courtesy of Spohr Charitable Trust



An anchor from Charles Spohr's "decorations." Courtesy of Spohr Charitable Trust

As a result of these efforts, the Gardens provide a breathtaking succession of colorful blooms from early spring through late summer. In addition to the great variety of daffodils, Charlie's favorite flower, there were more than a hundred varieties of perennials, lilies and iris, azaleas, hydrangeas, skimmia, Andromeda, leucothoe, and Dexter rhododendrons of many colors. Trees included crabapple, cherry, noir magnolia, Paulownia, plum and fig, hollies, umbrella pines, Japanese pines, tree peonies, and three types of beech –weeping, European, and American.

Among Charlie's "decorations" accenting the Gardens are his anchors. He started to collect small anchors as a boy. He was particularly interested in early anchors, their design, age, places of origin, and their evolution into modern anchors. His collection included anchors circa 1760 and 1850, among them his most prized, a 1760 English anchor possibly intended for use on the *H.M.S. Bounty*. It was found to be faulty, so the story goes, and left ashore

for repairs. It measures fourteen feet long, has eight-foot arms, and weighs 2,476 pounds. How Charlie acquired this beauty is unknown. He also inherited a collection of large anchors from a fellow engineer who worked at the Baldt Anchor Company in Wilmington, Delaware. Thirteen historic anchors rest atop the retaining wall along Oyster Pond.

Charlie acquired 75 millstones from around the Northeast. They range in size from six inches to eight feet. Several weigh tons. He purchased some and others were given to him if he removed them from their locations. Forty millstones are embedded in the patios around the house. Other larger millstones are scattered around the Gardens, resting among bulbs and trees, catching the eye of visitors.

A huge bell, cast by the famous bell maker Jonathan Mann in 1882 for a church in Dedham that burned down, sits in the daffodil bed between the two main paths. Another smaller bell is located by the water.

Two lighthouse lanterns, prized "decorations" of Charlie's, are placed at the edge of the patio near the house. The lenses for these lanterns came from Paris more than a hundred years ago. Cobblestones from New Bedford line the main paths. Granite watering troughs transformed into water fountains and bird baths are charming accents found throughout the Gardens.

Charles Spohr and his dog, Brandon. Inscription on this 1882 bell: "SINNERS The sound of this bell calls you together for the good and eternal happiness of your soul and ONLY THIS"
Courtesy of Spohr Charitable Trust



Over the years, Charlie and Margaret received enthusiastic community recognition for their lovely creation. The Falmouth Garden Club, the Chamber of Commerce, the Cape Cod Board of Realtors, and the Massachusetts Horticultural Society have all bestowed awards on the Spohrs and their Gardens.

In 1989 the Spohrs hired Michael Kadis (Mike) to help with the upkeep of the Gardens. He became their friend and later the caretaker. Mike relates that during the winter he and Charlie would sit and organize pictures into photo albums. He has been instrumental in organizing the documents, records, and memorabilia related to the Spohrs and the Gardens. Today Mike continues as caretaker. His warm relationship with the Spohrs and his long experience in the Gardens are essential to the continuity and care of the extensive flora.

The Gardens have matured and changed over the years. The daffodils, the signature flower of the Gardens, no longer bloom as abundantly as before. The Board of Trustees is considering new ways to present the Gardens while remaining faithful to the vision of the Spohrs to maintain a waterside woodland garden for the public to enjoy without charge.

Charlie passed away in 1997. Margaret died in 2001. They had shared the loveliness of their Gardens with the public from the very beginning. To ensure that the Gardens would continue to be maintained and available as an invaluable resource to the community, Charlie placed the property in a trust. Today, The Charles D. Spohr and Margaret King Spohr Charitable Trust works to sustain their mission and legacy.



Millstones at Spohr Gardens.
Photo by Leonard Miele

Credits:

Oral history of the Gardens from Michael Kadis, Caretaker.

Articles from the *Falmouth Enterprise*.

Articles from the *Upper Cape Local*.

Articles from the *Cape Cod Times*.

"Times Past": newsletter of the Falmouth Historical Society, November, 1997, pp. 7-8.

About the Author

Rosemary Hoskins has lived in Falmouth for 47 years. Since retiring, her main interest has been Spohr Gardens, first as a volunteer worker and currently as a member of the Board of Trustees.