

# The American Gardens of Lotawana Nims

*Judith Lang Day*

## Introduction

Lotawana Flatau and Eugene D. Nims were married in 1914 and lived in Saint Louis, Missouri. He was the president of Southwestern Bell Telephone Company and sat on the boards of banks and insurance companies throughout the Midwest. His friends were leading members of industry and government.

Lotawana quickly adapted to her husband's lifestyle. Her photograph frequently appeared in the society section of the newspaper, and she became one of the trend setters of St. Louis. Her charities and interests often centered around music, and in the thirties she sponsored the National College Glee Club Competition.

They lived on Portland Place, a community that was a world unto itself. Considered by some to be the most exclusive neighborhood in the country, it was protected by a gate, had its own schools and roads and governed itself apart from greater city of St. Louis. (The History of the Architecture of America's Premier Street 1888-1988, Julius Hunter).

Like many wealthy Americans of their time, the Nims traveled extensively; to South America in 1922, around the world in 1927, and toured Europe often. Eugene studied the telephone systems of foreign lands, but Lotawana was interested in architecture and landscape architecture. Italy seemed to captivate her more than other countries, but she greatly admired the architecture and gardens of Britain as well.

In 1916 the Nims purchased Bee Tree Farm as a weekend retreat. About thirty miles south of St. Louis,

sitting on a river bluff high above the Mississippi, it was to be a true Gentleman's farm. Eight years later they acquired a large estate on Cape Cod as a summer home. Both of these were to become show places for Lotawana's designs.

She began her landscaping at Bee Tree in the 1920s and continued to refine her designs into the late 1950s. On both of Lotawana's estates, the houses sit high on a hill dominating the surrounding area, but in her gardens it is difficult to tell where nature stops and the work of man begins. They are carved out of the shape of the land, their boundaries are the natural growth, and the two tend to meld together. Her massed fields of flowers are the perfection of a natural meadow. Her woodlands were finely honed to emphasize the shape of a tree or the character of a rock and her paths curved through patterns of light and shadow. Lotawana emphasized plants that were indigenous to the area and highlighted native rock with imagination and dignity.

Lotawana would turn swamps into mirror pools and poison ivy thickets into slopes of gold. Her slogan for gardening was to buy a package of seed and go to work. She often bragged that from a few packages of seeds and one lily bulb she developed everything in her gardens. Her estates were not to be the formal showplaces of the wealthy, but fields and woodlands that elaborated on nature, never obviously controlling it and never completely subjugating it to the will of man. The gardens were just separate spots where bramble had been cleared and splotches of color substituted.

Bee Tree Farm is now a public park, but the basic design of field and woodland remains intact. Her gardens on Cape Cod still exist and are owned by the family. Many of the smaller ones have been grassed over or changed considerably, but the general design of the estate has not been altered. The gardens by the road continue to be a great tourist attraction when in bloom but it is the form and shape of the gardens, the beauty of the woodlands and the sculpted land that acts as a monument to the singular designs of Lotawana Nims.

### The Nims Family

Eugene D. Nims was born in 1866 of Huguenot descent. He worked throughout the midwest in the lumber business, as a banker and for a real estate loan company. His eyes, however, were always on open spaces. When the United States Government opened Oklahoma for settlement in 1893, he was there and made the run on horseback into the Cherokee strip, locating at Perry. Here he returned to the lumber business, starting his own company. All the settlers needed wood to build their homes and he quickly became successful. He re-entered the banking world as well, establishing banks in three Oklahoma cities, and became the first secretary of the Oklahoma State Bankers Association.

By 1896 he began his career in the development of public utilities, linking the three small towns of Perry, Pawnee and Stillwater by phone, a total of 36 miles of wire. Because Oklahoma's population was growing at an astounding rate, eight years later he was able to create the Pioneer Telephone and Telegraph Company, a much larger company with many

more miles of wiring. In 1914 this company merged with two others in Missouri and Kansas to become The Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. He became president in 1919 and chairman of the Board eleven years later. He retired in 1932.

When he married Lotawana Flatau in 1914, he was 48, she ten years younger. Although he had never married before, she was a divorcee, the former Mrs. Ellis. It must have been scandalous at the time, although Lotawana was never one to be concerned with what people would say.



Lotawana Nims in her wedding dress, Hartford, Connecticut 1914.

Lotawana was born in Pittsburgh, Texas, in 1877, the third of seven children. Her mother's father had founded the farming community outside of Dallas. Her father was also a native of Texas. He served as a commander in the Army of Tennessee during the Civil War and when peace came, he returned to Texas to become the Sheriff of Camp County where Pittsburgh is located. In time he would be a farmer, a riverboat captain and an inventor with one hundred and sixty U.S. Government patents issued to him.

Lotawana's most unusual name may be attributed to her father. It means "the break of dawn" in an Indian language, perhaps Cherokee. It is known that her father did speak some native American language or dialect and it is clear that he chose the name, probably because of the time of her birth. In later years she would often claim to be half or part Indian. There is no evidence of this ancestry, but her dark black hair and sculpted cheek bones made it very easy for people to believe her. She also would often say that she was named after Lotta Crabtree, an actress whom her father greatly admired. Her nickname within the family was Lotta.

Like her siblings, she worked hard on the farm, chopping wood, milking cows, hoeing and plowing behind a mule. She learned to shoot from her father and family legend claims that she was known as a better shot than Annie Oakley. Her mother did not neglect the more cultural aspects of her upbringing and she was an accomplished violinist, playing all through her life. Although gentle in nature, in later years she was never considered quite "proper" enough for the society ladies of the East. But after her marriage to Eugene she quickly became a lady of society, a trend setter in St. Louis, wearing the most chic fashions. Tall and elegant, with perfect carriage, she was often photographed in jewels and furs. Her skin has been described as marble, her manner slightly aloof.

Despite this aura of elegance, the most distinct impression she gave was a woman of nature. More than one person has described her as a dirt farmer, but this is not entirely accurate. She had a love of nature that went beyond the ordinary gardener. Her ethereal spirit was one with nature. Although she loved her family and friends, she never quite related to nor understood people as well as she did the natural world. Her eyes



The orchard,  
Bee Tree Farm,  
1969. Courtesy  
Robert E. Goetz,  
St. Louis,  
Missouri.

lit up in a special way when she described a tree or a rock or spoke of her gardens. This was where she belonged and this is where in her unique way she made her mark of beauty on the world.

### **Naturalistic Design in the Country Place Era**

The Country Place Era (1880–1940) in the United States was a time when the greatest American gardens of this country were created. The wealthy built great houses away from the dirt and noise of the city and surrounded them with luxuriously landscaped spaces.

Most often, these new American millionaires wanted to emulate the highly structured formal gardens that they had seen on their European tours. English parks, Italian fountains and French parterres all found their way to the estates of the newly rich. In the midwest, however, and scattered throughout other areas of the country were designers who were creating uniquely American gardens. They fought against straight lines and called on the forms of nature, not man, for their inspiration. They abhorred the Victorian use of bedding out annuals and heralded the use of native plants.

This naturalistic trend in landscape design was encouraged by Andrew Jackson Downy (1818–1852), continued in the work of Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) and culminated in the designs of Jens Jensen (1860–1951) and his work in the Prairie School. Jensen's designs concentrated on the juxtaposition of light and shadow, irregular axes through meadowlands, water elements and an emphasis on local flora. Almost always his gardens included stone work for he felt that rocks had a spiritual existence of their own. His work echoed the contours of the land and highlighted and "perfected" the natural beauty of the site.

It is not known if Lotawana Nims knew the work of Jens Jensen. She was not a client but may have seen

his designs in the parks of Chicago. It is remarkable, however, how closely her work expresses his theories. Traces of her work show Italian influence, and her use of annuals was extensive, but in her overall designs she worked in harmony with the natural setting. Few straight lines marred the curve of a hill or the edge of a field. Her wide paths curve through light and shadow and her garden beds flow into natural backgrounds. Her love of rocks and water, her massing of single plants, and her use of native material all closely relate to Jensen's work. Like the woman herself, Lotawana's gardens are truly unique and express a sense of the exuberant American frontier.

### **Bee Tree Farm**

When Eugene Nims lived in Oklahoma he had been involved in the highest circles of the government: helping to establish laws, write the constitution and set up statehood. When he moved to St. Louis, he was no less active. Bee Tree Farm, the Nims estate outside of St. Louis, was a showplace to entertain the important people of Missouri as well as a retreat from their demanding city life. Weekends were spent there from October through June.

The large stone house was located high on a bluff above the Mississippi River. Lotawana designed the surrounding 192 acres with all the elements that she felt were essential to landscape design. Wide trails for walking and riding were cut along the natural contours of the land. Clearings exposed majestic views of the river or highlighted a particular tree or rock formation. Irregular fingers of woodlands melded into the lawn and open fields. These were edged with native shrubs and trees that flowered exuberantly in the spring. At their feet were carpets of wild flowers, day lilies or bulbs. Over 10,000 daffodils were planted on the estate, most of them on the bluff below the house. Far below on the river, the boat captains would blow their horns in appreciation.

Bee Tree was a serious working farm as well as a hunting lodge. An orchard of plum, apple and pear trees as well as vast vegetable gardens provided all the produce for the city house. It was in these gardens and in the livestock areas of the farm that Lotawana went back to her roots in Pittsburgh. She grew the apples and bottled the cider. She made the jams and preserves. Every January she orchestrated the killing of the hogs and helped to smoke the bacon. Chickens and geese were freshly killed for dinner. In the winter there was a wild turkey shoot and Lotawana rarely missed a shot. Eugene loved the shoot as much as she did and even when unable to walk because of Parkinson's disease, he would insist on being taken out in his wheel chair.

Lotawana created Bee Tree for the nine months the Nims were there. Its exuberant spring show ended at the beginning of July when the family left for Cape Cod. It resumed again with the magnificent colorations of the fall. Even in the winter the structure of her design could be appreciated when no foliage decorated the plantings. The curving of the trails and the shaping of the woodlands alone exhibited the strength of Lotawana's plan.

### **The Larches at Woods Hole**

Woods Hole is a most unusual summer community. Until the 1880s the town had been the home of the Pacific Guano Factory, not exactly a place for the stylish rich. By the 1920s, however, large homes were being built and the summer community was well underway. Unlike other resort areas such as Bar Harbor or Newport, Woods Hole did not attract the people who wanted to continue their city social life during the warm months. Instead, the Woods Hole summer community was largely composed of mavericks, the people who wanted to get away from society for a time. It was not a fashionable resort, but a quiet and conservative one.

The families came from New York, Washington, D.C., Cincinnati and Chicago, as well as Boston and western Massachusetts. The list of names and occupations is an impressive one: among others were Newcombe Carlton, president of Western Union, C. Proctor Cooper, vice president of American Telephone and Telegraph, W. Murray Crane, the president of Crane Paper Company and a former Senator, and Seward Prosser, president of New York's Bankers Trust Company.

For all these luminaries, one of the attractions of Woods Hole was its informality and disregard for the social mandates of more fashionable summer resorts. Informal at that time meant that gentlemen did not have to wear tuxedos to dances at the golf club. But in this Flapper era, it was also a conservative community. Ladies still visited on Thursday afternoons, stopping for tea or leaving their cards. Most had their at-home days. Younger people indulged in the most innocent of pleasures: tea dancing, tennis and the occasional movie. Bathing tops were always worn by gentlemen on the private end of the beach so as not to disturb the ladies with their hairy chests. (This was true into the 1950s.)

Another factor made Woods Hole stand out among so many seaside areas, especially on Cape Cod—the trees. Pictures taken in the 1880s and 90s show a barren coastal area, covered only by a minimum of the usual scrub oak and native growth found along beaches. But by the 1920s, the pictures are very different thanks to a local Johnny Appleseed by the name of Joseph Story Fay. He owned many acres of pasture land, most of which had been used for sheep and cattle grazing. The animals had leveled almost all of the vegetation. Joseph Story Fay imported hundreds of thousands of trees that he planted in large groupings of about one half acre. He chose species that he felt would prosper by the sea including American white ash (*Fraxinus americana*), European basswood (*Tilia*

The Big House  
at The Larches,  
Woods Hole,  
Massachusetts,  
seen from the  
northwest, ca.  
1955.



*europaea*), European white birch (*Betula pendula*), black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), Catalpa, American white elm (*Ulmus americana*), horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), Kentucky coffee-bean (*Gymnocladus dioica*), black locust (*Robinia pseudo-acacia*), Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*), Sycamore maple (*Acer pseudo-platanus*), white willow (*Salix alba*), red pine (*Pinus resinosa*), Scotch pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), white spruce (*Picea glauca*), blue spruce (*Picea pungens*), and European mountain-ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*) and European larch (*Larix decidua*). In consequence, Woods Hole is a seaside marvel of horticultural diversity and lushness.

In the summer of 1915, the Nims were invited by Lotawana's sister Kate Ratcliffe to visit her in Woods Hole. It is clear that both the social and horticultural atmosphere must have captivated them for they returned year after year. In 1923 they bought a small piece of property on Church Street and had plans drawn up to build a most imposing house. On a

whim, they also made an offer on a large adjacent tract (44 acres) that sat between the Vineyard Sound beach and the railroad tracks. The previous owner, John Glidden, had been the Treasurer of the Pacific Guano Company and when the company went bankrupt, he had been blamed. He left Woods Hole in 1882 and never returned. The land had been in litigation for many years. The Nims offered \$24,000 and on Christmas Eve, much to their surprise, learned that it had been accepted.

Unlike Bee Tree which was a weekend respite from the business world and used for entertaining the leaders of the Midwest, Woods Hole was to be a place where the Nims would come for three months (July, August and September) and surround themselves with family. Although they had no children of their own or perhaps because of it, the house was to be a haven for Mrs. Nims' sisters, their children and eventually their grandchildren (and now their great-grandchildren). A separate house was built for Lotawana's sister, Kate



Ratliffe, but by the end of the 1940s she would move back to the main house. Each family brought a maid, a cook or a nurse to help with the burden of coping with the thirteen or more residents of all ages. Twenty-two flower arrangements were done every five days by the caretaker's wife.

The estate had some initial similarities to Bee Tree Farm. The large house (known as The Big House) sat on a bluff high above Fresh Pond (it is no longer fresh and is now called Nobska Pond) that was separated from the beach by a small strip of land, now a public road. The view of Vineyard Sound was spectacular and from the observation deck on the roof one can see Cape Pogue and beyond on a clear day. Although the slope is fairly gentle on the north and west sides of the house, the east and south slopes were extremely steep and the integration of the house with the land was most awkward.

The uncleared land ran back to the railroad tracks which had been put down to carry the guano fertilizer to market. There were a small pond near the tracks and a large marsh along the east side of the property. Along the driveway at the beginning of the property was a large grove of Joseph Fay's European Larches (*Larix decidua*) that had been a gift from him to the original owner of the property. Mrs. Nims chose to name the property after these trees and to this day the estate is called The Larches.

There were a few sheds, a small greenhouse, and two other buildings on the property, a large carriage house with an apartment above it, and next to it a large playhouse. Originally this building had been two chicken coops, but had been converted into a playhouse for the Glidden children sometime in their last year there. The small two-room building was used to house the chauffeur, the only male and for many years, the only black servant on the estate. The Nims and their parrot took the train east from St. Louis every July 1. The chauffeur drove the cook and the maid.

In contrast to Bee Tree where birds were routinely hunted, The Larches became a bird sanctuary. No hunting was allowed and signs were posted everywhere. There were chickens but they were for eggs and southern fried dinners. Pheasants, quail and other birds were allowed to roam freely, much as the peacocks did at Bee Tree. Ducks and geese were encouraged by continual feeding to seek shelter. In the winter, upwards of 200 pounds of feed a week lured 300 ducks and hundreds of pheasants and quail. Rocks with deep natural wells and giant Pacific clam shells were placed on the lawn for bird baths. The lawn in front of the house was never properly green due to the wild bird seed.

This was not a hunting lodge, but a resort home. Having loved the villas that she saw on her travels in Italy, the first thing that Lotawana did to her new home was to remove the classic Cape Cod shingles and replace them with a stucco exterior. The color was to be the earth tone of the ancient Italian villas she had seen on her travels. (In time repainting efforts colored the house many different and unusual shades of pink, not at all what she had intended.) At the same time she converted the porte-cochere into a porch and put the front door along the main driveway on the north side.

The property had been abandoned since the early 1880s, and when the Nims bought it there was only a small patch of grass at the entry way. The rest of the land was a mass of brambles and poison ivy. Many of the old trees had been killed by Gypsy moths. There was a single track running through the center and no one dared venture from it into the jungle. Mrs. Nims began clearing brush around the house and called in a landscape designer from Boston by the name of Sheffield Arnold.

In Mr. Arnold's plan, much of the land was to remain wild, except for the area directly around the house and across the driveway. The old eight foot wide drive was widened to sixteen feet and extended, curving down

past the carriage house for a half mile out to a second entrance to the estate. Along the north side of the drive a row of Sycamore maples (*Acer pseudo-platanus*) was installed. The rolling area across the drive was cleared of brambles. Large trees were left so that, like Bee Tree Farm, there was a feeling of an English park. The lawn swept down from the driveway and then up to a ridge which was left wild. A service drive was cut along this ridge. It actually linked two parts of the main drive but was hidden from the house by the woods so that trucks could get through the property without disturbing The Big House.

A front pathway of broken flagstone led from the front door of the house across the drive to the lawn. It continued onto a path that led toward the carriage house. Today this path is solid from the house to the drive, but on the lawn it is suggested rather than defined. Where the footing is steep, there are stone steps that gently turn the stroller in the proper direction, but most of the path is grass. Much of the vegetation that previously lined the path is now gone, yet the feeling of a path remains. This walk leads to a "wishing well" that may have been the original well for the house. Mr. Arnold envisioned a second path going up the hill past the well and into the woods to a "rustic shelter." Although the guest house at Bee Tree was rustic to fit in with the Midwestern woodlands, creating a rustic shelter on Cape Cod may have seemed too precious and self-conscious to Lotawana. Along with other similar stylized structures designed by Mr. Arnold, it was never built.

A small shrubbery was designed at the entrance to the house. An old privet hedge was extended down to the turn-off of the drive to block the view of the drying yard outside the kitchen. A shrub border to soften the stiff lines of the hedge was planted in front of it.

Below the east side of the house Mr. Arnold designed two "garden rooms." A broad set of stone steps led down the steep slope. The first room was a formal

rectangular garden with a strong central axis derived from the placement of the stairs. A central grass panel with statuary at each end was surrounded by a flower border. The central path from the steps led to a second set of steps down to a semi-circular garden. Along the retaining wall that held up the first room was another flower border, but the surrounding arc was left wild. In contrast to the garden above, this area was to be more private and less formal. Another rustic shelter was designed to be placed opposite the steps; a place out of the wind where one could contemplate the view of the sea.

Mrs. Nims rejected this garden room plan of Mr. Arnold. The nouveau riche of Newport might want the formal beds of the English great houses, but this was not for the lady from the American Midwest. It was too formal, too structured, too un-American for her. Arnold's garden was not about nature but about man's control of nature. In her mind, man's hand should not be so obvious. His garden would destroy the natural, wild land she so loved, and she rejected his formal ideas.

Mr. Arnold was let go and with few exceptions, Mrs. Nims turned her attentions to carving out a site to the northwest of her own on which to build a house for her sister Kate. This was completed in 1926. To the west of the main house a tennis court was installed. A vegetable garden was placed at the northeast corner of the property and above it, an apple orchard was planted on a south facing slope divided from the garden by a large area of natural landscape with only a path to connect the two.

By 1929 only the most basic work had been done on the property. There were no decorative gardens and yet Lotawana was clearly beginning to put her mark on the land. To echo the Italianate feeling of the stucco house the privet hedge on the seaside was cut to two feet and large Italian urns were set in the corners. The underbrush was cleared on the outer edge of the slope



and only a few black pines remained. Limbed up on the east and west sides of the slope, they framed the water view perfectly. The feeling is both Italian and natural.

In 1929 Mr. Nims contacted the Olmsted Brothers to do some extensive landscape planning. They were charged with dividing the property into house lots, creating bridle paths through the brambles, moving the vegetable garden closer to the house and trying again to integrate the steep eastern bluff, the house and the surrounding land. Mr. L. H. Zack from the Olmsted office came that winter and took pictures of the land and began a survey of the property.

Six house lots were sited on the plan and a second driveway was proposed to access the lots behind Mrs. Ratcliffe's house. Bridlepaths were drawn on the topography map used by Mr. Zack. This was a primary interest of the Nims. They rode at Bee Tree and their nieces, the daughters of Winnie Davis Long, were also avid riders. Almost a mile of paths was planned out and staked, although the brush was so thick that it was nearly an impossible task. It was suggested by Mr. Zack that one path go into the water along the edge of Fresh Pond just below of the house to the east. These paths and others were eventually cut although it is unknown if the edge of pond was hard-packed as Mr. Zack suggested.

A solution was designed for the eastern slope. The privet hedge along the bluff was to be removed and the lawn extended to a retaining wall. A shrub border below would begin at the porch line, go along the wall and curve to the south. Elegant stairs would circle down from the lawn to the base of the berm. The southern slope was to be regraded, softened and integrated into the western lawn. Mrs. Nims primarily objected to this because she felt that "cutting off the sharp top of the bank and rolling the slope down over to the existing surface tended to bring more foreground into the picture and thereby tend to throw the

pond further into the distance." (Memorandum by Zack 4/29/30) Mr. Zack responded that plantings at the same height as the old bank would make the changes almost unnoticeable. But again the feeling was too formal and again Lotawana rejected the plan.

A planting of small trees and shrubs was proposed for the north lawn that would be "well into the existing masses in front of the house and would tend pleasantly to soften the rather stiff line of the existing privet hedge which screens out the service area" (Letter to E.D. Nims from Mr. Zack 3/29/30). Shrubs were also designated for the other side of the hedge. Although this was not in the least formal, it was never done. The area was left lawn as Mr. Arnold had planned it.

Except for the minimal staking of the paths, nothing of the Olmsted plan was actually executed. Mr. Zack was discharged as Mr. Arnold had been. In 1930 Mrs. Nims took over the planting of The Larches herself. No professional would be hired again. For the next twenty-five years she would clear the brush, sculpt the land and paint it with the colors of a thousand flowers.

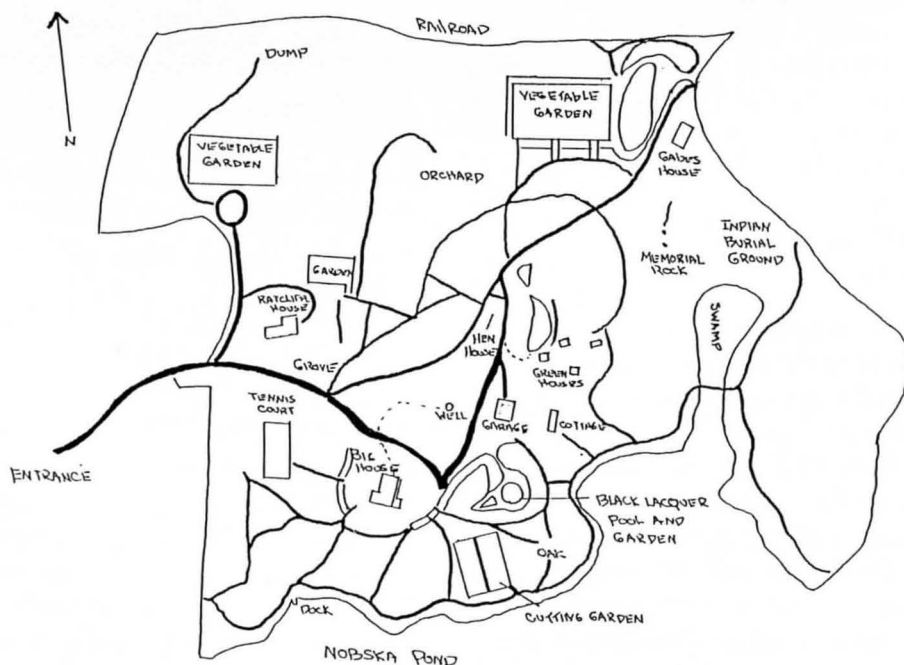
Many gardeners would help her in this endeavor but they all worked under the expert guidance of the head gardener and caretaker, Gabriel Bettencourt, who was hired in the early thirties. He tended The Larches in the nine months that the Nims were away and worked with Mrs. Nims when she was in residence. He put up with her whims and fiercely defended the greatest of her apparent eccentricities. He seemed to have understood her concept of design and would help her execute the smallest detail.

Gabe loved and respected the soil and knew how to care for it. In the clay soil of the vegetable garden he incorporated hundreds of truck loads of sea weed and sand and sowed green manure crops over the winter. The soil is still extremely fertile, the best possible loam. With two helpers in two small greenhouses he patiently transplanted thousands of annuals every spring. Every fall he lifted over 700 dahlia bulbs, 1000

gladiolus and untold numbers of tuberous begonias. He grew the biggest pumpkins for miles around and carefully segregated the seeds and plants of Mrs. Nims' special squash. Its color matched the color of the house and was used to decorate the front porch in the early autumn. Mrs. Nims built him a house above the vegetable garden and he lived there until he died, twelve years after she did, well into his nineties.

It is unclear in which order Lotawana created her gardens but it is clear that her greatest love may have been clearing the paths through the brush. Nothing pleased Lotawana more than creating views by judiciously trimming limbs and cutting trees. She was proud of these views in which no evidence of man's manipulation was felt. She could often be seen high in a tree, saw in hand, straw hat on her head, telling Gabe to cut the path in a certain direction.

In time, she would create four miles of paths, many more than Mr. Zack had suggested. Each had its own character created by the position of a rock, a view of the sea or the top of a hill. Curved and wide, the paths urge the walker onward into sun spots or shaded nooks, toward a perfect beech tree or around the corner to a view of a garden bed. Some paths were lined with *Clethra alnifolia* that perfumed the air in August, others with *Viburnum* that glowed in the shade in July. Blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) and *Azalea viscosum* grew wild with the shadblow (*Amelanchier arborea*) and wild roses, usually the scourge of the Cape Cod gardener, were made focal points in their uncivilized June display. Maples and beeches shaded areas while bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*) flourished in the sunlight. A dirt bridge was created through the swamp and led to a path along a ridge that was covered with a moss floor. Its brightness glowed in the damp shade. Legend has it that this path terminated in an old



Plan of The Larches, ca. 1955.

Gabe  
Bettencourt's  
house from the  
road, 1953.



Indian burial ground. All of these plants were native to the area, but the woodlands were as tended as the most formal of gardens. Tree pruners were brought in every year and a crew would work up to two months, clearing, shaping and perfecting the natural wonders.

On a hill above Fresh Pond and the marsh two paths converged on a clearing created to expose a most unusual tree, known to the family as the Climbing Tree. In fact it was an oak whose branches crawled (whether by heritage or environment) out from the main trunk for twenty-five feet into the clearing. Twinning and slithering along the grass the massive limbs were a delight for anyone, but it was the children who enjoyed it the most. No higher than fifteen feet, it was a perfect natural jungle gym. Mrs. Nims felt that it deserved a place to itself. In 1943 she wrote to Donald Wyman at the Arnold Arboretum who came to The Larches to see the tree. In a letter after his visit he states, "The oak tree, which I was so very delighted to see, is a real honest-to-goodness black oak, *Quercus velutina*. If, as I suspect, the habit is natural and not

a forced one, as Wilfrid Wheeler suggested, then it is a new variety which, as far as I know, has not been described." (Letter from Donald Wyman at the Arnold Arboretum to Mrs. E.D. Nims, dated September 14, 1943.) Its age was unknown. Gabe and his workers lavished the oak with fertilizer and water, giving it the attention its unique character deserved.

Being New England, almost every clearing revealed rocks and Lotawana loved these even more than the trees and flowers. Like Jensen, she believed that they had a mystical spirit. Perhaps this is related to her possible Indian heritage or perhaps it was just to her own sensitivity to nature. Never was she happier than when she had unearthed a new rock that could be moved to the perfect spot or left in place and set off by its surroundings. In the woods on a high ridge behind Gabe's house there were two enormous rocks. During the Second World War one of these was planted with climbing hydrangea and surrounded by begonias. It was designated by Mrs. Nims as a tribute to the soldiers missing in action.



View of the driveway to the road, behind Gabe's house showing daylily bed, pond, and ribbon garden on the left, 1992.

A house was built for Gabe at the northeast corner of the property along the road. The front yard was high above the street and the bank was planted with pink wax begonias for about forty feet. Behind the house the hill that ran down to the driveway was terraced and each level was filled with pink petunias. A set of stone steps ran along the northerly edge of the terrace and a pair of large Oriental brass cranes stood at the bottom on the drive. A small strip of lawn was placed next to the terrace on the southern side and all of the rest of this yard was planted with pink petunias. It was not a bed in the normal sense of the word, but more of a ground cover of pink. Hanging from trees and at focal points along the drive were long cypress knees containing tuberous begonias and annuals of all kinds.

Across the drive was a thin ribbon border of marigolds that extended 280 feet, and then a retaining wall. At its base was a six foot band of *Rudbeckia hirta*. A narrow path separated this from a small pond. Originally a low swampy area, it was dug out and enlarged and the edge was planted with iris, loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), and marsh mallows (*Hibiscus moscheutos*), keeping it in bloom all summer. With the onset of the cooler weather a tupelo tree (*Nyssa sylvatica*) at the western corner of the pond turned a vibrant red, its magnificence multiplied by reflection in the water.

To the west of the pond the land gently sloped upward and here the vast vegetable garden was planted. Despite the charge to the Olmsted Brothers, it was never moved. Over a quarter of an acre in size, it was

as ornamental as it was productive. The prettier vegetables were planted here—beans, beets, cabbages, squash, lettuce and, true to Lotawana's Texan heritage, peppers of all varieties, mostly hot. All crops were grown in rows of 120 feet at the rear of the garden. The front half of the garden was devoted to flowers: marigolds (12 rows); gladiolus (4 rows); and dahlias (10 rows). This was a cutting garden, but one of unusually magnificent proportions. A fence to protect the crops from the deer and woodchucks was beautified with morning glories (*Ipomoea*) and climbing roses. On the north and west sides the garden was surrounded by raspberries and, by design or nature, tall native *Heliopsis* whose yellow sunflowers glistened in August against the rough natural background of the woodland. On the south side of the garden, outside the fence, were rows of gladiolus, marigolds or zinnias (depending on the year).

To the north and south of the pond and all along the south edge of the garden were four vast beds of daylilies (*Hemerocallis* hybrids) undulating along paths or into the woods. Over a half acre, the mass of yellow interplanted with random peach, orange and bicolor lilies explodes with the energy of the color. To this day, these beds are a tourist attraction in the last two weeks of July. Although the spectacular nature of the show began to dwindle in August, the flowers in and next to the vegetable garden would take over the display. And when all else was gone, and the lilies were cut to the ground, a landscape of rocks was revealed in the lily beds providing a slightly mysterious winter-scape seen against the background of an enormous beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) that stood guard over all.

This massing of daylilies is not only spectacular when in bloom, but serves to unify the area, relating all the various elements of garden and pond. Despite the thousands of lilies used here, Lotawana did not restrict them to this one area. Clearly charmed by the strength of their color, she brought them into the interior of

the property as well. On the west side of the The Big House a narrow bed of daylilies divided the lawn from the natural jumble of trees and bushes and on the east, the lilies edged a wild sloping meadow. (At Bee Tree Farm Lotawana had used daylilies in a similar manner.) Behind the hybrid borders the wild orange daylilies were allowed to sprawl at will and in the fall, goldenrod (*Solidago*) glowed in the afternoon sun. Oaks and maples dotted the meadow.

Behind and below these modest beds Mrs. Nims created the major focal point for the interior of the estate. Once the brush was cleared it became evident that the topography of the land to the east was most irregular. Mrs. Nims took advantage of what could only be considered an impossible situation. She dug out the low spot, creating a large bowl in the ground, similar in size and shape to a Greek amphitheater. A circular pond was created in the center and named the Black Lacquer Pool after the black and non-reflecting nature of the water. An island was left in the center for the planting of loosestrife and other aquatic plants and the pond itself was filled with water lilies.

The water was surrounded by a thin grass strip and on the south and east sides, against a steep bank of wild scrub, a thin border of daylilies was planted backed by tall lilies, wild *heliopsis* and annuals. A flat rock for sitting and a slim tree for shelter were carefully positioned at the very edge of the pond. From this shaded spot one could look up the sunlit north slope. Instead of the seats of an amphitheater, the view was up a narrow path flanked by masses of flowers. Daylilies, *Rudbeckia*, *Helianthus* flourished along with marigolds and numerous annuals of pink, yellow, blue and orange. An old dead tree, covered in ivy, was allowed to remain in place providing a sense of perspective to the surrounding garden. On the westerly side of the incline the bed came up and curved around to join the daylily beds along the lawn.



This was certainly not a solution that most landscape architects would have suggested. It lacked any sense of formality and even, perhaps, dignity. Any feeling of the picturesque is overwhelmed by a sense of exuberance and lushness that luxuriated in color. In the early 1940s even this exuberance was enhanced by the addition of a second pool to the west of the first. Triangular in shape and surrounded by marsh mallows and other moisture loving plants, the pool was filled with lotus plants. Their enormous blooms became a focal point in August and a set of willow furniture was placed on the ridge overlooking the pool, so that one could have a quiet moment overlooking this exotic species.

The sharp rise of the southern ridge culminated in a narrow flat strip and then plunged downward again toward Fresh Pond. Although hidden from view from all points except the upper bedroom windows, the land was cleared and a cutting garden installed. Fifty feet by a hundred, in different years it contained marigolds, zinnias and dahlias and was the primary source

for the flower arrangements that decorated every room in the house.

On the opposite hill at the northern top of the Black Lacquer Garden but hidden from view by a thick row of trees was the garage. Behind this, two low swampy spots were also turned into ponds. Being surrounded by thick bushes and trees this area was more somber and in sharp contrast to the exuberance of the flower beds. The larger pond was dug more deeply and surrounded by rocks. A path of stone steps led down from the driveway above and curved to a stone path that led directly to the pond's edge. A wide terrace was cut into the bank and covered with an enormous planting of wax begonias. Wild roses and ferns covered the steep drop down to the pond itself. A large rock was left in the pond as a focal point, with irises behind it. Ferns and moss wove through rocks leading up the opposite hill to a magnificent beech tree. The pond was surrounded by huge tupelos (*Nyssa sylvatica*), some of whose branches swooped out over



The Black Lacquer Garden looking down the northern slope, 1991. Photo by Stan Reis.



The Grove, 1992.

the water and in the fall their bright red color was reflected in the water below.

Smaller gardens were designed away from the main house area. Mrs. Ratcliffe's house was landscaped. To the west behind the house a terrace was cut into a part of the steep hill and combined with a stone wall that bordered that side of the property. Next to the terrace the soil was removed and a six foot retaining wall built to hold back the hill. This gently sloping area was surrounded by a narrow border and, like the terraces, was filled with daylilies, lilies, zinnias and marigolds. At the curve in the driveway a small rock garden was formed. Iris and lilies were planted along with annu-als. Even in the dead of winter it is clear how well the area was designed. The terraces and shape of the beds have their own integrity and charm devoid of blooms. However, in true Lotawana style, this was a bit too structured and subdued. At one point in the fifties the sloping lawn from the house down to the rock garden was completely planted with marigolds and petunias. Again, it was not a bed of flowers as much as it was a lush version of ground cover.

A second vegetable garden was created behind Mrs. Ratcliffe's house for the less ornamental vegetables, corn, onions and potatoes. The orchard was expanded down the hill to create a large blackberry patch. Where the service road met the main road, a small triangle was created and this was planted with portulaca. The fence surrounding the tennis court was covered in morning glories while the hill above was planted with *Althaea*.

Lastly, there was The Grove. Not strictly a garden, this was the grove of Larches after which the estate was named. This became the picnic area, a gathering place for the family at Sunday suppers. Even after family members had moved to their own homes around Woods Hole, all would return here for large collective dinners. The lacey limbs of the trees filtered the sun and provided shelter. After the hurricanes of the 1950s when almost all of The Larches were uprooted Mrs. Nims created a grape arbor over the long picnic table. The table was always decorated with copious amounts of vegetables mounded down the center. Surrounding this was a rock setting of tables and benches

similar to the one at Bee Tree but without the Midwestern feeling. There were two large stone grills, one for the meat (lamb or chicken), and the smaller one for the corn that had just been picked in the garden. One large rock was for the cook and another was the servants dining table. A third was for serving ice tea and lemonade while a fourth was primarily a conversation area. A small Stonehenge when viewed, but the center of family life on a Sunday in July.

### Afterward

Eugene Nims died in 1954 after many years of being confined to a wheel chair because of Parkinson's disease. Lotawana died twelve years later, in 1966. It was a tragedy that in her later years she was completely crippled by arthritis and could rarely get into her gardens.

Today Bee Tree Farm is a public park. It was bought by the County of St. Louis in 1972 and was the last open river bluff area in the county. The master plan to convert the private estate to public use was designed by Robert Goetz of St. Louis. Although overgrown and untended since Mrs. Nim's death, the structure of her design and her careful plantings were still intact. Bee Tree needed little alteration to convert it to a magnificent park for the public.

Although the exuberance of The Larches may have died with her, many of the gardens did not. Her only remaining sister, Winnie Davis Long, was allowed to spend the summers there until she died in 1978. From 1966 to 1979 the estate was largely run by Mrs. Long's daughter Winnie Davis Crane. Mrs. Crane was the daughter-in-law of Mr. and Mrs. W. Murray Crane another of the illustrious summer residents.

Winnie Davis Crane, like Lotawana, was a musician. She was a gifted pianist and a major patron of the Tanglewood Summer Concerts. She was also a noted horticulturalist. In her years around The Larches she had hybridized many of the daylilies and dahlias.

Many of the former still exist today although their heritage and names have been lost. She crossed many of the dahlias as well and those were all named after people who worked or lived on the estate. Unfortunately many of them no longer exist although "Gabriel Bettencourt" is still the most vibrant yellow in the cutting garden and "Lotawana" the most prolific of the small reds. When nuclear power began to appear, she took seeds down to Oak Ridge, Tennessee to have them exposed to radiation to see what reaction would occur. Her notes have not been found and there is no way of knowing what conclusions she drew. Her greatest love was geraniums, many of which she hybridized and wrote about for the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. At her home in Dalton, Massachusetts, she had a large greenhouse and a small nursery business for hanging plants.

It was only fitting that Mrs. Crane would fall heir to the gardens of her aunt. However, times had changed by 1966. Labor was no longer inexpensive and qualified gardeners were hard to find. She had her own homes to consider and could not lavish the time on an estate that was not hers. The lawn garden at the Ratcliffe house had been closed in the mid 1960s and Mrs. Crane went on to eliminate the cutting garden by the house, the non-terraced petunia bed behind Gabe's house as well as the wax begonia bed in front of it. The second vegetable garden was allowed to go fallow and eventually all the vegetables were eliminated as an unnecessary expense.

Gabe was in his eighties and the responsibility for The Larches fell into the hands of his assistant, Manuel Duarte. Easier annuals were substituted for more difficult ones. Marigolds became the singular flower in all the beds. The begonias that hung from trees in Cypress knees throughout the estate began to disappear. Gabe's excellent organic horticultural practices gave way to more expedient chemical fertilizers that ultimately burned out the soil.



Lotawana Nims in the front room of the Big House at The Larches, ca. 1940.

Environmental conditions, too, had changed in many of the gardens. The hurricanes of the fifties had taken down many of the trees that sheltered shaded beds while volunteer trees had been allowed to grow up and overshadow once sunny gardens. The traditional plants designated by Lotawana could no longer survive. The lushness and the verve had disappeared in all but the beds behind Gabe's house.

In the fall of 1978 Gabe died and so did Mrs. Long. Her four grandchildren, the children of her daughter Katherine Day, bought out the other heirs and took over the property. To the unknowing eye, the estate was still magnificent, but a gardener would have quickly perceived the problems. The outlines of the gardens were there—the sculpted forms, the terraces, the general design and they held together despite the

poor planting. But the misuse of the soil was quickly evident especially in the center piece of the internal landscape, the Black Lacquer Garden.

In 1979 the The Larches was taken over by the wife of Mrs. Long's eldest grandson, myself. With the help of one gardener, Ted Fitzelle, I set out to maintain the estate as well as possible. Initially the vegetable garden was closed down. The old cutting garden by the house was reopened and the vegetables and dahlias (reduced to only 175 stakes) were moved there. Over time, however, a place was needed to plant divisions of daylilies and other perennials. The vegetable plot was reopened for this and is again a field of flowers. The tall *Heliopsis* that once bordered the garden have now invaded it, but continue to bloom after the daylilies have faded.

Slowly all the beds have been converted from annuals to perennials. The Black Lacquer Garden is filled with *Coreopsis*, *Rudbeckia*, *Helianthus* and *Heliopsis*. Even when Mrs. Nims was alive the original more intimate atmosphere of the area was altered by the removal of trees and today there is the feeling of a flowering sloped meadow. Originally conceived by me to be yellow, all colors but pink now flourish together in the blooms of *Veronica*, *Lysimachya*, *Delphinia*, and *Crocsmia* among others.

*Rudbeckia* no longer reseeded itself by Gabe's pond and new more exotic plants have been substituted. *Coreopsis* replaced the ribbon garden of marigolds along the back driveway. In the small triangle where the roads meet hostas now flourish in the shade, where *Portulaca* would no longer grow. The apple orchard was long past restoring and the new peach,

plum and apple trees will eventually bear fruit. Below them on the hill new plantings of blueberries, strawberries and raspberries are beginning to thrive.

Landscape design is an ephemeral art. Unlike a great painting, gardens often disappear at the death of their owner. After 70 years, Lotawana's gardens continue to flourish. Although details have been altered in many ways, the basic outlines are still visible. Brambles exist in place of cultivated woodlands, but the design of the paths through them has not lost its grandeur. The land she sculpted, the ponds she created and the curvilinear shapes of her flower beds still live as a testament to her natural design genius. In every rock, so carefully placed or highlighted, one senses her spirit and the story she had to tell.

Judith Lang Day was born in New York and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 1968, majoring in Art History. She has practiced interior design in the Boston area. Her husband, Roger Day, is the grand nephew of Mrs. Nims and since 1979 Judith has directed the gardens at The Larches. In 1985 she designed the renovation of the garage there for her family. She has a Certificate in Gardening Arts from the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University and is currently a landscape designer.

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