

Floral designer Ella Grant Wilson captured Cleveland at turn of the 20th century

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Elegant Cleveland: Ella Grant Wilson

ELEGANT CLEVELAND / A look back at the finest elements of Cleveland's stylish history, as shown by its people, architecture, fashion and other cultural touchstones.

Ella Grant was a girl of 10 in April 1865, when President Abraham Lincoln's coffin arrived at Cleveland's Public Square. The city was in mourning, with stores and homes draped in black bunting, and Ella was among the more than 100,000 people who made their way to the square to pay tribute to the martyred president, whose body lay in state.

As she described it many years later, she was too small to peer into the president's casket. So a gentleman named Salmon P. Chase -- chief justice of the United States -- held her aloft and said, in words and an image memorialized in a newspaper illustration, "There lies a great and good man. Never forget him."

Sixteen years later, Ella Grant Wilson would play a more important role at the funeral of another assassinated president, native son James A. Garfield, whose body also was laid out at Public Square.

By then, at 27, she was already a woman of professional accomplishment. Yet she was just getting started.

When historians consider Cleveland's greatness in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they note the stupendous growth and significant innovations that occurred locally as much as nationally.

Wilson not only had a close-up view from inside many a Millionaires' Row home, but she spent a lifetime keeping a record of all that she experienced -- and of all that inspired her.

Her 287 numbered and bound scrapbooks -- all with identical covers -- are a treasure stored at the library of the Western Reserve Historical Society. It is by far the largest single such collection, says the society's reference historian, Ann Sindelar.

Wilson was unusual in that she seemed to be aware of the significance of events as they unfolded, of the importance of capturing the details of a lifetime that began in the horse-and-buggy era and ended just two years after Amelia Earhart's plane was lost. She noted these details through the newspaper clippings, magazine articles and postcards she collected, as well as her own written entries -- and eventually, she wrote up that history in two published volumes.

But then, Wilson turned being unusual into an art form.

A businesswoman among men

She was born in New Jersey in 1854 but moved to Cleveland with her parents, Gilbert and Susan Grant, in 1860. She grew up in a white colonial on the corner of Prospect and Perry streets (which would now be the corner of East 22nd Street and Prospect Avenue).

As a girl of 6, she was fascinated by the flowerbeds behind the iron gates of the large home of O.A. Childs, where the YMCA building now stands.

Later, the family moved to what is now Tremont, where Wilson would regularly get her horse and buggy mired in the mud on nearby Scranton Avenue. Her father was a merchant and, later, a partner in an oil refinery. When her father's business had a severe "reversal," thanks to John D. Rockefeller's rapacious business tactics, Ella and her mother crocheted long woolen mufflers that they would sell for \$5 each.

"That winter [1869] we earned about \$200, on which we managed to live somehow and feed our horse, Jim; we used him in getting and delivering our orders," she wrote.

That success seemed to ignite an entrepreneurial spirit in Ella, and by the time she was 17, she had talked her way into a job for a Mr. Harris Jaynes in which she learned to arrange flowers.

Within a few years, she had her own business as a florist, one that was fueled by the work she did for the Hollenden Hotel and the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce. One of the members suggested, "You are here so often, why don't you join the chamber?" So she applied, only to be rejected because she was a woman -- "Even though I was the active head of my own business."

Still, she wrote, her connections through the chamber and the hotel "made me acquainted with many of our leading citizens, with those men who were developing Cleveland."

In September 1881, Cleveland and the country mourned the death of President Garfield, who had been shot by an assassin two months earlier at Washington, D.C.'s, Baltimore & Potomac railroad station. Again, Cleveland businesses and homes expressed their sorrow in drappings of black.

When Wilson heard the president had died after lingering for two months with his injuries, she went straight to City Hall and buttonholed the chairman of the decorating committee for the funeral into allowing her to contribute her skills.

Wilson was assigned to create the four flower-bedecked arches that would brace Superior and Ontario streets. The Cleveland Grays militia, ordered to protect the funeral workers, tried to shoo Wilson out of the square as she worked, because she had forgotten to get an official badge. She spied the president of Cleveland's City Council, who gave her his own black leather badge, embossed in gold leaf that spelled out "Garfield Obsequies, Sept. 26, 1881."

"The last six hours I was on duty, I existed on ice water," Wilson recalled. "The men indulged in something stronger."

By then, Wilson was a wife as well as a businesswoman. The previous year, she had married a man named James A. Campbell, but the couple divorced after eight years of marriage. In 1891, she married florist Charles Wilson. All told she had five children -- Pansy, Helen, Carl, Fern and Ernest. It didn't seem to slow her down professionally.

Over the next few decades, she created flower arrangements for some 300 weddings, including many in Euclid Avenue mansions, and three times as many funerals. She became diligent about having studio portraits made with young "Gibson girl" models or children who were showing off Wilson's elaborate floral designs.

Creating a showcase for Cleveland

In 1896, Wilson, never short on moxie, involved herself in an enormously important event. She not only exhibited some of her floral arrangements for Cleveland's grand centennial celebration, she also helped create the entire floral exhibition by rounding up 32 other florists and gardeners and persuading them to show their artistry in collaboration.

She invited the national Society of American Florists to Cleveland, and its leaders agreed to come. "I was kept pretty busy, and for a week prior to the show I stayed at the Hollenden," she wrote, noting that the August flower show turned out to be a grand success. "After paying all expenses, we have \$4,000 profit for the florists club treasury."

Over the next few decades, Wilson would turn that collaboration into a local trade association for florists -- and make herself the group's publicist.

James M. Wood, author of several books on Cleveland history, says that what Wilson accomplished is all the more remarkable because of the uphill battles she certainly faced as a female entrepreneur.

"For a woman to be running her own business at the turn of the 20th century is a major achievement," he says. "She had to have a strong sense of her abilities and to be unfazed by masculine arrogance."

It might have helped that flowers were naturally considered a woman's domain, but not much, says Wood. "You could be into flowers as a woman and still be thwarted by males who thought the business of flowers, gardens and landscapes was their domain."

But Wilson had more than business pressures to deal with. Her son Ernest served in the trenches of France during World War I. His letters on pale-blue military stationery are among the papers stored at the historical society.

He writes of being in "No Man's Land" and spares his mother the details of the horrors he encountered. But he is injured, and hospitalized, as some black-and-white photos from 1918 show. They appear, to our eyes, as if they were taken on the set of "Downton Abbey."

A small group of heavily bandaged men in beds and wicker wheelchairs is shown in contrast with an elaborate floral display that, Ernest wrote, amazed his fellow patients. Wilson had found someone in Europe to make the arrangement to her specifications.

Wilson's second husband died in 1917.

Such sadness aside, Wilson was generally buoyed by the creativity she could show through her business ventures.

She worked long hours to keep her floral stock prepared for use, then worked tirelessly to come up with innovative combinations (she often used clippings from magazines and paper-doll books of the time for ideas, making them the equivalent of the inspiration boards that fashion designers use today).

She reveled in the celebrations at which her creative decorations were featured, especially the society weddings.

"At one time in my life, I believe I could say that I knew the interior of almost every house between Erie Street [East Ninth Street] and Case Avenue [East 40th Street]," she wrote in the first volume of her work on Cleveland history, published in 1930. "The great events of life brought me, at one time or another, into nearly all these homes."

She writes of one of these "great events of the '90s" the wedding of Emma Paige Eells, whose family lived in a Euclid Avenue mansion, to Arthur Newberry of Detroit. It was during the Victorian era, when elaborate decorations were in vogue.

In the home's drawing room, she created "a Swiss thatched bower of Gothic design in wheat, and trimmed with smilax; heavy curtains forming a dark, rich background. On the mantel to the left was a horseshoe of white roses and carnations, with clusters of flowers on the ends. Over the doorway to the library hung a wedding bell of chrysanthemums, with a tongue of red flowers. The effect of the decoration was added to by the candles placed appropriately about."

A personal view to history

Wilson not only worked for these families, but she knew some of the wives from her schoolgirl days. One who always stood out to her, she wrote, was Mamie Morris, who became the wife of Charles Brush, the inventor of the arc light.

"I considered Charlie Brush and his wife the handsomest couple in Cleveland," Wilson wrote. But Mrs. Brush died young, and when Wilson visited the home soon after, "I thought, what a travesty life was. Here was a beautiful home, a devoted husband, two beautiful children, and she, the center of it all, had to go and leave it. And there I was, still a struggling florist trying to make happiness for others by creating beautiful flower decorations."

Such passages are what set Wilson's historic accounts of Cleveland apart from any other, says Sindelar of the historical society.

"We have many Cleveland histories, 91 of them on Euclid Avenue alone, but this is different -- it has more of a personal spin, and personal observations that capture, with great detail, a time and place," she says. Wilson "offers descriptions of school life, of social events, of courtships -- physical descriptions of neighborhoods, of who was doing what.

"And she lived from the time of horse-drawn carriages to the advent of the automobile, the telephone, electricity. It's a universal story of the history of the United States and the microcosm that is Cleveland."

But before she got around to writing her books, when she was well into her 70s, Wilson did a few more notable things. In her mid-60s, she became The Plain Dealer's garden editor, and when she wasn't at work, she was an extensive traveler.

By train and roadster, she headed from Cleveland to San Francisco. She stopped at the office of the San Francisco Chronicle to show an editor her work, but he was dismissive.

The city editor told her writing might be fine for a small paper like The Plain Dealer but not for the Chronicle. "I told that fellow that he needed educating, that Cleveland was a larger city than San Francisco and that the Plain Dealer was a larger paper than the Chronicle." At that time she was right, of course.

Wilson continued her travels, as her collected postcards show, visiting such wonders as the Royal Gorge in Colorado and other important natural sites. Driving cross-country was a far more arduous trek in those pre-highway days, and it couldn't have been all that comfortable for a woman well on in years.

But Wilson was hungry to see more, to know more, so she traveled and collected mementos and memories. And after decades of doing that, she organized them into 600 scrapbooks. The historical society removed some of the material to preserve it in archive boxes, but 287 of her bound volumes remain, taking up about a dozen shelves.

Then, it was time for Wilson's last act.

In her 70s, she began using the scrapbooks, and her keen memory, to put together a series of articles on Cleveland history published in The Plain Dealer. She reworked them to create a 325-page book called "Famous Old Euclid Avenue."

Published in 1930, it met with such a great response that she was asked to write Volume 2, a 265-page follow-up, which was published in 1937. The second volume features even more of her personal stories of friends.

Taken together, the volumes form the essential history of Cleveland's growth, as told not only through its leaders, their families and homes, but through the recollections of a woman who saw it all and noted it well.

"It's evident that anyone who ever wrote anything about Euclid Avenue had to refer first to Ella Grant Wilson's books," says Sindelar. That includes Jan Cigliano, who credits Wilson in her well-known book on Euclid Avenue, "Showplace of America." Wilson would live only two years after the publication of her second book, dying at 85.

But her final published words, recalling the "evanescent dreams of Famous Old Euclid Avenue," are evocative -- and timeless.

"I cannot go ten feet in either Lake View Cemetery or Riverside, without seeing the name of some old friend. I had been meandering along the lawns of Lake View when I found an iron chair which some thoughtful person had placed there. I sat down and found that I was crying as the tears rolled down my cheeks, for I saw name after name of some old, old friend. And I wondered how soon my time was coming for me to go to the eternal rest."

But what a legacy she left. As Sindelar says, "It's the story of the city."

And the story of an indefatigable woman who never stopped working, or appreciating what was happening all around her.