Clara B. Rees, Queen Mother of the Iris World

by Jean Richter

While Clara B. Rees (together with her sister Ruth) introduced only 28 iris during her lifetime, she remains one of the most impactful American iris hybridizers, largely through her first introduction, the astounding iris breakthrough 'Snow Flurry' (C.B. Rees 1939).

'Snow Flurry' (C.B. Rees 1939) photo by Jean Richter

'Snow Flurry' was the result of a cross of the white iris 'Purissima' and pastel orchid pink 'Thais.' The resulting seed pod had only two seeds, one of which was shriveled and was discarded. The other produced a blue-white iris of unparalleled size and ruffling, held on large well-branched stalks. As I have related in a previous blog of Carl Salbach, Ms. Rees' sister Ruth cut several of its flowers, securing them with tissue paper in a shoebox, and made an all-day journey by train, ferry, and trolley all the way from San Jose to Salbach's home in the Berkeley hills. Upon seeing the magnificent flower Salbach was so amazed that, after seeing the plant in Rees' San Jose garden, he purchased her entire stock. He also kept a stalk in cold storage until the AIS
convention in Oakland the following week - upon its presentation to the assembled irisarians there were audible gasps, and numerous orders of rhizomes were made. Its premiere into the iris world was so remarkable that an article on the subject appeared in the local newspaper.

'Snow Flurry's breeding potential was recognized immediately by hybridizer Orville Fay, who went on to create numerous award-winning 'Snow Flurry' progeny. Although producing no pollen, 'Snow Flurry' proved to be an excellent pod parent for many iris, passing down her most excellent traits. The photo below from the January 1968 AIS Bulletin shows Ms. Rees with a stalk of 'Snow Flurry' and a board showing its multitude of progeny.
Clara B. Rees was born and lived her early life on a farm in Ohio. It was here that she learned her love of plants and flowers, and made her first hybridizing efforts with amaryllis. After her father passed away, she, her mother, and her sister Ruth moved to San Jose, California to be near her other sister Mildred (Mrs. Bert E. Loehr).
The Rees sisters. from left: Mildred, Ruth, and Clara (photo courtesy of Bryce Williamson)

Although Clara had a strong early interest in tulips, the San Jose climate made working with them impractical, and she began concentrating on iris instead. She and Ruth (who referred to herself as Clara's "Girl Friday" in iris matters) soon filled the garden of their San Jose home with many of the latest varieties of iris, as well as many other plants.
Clara raised 600 to 1000 seedlings per year, but was very selective in what she chose for introduction. She introduced a number of 'Snow Flurry' progeny herself, including the yellow-tinged white iris 'Easter Sunrise' registered in 1944.
'Easter Sunrise' C.B. Rees, registered 1944 (photo by Bluebird Haven Iris Garden)

'Easter Sunrise' was the parent of the lovely yellow 'Sarah Lester,' a joint introduction of Clara and Ruth.
'Sarah Lester' (C.B. and R. Rees, registered 1949)  (photo by Mikey Lango)

The red-purple 'Fire Flurry' is another child of 'Snow Flurry.'
Clara even produced an arilbred iris from 'Snow Flurry,' 'Flurry Mohr' whose pollen parent was the important arilbred iris 'Capitola.'
'Flurry Mohr' by C.B. Rees, registered 1949 (photo by Bluebird Haven Iris Garden)

Late in her life Ms. Rees produced a number of large, ruffled introductions, such as 'Light and Lovely' (C.B. Rees 1966).
'Light and Lovely' (C.B. Rees 1966)  photo by Larry Harder

'Touch of Elegance' (C.B. Rees 1962) has a tangerine beard as its focal point.
'Touch of Elegance' (C.B. Rees 1962)  *photo by Rosalie Figge*

'Waltzing' (C.B. Rees 1969) shows remarkable form and ruffling for its time.
Clara B. Rees received numerous honors in her lifetime. She received the AIS Hybridizer's Medal in 1967, and the AIS named their annual award for best white iris the Clara B. Rees Cup. In 1957 a group of irisarians in the San Jose area organized the Clara B. Rees Iris Society, a club that is still active today.

Clara B. Rees passed away in 1970 at the age of 90. Wherever iris are grown, Clara B. Rees and 'Snow Flurry' will be remembered.
Distinguished irisarians at a Region 14 spring meeting in San Jose admiring a clump of ‘Snow Flurry’. Front row from left: Roy Oliphant, Bernice Roe, Melba Hamblen, and Clara B. Rees. Back row from left: Larry Gaulter, Harry Randall, and Robert Carney. *Photo courtesy of Bryce Williamson.*