

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

The Rose Industry in Mount Clemens

by James and Ruth Donaldson

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March, 1950 - graders carefully inspect blooms and measure the length of the stems
(photo courtesy of *The Macomb Daily*)

The rose, celebrated in song, art and literature, added to Mount Clemens's economic development when its cultivation for commercial distribution began in the 1880s. In 1882, the first **John Breitmeyer** moved his business and family from Detroit to Mount Clemens. Since his arrival from Germany in 1862, Breitmeyer had been raising and selling vegetables and flowers in Detroit, but he made the move to Mount Clemens to expand his rose growing where land was cheaper and taxes lower. He found suitable acreage in the southwest part of town near the Clinton River and built his first greenhouses on what was eventually to be called Floral Avenue, but which was then named Gutschow Street. There were eight children in his family, and four remained in the floral business, although not all of them in Mount Clemens. It was Fred who assumed control of the Mount Clemens business. Philip, besides his horticultural interests, was a civic leader in Detroit and served as its mayor in 1909 and 1910.

Another early grower was **Robert Klagge**, who had his greenhouses at 154 Gutschow Street. From these two growers came a succession of enterprising men who, after serving an apprenticeship with them, began their own businesses. As the new century ushered in prosperous times and a broadening market for long-stemmed roses, the number of rose growers also increased. Many were European immigrants from countries such as Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. In most cases, their businesses became family affairs, with the next generation assuming command when the time

came.

In 1903, the **Louis Stevens Company** was established at 117 Gutschow Street. In a few years **Sidney Tinkler** bought out Stevens. He raised only carnations at first, but eventually exclusively roses. Tinkler became one of the city's longtime growers, spending over 60 years at the same address. He was joined in later years by his two sons, Fred and Robert. Two other growers in that same area were the **Sidney (later Walter E.) Lewis Greenhouses** at 119 Floral, and the greenhouses built at 209 Robertson by **Leopold Mallast**. There were various owners at the Robertson location, including **Fred Moderson** and **Herman Klein**. For many years, **John E. Carey** owned rose gardens at 16 North Wilson Avenue.

A young Belgian named **Gaston Vermeulen** arrived in Mount Clemens in 1913 and took a job in the Klagge Greenhouses on Floral Avenue. One of his tasks was to fire the boilers, not an easy job in the days of coal heat and no stokers. Another was to push a wheelbarrow loaded with containers of roses destined for Detroit to the nearby Grand Trunk depot for shipment. In 1923, after the Klagge family sold the business, Vermeulen managed the greenhouses for the new owners, the **Schimmel Doemling Company**. The company took a new name in 1927, calling itself the **Clinton View Floral Company**, and Vermeulen had greenhouses of his own at 505 Cass Avenue. In 1935, the bank foreclosed on the company operating the business at 154 Floral Avenue, where he had first worked, and Gaston Vermeulen bought the rose gardens and named them **Floral Avenue Greenhouses**.

The largest rose operation, **Mount Clemens Rose Gardens**, on Cass Avenue just outside the city limits in Clinton Township, was established by **Paul Weiss**, who came to Mount Clemens from the Chicago area in the 1920s. Land prices in Illinois had soared, making it expedient for him to look elsewhere, and Weiss purchased established greenhouses from Gustav Schimmel. The corporation was first named the **Weaver Rose Gardens**, after **William G. Weaver**, who had a part interest in the enterprise and served as secretary-treasurer. The business was also known as the **Mount Clemens Greenhouse Company** before taking its present name in 1946. While the senior Weiss did not move to Mount Clemens until the 1940s, Frederic, son of Paul and the present owner, came in 1938 to learn the rose business.

Also on Cass Avenue were greenhouses established by the **Van Beversluys**: Archille's was at 505 Cass and Arthur's at 460 Cass. The latter location, next owned by Herman Klagge, was purchased by **Frank Munt** in the 1930s. At his peak, Munt had 80,000 plants under glass. Little Road was also the location of various rose businesses, those owned by **Fred and Max Carl, Heckman** and **Carl Kaiser**. It was also on Little Road that **Harold Essmaker**, who worked for the Mount Clemens Rose Gardens for 14 years, established his own greenhouses. His son-in-law, **Ralph Durst**, also owned rose gardens nearby. The **North Gratiot Rose Gardens** were owned and established by **Edward Gallagher**. All were wholesale dealers, and some are still in business. The first rose retailer in Mount Clemens, **August von Boeselager**, had his greenhouse on North Gratiot, where **Smoke Brothers** is now located.

In the decade of the 1920s, ten major rose firms, with a total of over 30 acres under glass, brought a revenue of \$1 million annually to Mount Clemens. By the late 1950s, the sum had risen to \$2,500,000, and Mount Clemens roses had achieved a national reputation. Local growers represented the city in the International Rose Shows, as well as other floral exhibitions. As late as 1976, the Mount Clemens area had six of the nine commercial rose gardens in the state, growing 85 percent of its roses, or some 11 million a year!

Rose growing has become a refined art over the years. Besides the monumental task of planting, cultivating, pruning, spraying and watering roses, the climate must be controlled. The long Michigan winter necessitates large heating plants, as the greenhouses must be kept at a constant night temperature

of 60 to 64 degrees to produce marketable flowers. Mount Clemens Rose Gardens maintain a power plant large enough to heat a town of 300 homes. The original fuel was coal, but some 30 years ago a switch was made to oil or natural gas, which provided cleaner heat and required fewer workers.

In the summer, the hot sun necessitates automatic sprinklers and ventilating systems to keep the gardens from overheating. For instance, at the Floral Avenue Greenhouses, there are 2 miles of overhead misting pipes and about 12 miles of steel heating and watering pipes. Some greenhouses use the Clinton River for irrigation. When pollution control became an issue, the Michigan Pollution Control Board was asked to check the water at Mount Clemens Rose Gardens. The plant draws water from the river and returns it to the river after use. The board made its examination and found that the water coming out of the plant was actually a little cleaner than that going in.

The years have taken their toll of the greenhouses. In 1950, the Breitmeyers moved their operation from its original site to new quarters on South Gratiot, opposite **Seminole Hills**. The old greenhouses were dismantled and that property, plus what had been the **Breitmeyer Golf Course**, became a desirable real estate development which soon held many substantial homes. The location on Gratiot became a retail operation, no longer growing either roses or the snapdragons which had been Breitmeyers' big crop for some years. John and Clarence, grandsons of the original Breitmeyer, carried on there, eventually joined by John, Jr., a fourth-generation florist. Within the last 30 years many of the other greenhouses have fallen victim to rising taxes, astronomical fuel prices, expensive pollution control measures and retiring owners. In 1970, the Tinkler Greenhouses closed, and in 1975 Frank Munt went out of business.

Only two large greenhouses are left, Mount Clemens Rose Gardens and Floral Avenue Greenhouses. Mount Clemens Rose Gardens ranked twelfth in production in the United States as recently as 1976. Still run by the Weiss family, which now includes Paul II, grandson of the founder, the gardens produce almost 6 million roses annually. The entire establishment covers 80 acres. The rose gardens alone cover 7, all under glass. Over 235,000 plants are cultivated in up-to-date greenhouses. Floral Avenue Greenhouses is run by Joseph, Robert and Donald, sons of Gaston Vermeulen. They serve as president, vice-president and secretary-treasurer respectively. They produce more than 3 million roses a year. These two firms, along with a few small ones, continue to give Mount Clemens some claim to a name it once held, that of one of the rose capitals of the nation.

[Note: Mount Clemens Rose Gardens closed in 1999 under pressure from foreign importers.]

For more information about the rose industry in Mount Clemens, we recommend:

- Lenhausen, Don. "Outlook is Rosy For Macomb Flower Business," *Detroit Free Press*, March 19, 1972, p.3A, col.1.
- Vincent, Maurice A. "Area Flower Industry Blooms," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, July 7, 1959, p.7.
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- "Munt-Breitmeyer Floral Transaction Means Expansion for Both Concerns," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, May 1, 1953.
- Magee, Dorothy M. "Fragile Blooms Play Vital Role in Mount Clemens' Prosperity," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, March 24, 1950, p.1.
- Harwood, John H. "Mount Clemens, With Greenhouses Having Nearly Million Square Feet of Glass, Could Claim Title of 'Flower City of Michigan,'" *Mount Clemens Monitor*, July 20, 1934, p.1, col.5.