The Sunnie-Holme Gardens of Annie Burr Jennings

fairy land nearby

BY KELLY MCGOVERN

"In these dark and dreary days of economic strife, depression and unemployment, it is a good thing to know that there is a fairy land nearby; a place that takes you momentarily out of the dumps and your multiple troubles and transports you to a dream world, whose loveliness and fragrance transforms you for the moment into Pan or a dryad or a fairy; you might become a millionaire or you might just remain humble and glad that in spite of life's misfortunes you can enjoy the bounty of a generous person."

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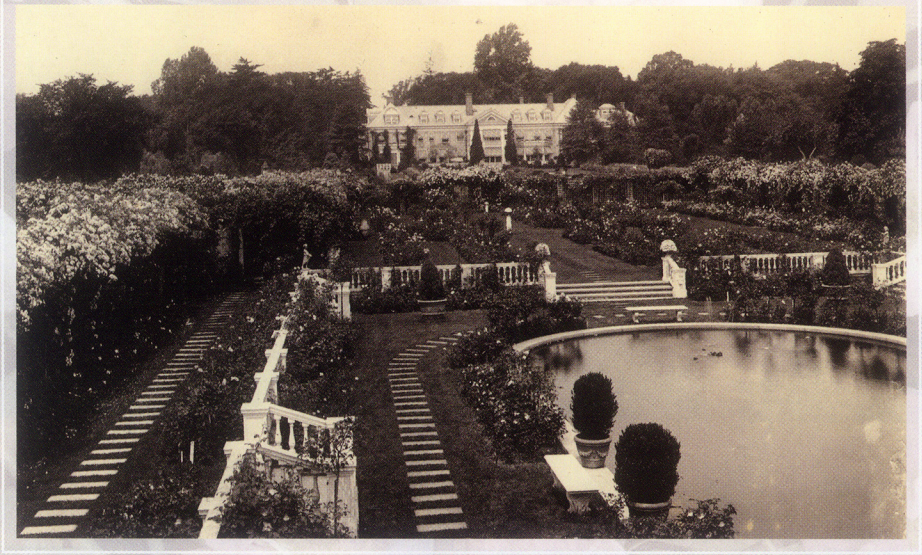
Considering today's economic climate, no doubt many of us could use a little sojourn into a "fairy land nearby" to take our minds off the headlines of the day. But these words were written nearly 100 years ago, by a newspaper reporter who was describing one of the greatest gardens in Fairfield; gardens that are lost to development but not to history. Sunnie-Holme was the name given to the mansion and grounds of the estate of Annie Burr Jennings, the wealthy philanthropist who made Fairfield her home from 1909 until her death in 1939.

In addition to her many contributions to the town of Fairfield, Miss Jennings created an amazing array of gardens in the highly fashionable Arts & Crafts style behind her mansion on the Old Post Road. With the exception of her formal rose garden, Miss Jennings designed them all, and with the aid of a team of full-time estate gardeners, she maintained them impeccably. True to her generous philanthropic nature, she opened her gardens to the public in 1915.

Stretching from the Old Post Road to Long Island Sound, and from Beach Road to what is now Mariners' Way, Miss Jennings' landscape included formal herbaceous borders and parterres set amongst long axial paths leading from the house; an evergreen garden leading to an all-white garden; beds based on particular colors or varieties of plants; an enormous cutting garden devoted exclusively for the home's arrangements; an herb garden with more than 100 varieties of medicinal, brewing, and culinary herbs; and a vast "wilderness" garden.

But the garden that was widely touted as the most beautiful was Miss Jennings' formal rose garden. Situated around a sunken reflecting pool with a fountain in the middle and stately paths all



fairfield's first lady

NEWCOMERS TO FAIRFIELD ARE NOT IN TOWN VERY LONG BEFORE THEY hear the Jennings name, which graces a school, a road, and, of course, a beach. Of all the Jennings, it is probably Miss Annie—or Annie B.—who was the most beloved. A descendant of an old Fairfield family, Annie B. was born in 1855 in San Francisco. Adventurers, dreamers, and executives had flocked to California when gold was discovered in 1848, and Oliver Burr Jennings, Annie B.'s father, was one of them. He opened a business selling supplies to gold-miners and later, on the advice of a friend, invested in an insignificant infant oil business that eventually became Standard Oil Company. (The successor companies from Standard Oil's breakup—including Exxon Mobil—form the core of today's U.S. oil industry.) Annie B. moved to Fairfield in 1909 at the age of 54. From that point until she died in 1939, she was one of Fairfield's most devoted citizens. Here are a few reasons she was known as Fairfield's "First Lady."

SHE CREATED A SANCTUARY

In 1914, Annie B. and her friend Mabel Osgood Wright saw a play in New York, *Sanctuary*, that was all about the beauties of nature. The next day Annie B.—who preferred to donate anonymously—called Mabel and told her to find a piece of property, saying, "Connecticut must have a sanctuary and you must make it." Mabel selected the spot across from her home, Mosswood. (Today condominiums stand on the site of Mabel's former home, and they still bear the Mosswood name.) Annie instructed her to "buy the ten-acre lot and make the plan of what you think the Birdcraft Sanctuary should be. The birds and their comfort should be the first consideration." The Birdcraft Sanctuary became the first official headquarters for the Audubon Society of Connecticut. (Later, a few more acres were added to the site, but in the 1960s, construction of the Connecticut Thruway took away six of them.)

SHE OPENED A SCHOOL

After much debate about needing a high school in town, Annie B. purchased a house on the land where Tomlinson Middle School stands today and donated it to be the first Fairfield high school. It opened in 1916. She stipulated the land could only be used for a school. (That is one of the reasons the town cannot expand the railroad-station parking area to that property.) —*Marcia Miner*

around were every conceivable variety of rose, either rambling up arbors or neatly arranged in rectangular beds. At the end of the sunken pool was a white "summer house," or pergola, where Miss Jennings and her guests often took their tea or sat to read. The skeleton of the pool and the flagstone flooring of the summer house hauntingly remain on Sunnie-Holme Drive, buckling under the strain of many years of frost heaves.

Close to what is now Judson Road, a more naturalized area was constructed, with dark, shadowy paths opening onto various rock and succulent gardens. Peeping out from shaded nooks were several bronze rabbits as well as a mysterious dusky pool with a bronze statue of Pan with his pipes. An observer today might wonder if some of the rocks and trees behind the homes on Judson Road could be the remains of Miss Jennings' woodland garden.

Over the years, thousands of visitors came to stroll through the verdant display, enjoying the intoxicating landscape or seeking refuge from their hectic lives. The gates to Sunnie-Holme were finally closed, however, upon Miss Jennings' death in 1939, and the gardens fell into disarray until the land was sold to a developer about six years later.

We know that Annie Burr Jennings stated in her will that her land should not be used for commercial purposes, as she strongly felt that the resulting traffic and noise would be a serious detriment to the best interests of the town. However, she went on to say that despite her opposition to creating a public park on her property, she would not be opposed to the "permanent dedication of my gardens for such uses and purposes." Ahhh … couldn't we all use a little bit of the "fairy land nearby" today? ■