

Stop to Smell the Flowers

A visit to Ray and Hortense Pittman

The North Texas hill country is part of a picturesque and scenic landscape. Large ranches and rolling grasslands make up the countryside while small towns dot the highways. This past summer I had the fortunate occasion to drive across North Texas and see first hand what nature has wrought. From the misty morning fog suspended over the grasslands and cattle ranches of Amarillo to the hot sun bright in the sky over Collin County outside of Dallas, I passed through colorful horse farms, endless cattle ranches, pumping oil wells and quaint charming towns. Once in Collin County, I found the City of Celina, population 5,100, and the home of African Violet luminaries Ray and Hortense Pittman.

To find the Pittman residence requires a drive down a long narrow gravel road, with a right turn onto another even narrower and darker gravel road. This is the Pittman's driveway but the only indication of a homestead is a mailbox. Cautiously driving into this tunnel formed by the overhead trees I eventually reached the Pittman home surrounded by a veritable botanical garden of flowers, shrubs, trees and fountains. It was time to suspend my cross country trip for a few hours, get out of the car and smell the flowers.

I walked under the flowering Crepe Myrtle towering over the sidewalk and stepped onto the front porch. There was no need to ring the doorbell since the Pittman dog, a poodle named Sherrie sensed my arrival and was barking furiously inside the house. Hortense and Ray greeted me at the door and we proceeded to paradise in the back of the house. Paradise is their very comfortable enclosed back porch. Among the plant stands with over 2,000 violets, the wall of plaques and awards and the birds and cattle outside in the backyard, we sat and chatted.

Hortense grew up in Celina, TX, in the Texas Hill country North of Dallas. The soil is a soft sandy loam and the winters are mild making this agricultural region one of the top horse breeding and training regions in the US. Ray Pittman grew up in San Antonio, TX, the second largest city in the State. The railroad had come to San Antonio in 1877, an event that launched the region into an economic boom that continues to this day. Early in his youth, Ray got a job working on the railroad, the Missouri Pacific Railroad. As a youngster working on the railroad, Ray developed a habit of not being very punctual. His buddies on the railroad, aware of his tardiness, eventually coined a phrase for Ray saying that he'll get here "when the sun goes down". This then became his nickname, "Sundown" which his friends still call him today.

In the early 60's, mutual friends arranged for Sundown of San Antonio to meet Hortense of Celina. They soon found they shared many common interests, one of which included gardening. The friendship blossomed over the 300 mile distance between the Texas towns. Back in the sixties, Braniff Airlines was the air carrier between Dallas and San Antonio. Sundown, a railroad man in love, soon became a frequent flyer of Braniff Airlines while courting Hortense. They

eventually married in 1967 and Hortense left the family ranch and joined Sundown in San Antonio. Braniff filed for bankruptcy.

The newlyweds settled in San Antonio and soon joined the San Antonio City Garden Group which had a violet group. Unfortunately it was devoted to woodland violets, not the AV's we know and love. Her path to African Violets was via her birthday. Hortense shares her birthday with Abraham Lincoln which we all know is in February. The February flower is the violet so in a stroke of good fortune (or was it fate?), Sundown went to a nursery and purchased several Volkmann Brothers African Violets for Hortense's birthday. Of course the mechanically gifted Sundown also built a light stand to help nurture the hybrid African Violets. As the plants grew, more Violets were added to the stand. Hortense propagated some of the violets to make even more plants and Sundown busily started working on a second plant stand. Sundown told Hortense that "he could build light stands faster than she can grow Violets". Ha! How many people who grow African Violets believe this statement?

Her love of African Violets continued and eventually in the late 60's she joined the local Alamo AVS of San Antonio and AVSA. Her Violet Society association started her down the road of hybridization after she attended a program by hybridizer Harvey Utz. Harvey became Hortense's mentor with her first hybrid registered jointly to her and Harvey in 1979. Hortense now has over 600 registered varieties in First Class.

Sundown retired from the railroad in 1977 and the Pittman commercial African Violet venture was started in earnest. They converted a 2,200 square foot garage into a plant room with Sundown crafted light stands. Because the ballast of a fluorescent light generates so much heat, Sundown had the idea of mounting the lighting ballast transformers inside metal duct work in the attic with a fan exhausting the heat. The business and Hortense's hybridization efforts thrived for many years before they decided in 1993 to move back to the family homestead in Celina. This was the same year Hortense began serving as the 27th President of AVSA.

Now in Celina, Hortense and Sundown enjoy growing African Violets on plant stands on the back porch which is also called a sun room. In addition to the lighted plant stands, the natural light from the windows is put to good use with plants on shelves along the windows.

The watering system for the Violets is unique. Sundown has rigged up a system where rainwater from the roof of the house is captured and funneled into a 1700 gallon black tank. (The water tank is black to discourage algae.) There is an additional 300 gallon tank on the West side of the large sun room. Cleverly, a pump in the tanks supplies water to a faucet in the plant area on demand. These tanks supply all the water needed by the plants. I questioned Hortense about the possibility of a short term drought leaving her high and dry but Hortense said they have always had enough water for the plants through some pretty dry Texas summers.

Outside, there is a herd of Black Angus beef cows. When I was there in August the Texas sun and heat were intense. The cows had all gathered under shade trees just off the back porch,

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otherwise they would be out wandering the pasture grazing on grass. Hortense told me about the different personalities their cows all have and how it's enjoyable watching the interaction they have with each other. I didn't ask but I would guess some of these four legged creatures have names. I spotted bird feeders and birdhouses between the pasture and the porch and asked Sundown about their birdwatching. He and Hortense enjoy sitting on the porch, when they're not busy tending plants, to enjoy watching many varieties of birds. This truly is a paradise! I stopped on my journey to "smell the flowers" but this is something Hortense and Sundown have learned to do a long time ago.