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Cattleya Edith Bolling Wilson

First Ladies and Their Cattleyas

BY ARTHUR E. CHADWICK AND A. A. CHADWICK



Usually the orchid wears the woman, but to the contrary with my dear Edith. — Woodrow Wilson

THERE WAS CONTROVERSY in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1914. It was rumored that President Woodrow Wilson had a love interest. The nation was still in mourning from the unexpected death of First Lady Ellen Wilson just eight months earlier. The President was also in mourning — until he met the widowed Edith Bolling Galt by a chance encounter in a White House stairwell. In order to woo his new sweetheart, he gave her a fresh orchid every day.

Their whirlwind courtship included a highly publicized appearance at the World Series in which she wore a quadruple cattleya corsage. On December 28, 1914, the President married Edith and she became the new First Lady of the United States.

During her tenure in the White House, Edith Bolling Wilson stood by her husband's side, supporting his efforts for world peace, and eventually aiding in the nation's conservation efforts during World War I. Like everyone else, the Wilsons observed "Gasless Sundays," "Meatless Mondays" and "Wheatless Wednesdays."

Woodrow Wilson was a popular president and had three cattleyas named after him — *Cattleya* President Wilson (1916) (*Fabia* x *labiata*), *Rhyncholaelocattleya* President Wilson (Mrs. J. Leemann x *Cattleya* Lustre), and the rare yellow *Cattleya* President Wilson (1918) (*Thyone* x *dowiana*). However, it was Edith who was the orchid lover in the family, and she had no namesakes. That changed last year when Chadwick & Son Orchids reached out to the Edith Bolling Wilson Birthplace Museum.

The Wilson nonprofit organization, which celebrates the life and legacy of the First Lady, selected a fall blooming purple cattleya from Chadwick's stock to honor Mrs. Wilson. The timing coincides with her October 15th birthday.

The new hybrid, *Cattleya* Edith Bolling Wilson (William Romanoff x *dowiana*) was bred by A.A. Chadwick, who is known for his work with large-flowered species and early hybrids. The seedlings, thus far, have yielded a broad spectrum of purple shades and are reminiscent of an earlier Chadwick cross, *Cattleya*



Powhatan (Princess Margaret x *dowiana*) which produced mostly lavender shades as well as some stunning semi-labes and even a yellow. (See *Orchids* magazine August, 1997). The Wilson cross is expected to produce some very dark seedlings and, maybe, some surprises.

One parent, *Cattleya* William Romanoff (Cabazon x Morning Star), was originally bred in 1962, and named after the owner of Romanoff Greenhouses in Canterbury, Connecticut. William and his wife, Sally, operated the nursery from 1947 until 1988. Their business had humble beginnings with the couple running a grocery store by day and dabbling in orchids at night. William "read everything he could to discover how to grow and hybridize orchids." Their story is depicted in the book, *Canterbury — The First 300 Years*. The hybrid was named by wealthy

[1] The *C. Edith Bolling Wilson* seedlings have yielded a broad spectrum of purple shades. We are expecting some dark varieties and maybe a few surprises.

Photograph by Arthur E. Chadwick. Inset: Washington D.C. was abuzz in the spring of 1914 as it was rumored that President Wilson had a love interest. Photograph courtesy of the Everett Collection.

[2] One of the parents of *C. Edith Bolling Wilson* is the dark purple, *C. William Romanoff*, from 1962. It was named by a good client of Romanoff Greenhouses.





3 ARTHUR E. CHADWICK



4 SALLY ROMANOFF

orchid hobbyist, Josephine Aronson. She and her husband, Charles, lived in Arcade, New York, on an estate called Hundred Acres and had a close association with the Romanoffs.

Cattleya William Romanoff comes from a long line of dark purple breeding. The lineage is complex with 11 species being represented over six generations. Hybridizers chose dark varieties of *Cattleya warscewiczii*, *labiata* and *lueddemanniana*. Most importantly, however, is an early cross that appears in both sides of the parentage — *Cattleya Callistoglossa* (*warscewiczii* x *purpurata*) that was registered in 1882.

Cattleya Callistoglossa, which translates as “most beautiful tongue (lip),” is one of the major building blocks of purple hybrids and was registered by James Veitch and Son of Exeter, England. Veitch Nurseries were the leaders in orchid hybridizing during the late 1800s and are credited with making the very first cattleya hybrid. Their breeder, John Seden, produced a host of famous primary crosses, starting with *C. Callistoglossa* and followed by *Cattleya Canhamiana* (*purpurata* x *mossiae*) in 1885, *Cattleya*



5 ARTHUR E. CHADWICK

Empress Frederick (*mossiae* x *dowiana*) in 1888, *Cattleya Fabia* (*labiata* x *dowiana*) in 1894 and *Cattleya Enid* (*mossiae* x *warscewiczii*) in 1898.

Veitch (1906) describes *C. Callistoglossa*, “The gorgeous lip of this hybrid is scarcely equaled in colour by any of the species belonging to the grand race of orchids from which it is derived.” Noted horticulturalist John Rolfe (1894) writes “Undoubtedly the best of the hybrid laelias, it was flowered in 1884 by Mr. Ballantine, gardener to Baron Sir J.H.W. Schroder . . . and was exhibited by him . . . where it deservedly awarded a first-class certificate. The flowers resemble those of *Loelia purpurata*; the sepals and petals are bright rose-colour, and the lip rich magenta-crimson shaded with mauve.”

Cattleya Callistoglossa is a tall plant with pseudobulbs well over 24 inches (60 cm) high and leaves that are narrow like its parents. A well-grown plant can produce enormous heads of flowers. For example, variety ‘Low’s’, which dates back to 1910, makes as many as seven 9-inch (23-cm) wide flowers.

Seden’s breeding was not limited to cattleyas or even orchids as he produced a wide variety of plant material from gloxinias and begonias to fruit trees. In recognition of his outstanding work in hybridizing, Seden was given the most prestigious award in British horticulture,



6 A.A. CHADWICK

[3] The other parent of *C. Edith Bolling Wilson* is the familiar yellow species, *C. dowiana* which has been used extensively in breeding for over a century. Pictured is A.A. Chadwick’s stud plant, *C. dowiana* ‘Meadowlark’ which has proven to be long-lasting and rot-resistant.

[4] William Romanoff and his wife, Sally, operated Romanoff Greenhouses in Canterbury, Connecticut for over 40 years.

[5] *Cattleya* Edith Bolling Wilson has a similar lineage to an earlier Chadwick cross, *C. Powhatan* (Princess Margaret x *dowiana*), which produced mostly lavender but also 18 percent semialbas.

[6] *Cattleya* Edith Bolling Wilson is influenced by many species and early hybrids. Especially noteworthy is the 1882 primary hybrid *C. Callistoglossa* (*warscewiczii* x *purpurata*), which appears on both sides of the lineage.

[7] *Cattleya warscewiczii* Walters Butler’, AM/AOS, AM/RHS — Dark varieties of species appear in the background of *C. Edith Bolling Wilson* including this summer bloomer from Colombia. Award painting by Nelly Roberts and the digital archive made available courtesy of the Royal Horticultural Society’s Lindley Library.



7

the Victoria Medal of Honour.

Orchid seed germination at the time of *Cattleya* Callistoglossa was a difficult proposition. Sterilized flasks and laboratory agar had not been invented yet so growers were left to shake the seed capsule over a pot of finely milled peat moss that had been boiled to kill any pathogens. The medium was then covered with wet burlap and a glass jar and placed in a warm greenhouse. Growers were lucky to have any plants survive and most

crosses saw only a dozen or so seedlings reach maturity.

Breeders were also not experienced in storing orchid pollen so most early hybrids were between plants that flowered at the same time. Such is the case of *Cattleya Callistoglossa* whose parents both bloom between late spring and early summer.

The other parent of *C. Edith Bolling Wilson* is the familiar yellow species, *Cattleya dowiana* which has been used extensively in breeding for over a century. The flowers are relatively short-lived — just 2–3 weeks in August — though the blistering summer heat contributes to the premature aging. Hybridizers use *C. dowiana* for a variety of reasons — hoping to pass along the intense lip color (gold veining on a velvety purple throat), the sweet fragrance or the blooming time, among other things.

In the case of Mrs. Wilson's cattleya, Chadwick took advantage of a little known hybridizer's trick with *C. dowiana*: When combined with a purple parent, the yellow color of its sepals and petals is known to darken the shade of purple in the offspring. (See *Orchids* magazine September, 2006.) Chadwick Sr. used his best *C. dowiana*, variety 'Meadowlark', which had proven over many decades to be long-lasting and rot-resistant.

In September 1919, President Woodrow Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke that left him temporarily paralyzed. In the White House, the only two people with access to the President were his doctor and Edith. Scholars today debate the role of Edith Bolling Wilson in White House affairs during this period. In Edith's autobiography, *My Memoir*, she referred to this time as her "stewardship" of the presidency, and decided which matters of state were important enough to bring to the bedridden president.

Mr. Wilson never fully recovered from his stroke and died a few years after leaving office. Edith outlived her husband by nearly four decades and did not remarry. Until the end, Edith Bolling Wilson continued to promote her husband's legacy. She died on what would have been her husband's 105th birthday — the very day that she was scheduled to be the guest of honor at the dedication ceremony of the new Woodrow Wilson Bridge outside Washington, DC.

Now, over a century after Edith Bolling Wilson first resided at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, she finally has a namesake orchid. The unique hybrid is to be unveiled October 15, 2017 at a special reception hosted by her birthplace museum in



8



9

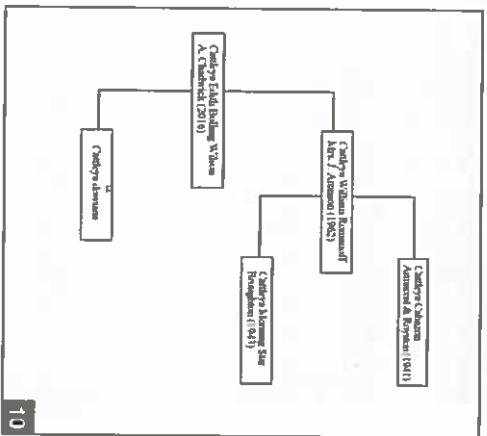
Wytheville, Virginia.

In preparation for the event, Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe's wife, Dorothy, hosted a gathering this past spring at the Governor's Mansion. Attendees included Edith Wilson's great niece, as well as the executive director and founders of her birthplace museum. The women wore stunning oversized cattleya corsages as was Mrs. Wilson's style.

The public is invited to attend the orchid unveiling in October. For tickets and information, visit www.edithbollingwilson.org.

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10



11

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— A.A. Chadwick and his son, Arthur E. Chadwick, are coauthors of *The Classic Cattleyas that describes the large-flowered species that make up today's hybrids*. A.A. Chadwick has been growing orchids since 1943 and is a regular contributor to *Orchids*. Arthur E. Chadwick is president of Chadwick & Son Orchids, which operates 11 greenhouses in Powhatan County, a retail store in Richmond, Virginia and boards over 13,000 orchids for local



Arthur E. and A.A. Chadwick clients. The Chadwicks have the distinction of having named cattleyas after the last five first ladies of the United States and Arthur E. Chadwick will present First Ladies and Their Cattleyas at the 22nd WOC (email art@chadwickorchids.com; Website www.chadwickorchids.com).

FIRST LADIES AND THEIR CATTLEYAS

- 1929-1933 Mrs. Herbert Hoover — *Orchids* 82(8):478-479.
- 1933-1945 Eleanor Roosevelt — *Orchids* 82(11):664-667.
- 1945-1953 Bess Truman — *Orchids* 83(2):98-103.
- 1953-1961 Mamie Eisenhower — *Orchids* 83(5):294-297.
- 1961-1963 Jacqueline Kennedy — *Orchids* 83(8):488-493.
- 1963-1969 Lady Bird Johnson — *Orchids* 81(8):498-500.
- 1969-1974 Patricia Nixon — *Orchids* 83(11):674-679.
- 1974-1977 Betty Ford — *Orchids* 84(2):98-103.
- 1977-1981 Rosalynn Carter — *Orchids* 84(5):292-297.
- 1981-1989 Nancy Reagan — *Orchids* 84(8):478-483.
- 1989-1993 Barbara Bush — *Orchids* 84(11):674-679.
- 1993-2001 Hillary Rodham Clinton — *Orchids* 85(3):210-217.
- 2001-2009 Laura Bush — *Orchids* 85(9):684-689.
- 2009-2017 Michelle Obama — *Orchids* 86(5):360-365.

[8] President Woodrow Wilson showed off his new girlfriend, Edith Bolling Galt, at the 1914 World Series. She wore a quadruple cattleya corsage that day. Photograph courtesy of the Everett Collection.

[9] Edith Bolling Wilson outlived her husband by nearly 40 years. Here, she poses with former first ladies, Eleanor Roosevelt and Bess Truman. All three are outfitted with cattleya corsages. Photograph courtesy of the Everett Collection.

[10] Genealogy of *C. Edith Bolling Wilson*.

[11] In preparation for this October's orchid unveiling ceremony, Virginia's first lady, Dorothy McAuliffe (white dress) hosted a gathering that included Edith Wilson's great niece, Elizabeth Evans (light blue), as well as the executive director, Shiloh Holley (dark blue) and founder, Far-ron Smith (white jacket), of the Wilson birthplace museum. The women wore oversized cattleya corsages as was Edith's style.