

15. Flower Growing

SOME OF THE early farmers of Colma were gardeners from sections of Italy that catered to the royal houses and great estates of Europe. In their new home, as they had done in the old land, they planted flowers and marketed their crops in the nearby cities. By the year 1900 they were growing so many varieties and in such number, their flowers were shipped to all parts of California.

So many farmers grew flowers that by 1920, it is estimated, 20 percent of the land of northern San Mateo County was used for flower raising. By 1944 one third of the \$18 million agricultural output of San Mateo County was in flowers, many of them grown in the Colma-Daly City area.² The production remained high in spite of the housing developments and highways that occupied much of the land following World War II. In 1970 San Mateo County still ranked second in California in the production of cut flowers. The gross value of the flower crops in the county was \$23,511,000.³

The first flower growers planted their crops in the fields and protected them from the fog with cheesecloth; even so, the weather killed all but the most hardy types. Among the varieties that survived was the Ulrich Brunner Rose that produces a large cherry-red blossom that is in great demand and generally commands a high price.

Growers discovered that California violets do well in soil that will produce strawberries and potatoes, two of the chief crops in Colma, and with proper care will give off a scent of delicate perfume. So many violets were grown that in Colma in 1916 over 450 acres were used solely in the cultivation of violets. Colma violets were found on the flower stands as far away as Missouri and Kansas. It is estimated that in 1916, 100 dozen bunches of Colma violets were taken to San Francisco daily.⁴ Dahlias, marigolds (especially African marigolds), chrysanthemums, marguerites and strawflowers were among the varieties that grew in the area.

For flower growers the day's work started about 4:00 A.M. with whole families cutting the blossoms and wrapping them in bunches and the bunches in wet paper or cloth. As soon as the flowers were ready the growers delivered them to the flower stands in San Francisco or to the flower market that was on Bush Street until 1917, then moved to 5th and Howard Street and subsequently to 6th and Brannan.

As the twentieth century progressed the growers started to plant their flowers in greenhouses, thus making it possible to produce more varieties and to

place the growing period on a year round basis. In the greenhouses fern growing became a major industry with twenty-eight acres under glass according to a 1936 report.⁵ "Colma and San Francisco," wrote a reporter in 1936, "supplied the entire Pacific Coast with cut ferns, 80 percent of them coming from Colma."⁶ Heather production and the cultivation of other kinds of liners became a part of the activities in the greenhouses.

The building of greenhouses seems to have saved the flower industry in the Colma and Daly City area from being snuffed out as one housing development after another gobbled up the land.

Flower growing in northern San Mateo County was a family enterprise with father, mother and children doing their part. Among those families now recalled were the Podestas, Concis, Raggios, Lagomarsinos, Ottobonis, Tealdis, Garibaldis, Pappas, the Paul Von Kempf concern and many others who will long be remembered. After the construction of greenhouses some larger concerns located in the area—among them the Avansino-Mortensen Company and the McLellan Company. Indeed the Rod McLellan Nursery near the southern part of Colma became so famous that it opened its gates to tourists, with as many as 6,000 visitors in a two day period gazing at the orchids, anthurium, stephanotis, roses, carnations, gardenias, agapanthus, and daisies growing there.⁷



LARRY DELUCCHI AT HIS FATHER'S FLOWER SHOP "PAUL'S FLOWERS" IN 1964