

A Year in the Life of the Compton Head Gardener

By Elizabeth Gavula, Morris Arboretum Archives & History Volunteer

Though only a two-fingered typist, I can go at a good enough clip to get the job done. So when the Volunteer Newsletter included a request for transcriptionists for the Arboretum archive, I offered. What privileged access I'm gaining to the stories of the early years at Compton and Bloomfield Farm! I was assigned to transcribe the 1921-1922 daily diary kept by John Tonkin, head gardener from 1913 to 1957 and was hooked from the start. When Tonkin wrote "Very dry" almost daily from June 3 to June 25, including "Everything suffering with the Dry weather" (6/21/1921) and "Still very dry watering all the time (3 men) not very good results" (6/24/1921) I found myself praying for rain. And when he recorded "horse took sick on the road" I worried for the poor thing and wondered if it survived.

Although he was prone to odd spacing and random use of capital letters, and generally skipped punctuation in these notations for his personal use, John Tonkin was a good speller. But he seemed befuddled by what was perhaps a new appellation for the property he cared for. He tried "arborutum" and "arbororum" – but generally settled on "arboretum".

Seasons were marked by key events. "Planted first crop of garden peas" (3/17/1921); "First swarm of Bees" (5/9/1921); "Swans laid first Eggs" (5/30/1921); "Planted Last crop Sweet Corn...Dug first potatoes...picked the last peas" (7/12/1921); "Spawned first mushroom bed" (8/1/1921); "Leaves Started to fall (9/3/1921); "Started to put cuttings of Geraniums" (9/6/1921); "Planted first frame of Cauliflower" (2/21/1922); "B took in palms and stevia and all outside stock afraid of frost" (10/5/1921); "All the corn & oats ground ploughed ready for spring" (12/1/1921).

What a busy worker "Adolf" was. "Adolf started to uncover" (4/5/1921); "Adolf finished storing away winter coverings" (4/27/1921); "Adolf fixed screen for garage" 4/28/1921). Busy, yes – but perhaps not happy: "Adolf on strike." (5/2/1921)! Not for six months is Adolf mentioned again. Was it a long strike or was all quickly forgiven? I'll never know.

The relaxed loops of Tonkin's fountain-penned script seem to tighten to more proper formality when he writes "Miss Morris came out" (3/4/1921); "Miss Morris came out from town House" (4/21/1921). When "Miss Morris left for summer trip" Tonkin "stopped all fountains" (7/20/1921) and embarked, for the next weeks, on all sorts of work: cutting grass, hauling manure, planting celery, cleaning raspberries, turning compost, pointing walls, pruning trees, cutting weeds, and hauling oats. Then on August 6 he wrote "Stopped pruning Dead wood from trees untill [sic] after Miss Morris come [sic] back lots more to prune but haven't time". Lots of cleaning up and grass cutting ensued for 13 days. Then on August 19 he noted, "Miss Morris came back place in good shape." But perhaps not good enough for Lydia? "Miss M planed [sic] her winter work on the Grounds" (10/18/1921).

Some entries remind me how poor my frame of reference is for 1920's farm life. "Put in set of Drinking cups for cows" (1/14/1922) surely meant neither the Dixie dispenser or the plastic ware I know. "Started to cut grass with horse machine in afternoon" (4/11/1921) tickles the imagination, as does "Car made trip to City Bought 3 bags of Blood" (6/13/1921). What was the "three way machine" that "Mr. Worthington came to see about" on the evening of July 19, 1921?

Deepening the pond was a major undertaking in the spring of 1921. Workers "Started to Clean Pond" (3/7) and for 18 days thereafter documentation of the enormous work gets more and more serious. "5

men cleaning pond (3/8); "7 men in pond Starting Hauling Hauled 16 loads" (3/10); "7 men in pond 24 loads Hauled" (3/11); "9 men in Pond started today with two trucks Hauled 40 loads" (3/14); "11 men in pond Hauled 45 loads" (3/21); "men worked until 10 o'clock in Pond" (3/24). The milestone recorded as "Finished Cleaning Pond 560 loads of Mud Hauled" (3/25) must have been met by a loud "Amen" from those tired men. A detailed estimate of the "Cost of Pond" follows, including \$35 for rubber boots and \$568.65 for labor. Imagine each man's share! Three weeks later, Tonkin recorded "laid off Pond gang" (4/16/1921).

His pride of work clearly shines through in entries like ""Place cleaned up very nicely" (7/2/1921); "8 men cleaned up park looked fine Roads hoed and edged" (7/15/1921); "Cleaned up & Place looked good" (8/27/1921); "Gang of men from Wayne Iron Works Started to take down Iron fence in Park Made a great improvement to the beauty of the place" (9/30/1921).

The sad reality of weather's foibles is recorded in entries like "10 degrees of Frost cut all Flowering Plants very bad [sic]" (3/28/1921); "Heavy White Frost all Flowering Shrubs destroyed" (3/30/1921); "Heavy storm in afternoon & evening washed roads in Park very bad [sic]" (8/7/1921) and "First Hard Frost Glass down to 32 All tender plants Killed outside Cut Hardy Chrys [chrysanthemums] bad lost most of the flowers" (10/26/1921).

Might John Tonkin have resisted modernity a little? "Phila Electric started to bring cable in Lots of draw back's [sic]" (4/12/1921) and "Had lots of extra work in connection with electric wiring [sic]" (4/14/1921); "new pump worked 2 ½ months and then went to pieces" (7/27/1921). On July 30 when the "Toro man came to demonstrate with three way", Tonkin recorded that no work got done on the farm. On August 11, 1921 he wrote "tractor couldn't plough deep enough (Horses better)".

Farm work was dangerous to man and beast. "horse burnt bad with lime had to be turned out to grass should have been washed after being used in lime" (8/8/1921); "Charlie Costanzo hurt himself" (8/15/1921); "Charlie Costanzo came back to work" (8/18/1921); "Johnson fell off wagon Hurt His arm & side" (12/7/1921).

Lest we get the idea that he was all work and no play, Tonkin recorded in October of 1921 that he "Went to Gardeners Convention Had a wonderfull [sic] time". He stayed for three days and "Saw all the fine places Around New York".

As interesting as the daily entries are the Memoranda at the end of the journal. Recipes for mixtures to prevent black spot and leaf minor, for Laying Mash Chicken Feed and for grass fertilizer are mixed in with instructions on how to charge a battery and how to calculate the tons of stone needed for road resurfacing.

A few of my favorite entries include this testament to the novelty of motorized vehicles: "Pete Haney finished Driving truck left us without a Driver" (9/10/1921) and this August 20, 1921 example of the wage scale: "George Whillier Finished on Farm worked 38 hrs paid \$13.30." You do the math!

I've moved on the 1922-23 diary. Stay tuned.

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