

The Mission Garden

Dan Hardison

In the mountains of Tennessee, in a valley just twelve miles from the University of the South at Sewanee, sits Epiphany Mission Episcopal Church. And just outside its doors is the Mission Garden. Though it was for all to enjoy, this garden was different than most, it was built and maintained by the young boys and girls of the Mission.

Begun in 1938 under the guidance of The Rev. George W. Jones, the garden was built over a number of years as a way to occupy idle time, to provide needed income, and to bring beauty and inspiration to the people of the valley. From the hauling of fertile soil by wheelbarrow, to the casting of blocks and bricks for the walls and walkways, the boys constructed the garden and then the youths became the gardeners who tended it day to day.

In the words of Father Jones, "In the garden spiritual and material needs are determined in all manner of people, heavy and gladsome hearts come and go. Marvelous indeed is the measure of parochial life that can transpire in a garden closely linked to an altar throne of God."

It would become a walled garden covering an area of 16,000 square feet in a Spanish Mission style. Within its ivy covered walls were pools with fish, fountains, bricked walkways, and an open-air chapel. The chapel was within a colonnade with a large statue of Mary holding the infant Lord behind the altar, and would become known as "Our Lady of the Hills" chapel.

In the garden, there were a variety of flowers, shrubs, and even vegetables. Flowers from the garden were used to adorn the church and its altars, and to provide beauty and comfort to the sick, the bereaved, and the aged. It is said that, "a lady each morning took to the hungry children a basket of fruit and a basket of flowers. By demand, the supply of flowers was the first exhausted."

Work in the garden was balanced with play and there would be time for horseshoes, baseball, and good-natured fun. As Father

Jones recalled, "The wheelbarrows have all but never stopped rolling. They must have rolled as far as around the world and moved incalculable tonnage. And if they are ever unemployed in work, they become the pleasure cars of small boys who never ever tire of riding each other over the garden walks and often all over the town. That is a nuisance! But both nuisance and extravagance are well endured because the keen delight ... is harmless and wholesome and long since has equaled in value the wheelbarrows' weight in gold."

During World War II, many of the boys who had been the builders of the garden left to serve our country, but they never forgot the memories and lessons learned in the Mission Garden. The young soldiers would correspond with Father Jones, reminiscing and longing for the Mission and its garden. As one young soldier wrote, "When I think of home I always think of the garden. That place means lots to me although I did not know it when I worked there. If I were an artist I could draw it perfectly from memory to every last brick and flower pot."

People from across the country would visit the mission church and its garden. But after struggling through the Depression and World War II, the area fell victim to a lack of employment and most of the people would gradually leave the valley in search of work. As the population dwindled, so did the membership of the church. The Mission Garden could not be maintained and most of it has been lost. But Epiphany Mission is still active today and "Our Lady of the Hills" chapel still stands – a testament to its past.



In the Mission Garden
Epiphany Mission Episcopal Church
Sherwood, Tennessee
Photo by Dan Hardison

The main entrance to the Mission Garden is a gate of solid oak painted green and set in a solid wall of masonry. The gate is generally closed and from outside the garden there is no vision within. Approach to the gate has deliberately been made to contrast outside and inside. A stranger approaching the gate is led to expect nothing.

Then the solid dark-green gate swings open, the visitors step across the threshold and lift surprised, startled eyes. The eyes view a vista some 180 feet long. A stretch of green sod bordered with (according to the season) hibiscus, dahlias, roses, lilies, irises, tuberoses; and roofed by poplar, willow, mimosa, or chiefly sun kissed skies.

At the far end, the vista terminates against a high ivy covered wall at the stone altar beneath the statue of the Holy Mother holding our baby Lord smiling "welcome" from her arms.

Surely through the years a thousand visitors have entered the green gate and broken off speech in mid-sentence to gasp, "Oh!" or "Ah!" beholding the beginning of the Garden. How aptly the young Mission gardeners have long designated the simple portal as the Gasping Gate."

— Father George W. Jones, 1951