

WHO WAS THE MAN BEHIND THOSE TULIPS?

*PIONEER OIL EXECUTIVE SHERWOOD LIKED PEOPLE TO ENJOY HIS FLOWERS;
BACKSTORY*

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A stroll through Guilford's Sherwood Gardens on a warmish, sun-splashed spring afternoon is a perfect restorative from the cares and worries of the day - and a wonderful way to celebrate Earth Day.

It seems to be the one place where even cell phone-addicted junkies gladly ditch their seemingly indispensable electronic appendages to take in the beautifully maintained gardens with their rows of colorful blooming tulips and daffodils. Azaleas, dogwoods and boxwoods, evergreens, ornamental trees and other curiosities are also to be found within this majestic 6 1/2 -acre - hard to believe - urban garden.

During a recent late afternoon visit, the garden named for its creator, John W. Sherwood, a Baltimore businessman, philanthropist and pioneer in the petroleum business, had drawn a pretty good crowd who had come to bathe in its beauty.

Young lovers strolled hand in hand. Mothers pushed strollers while watching older children frolic on the lawn, burning off bursts of pre-dinner energy. Senior citizens took in the sights while no doubt getting ideas for their own home gardens. And an artist was trying to capture on canvas the beauty of a stand of red tulips, which the sunlight made glow as though they had been electrified.

There was an air of tranquility here and none of the visitors felt crowded or jostled in this uniquely special greensward.

But who was the man behind the gardens that are visited by people from all over the world? The gardens that have been featured in National Geographic?

John W. Sherwood was born in 1871 into an old Baltimore shipping family.

His father, John R. Sherwood, was born in Baltimore in 1845 and began his career after the Civil War as an engineer aboard bay steamers of the Baltimore Steam Packet Co., better known as the Old Bay Line. He later was general manager and president of the company, retiring in 1918.

When he retired from the line, The Sun recalled his personal philosophy, which he willingly dispensed: "Stand up for your home city wherever you may go."

After graduating from City College, the younger Sherwood went to work as a clerk for the Vacuum Oil Co. In 1898, he established a company that barreled oil that was then sold to his father's steamship company.

He established a second company, Sherwood Brothers Inc., with his brother, Watson E. Sherwood. "In that venture he prospered even more as an early developer of home heating fuel and owner of more than 60 service stations in the Greater Baltimore area," reported The Sun at his death in 1965.

In 1933, he sold his thriving business to the Sinclair Oil Co., but remained as the company's board chairman until 1945.

His home at 204 East Highfield Road in Guilford was started in 1924 and finished two years later. Designed by architect Edward Sills, the house is a reduced-scale copy of Westover, the stately James River plantation near Williamsburg, Va., that was built around 1735 for Col. William Byrd II.

The land on which Sherwood built his home and later created his garden had once been under water.

It had been a pond on Guilford, the 350-acre 19th-century estate where A. S. Abell, founder of The Sun, had lived. But in 1912, the Roland Park Co. filled in the pond when it began developing the estate and building homes.

The garden dates to the mid-1920s, when Sherwood and his wife, Mary Franklin, began planting flower beds with cuttings of boxwoods and other specimens they had collected from the neglected gardens of Colonial estates in Southern Maryland, to fill in bare spots they could see from the house.

On a May day in 1930, Sherwood stepped off his back porch and found himself surrounded by hundreds of people. "They were all strangers and they were wandering all over his Guilford estate looking at his flowers," said a 1957 article in The Sunday Sun Magazine.

"The gardener came up with a worried look and asked if he should try and send the crowd away. The owner watched for a minute, saw that people weren't doing any harm, and decided to let them stay. That was the beginning of Sherwood Gardens, 27 years ago."

During the Sherwood years, the gardens were only open to the public in early May. But now that they are owned and maintained by the Guilford Association - which makes sure bulbs are planted, trees trimmed and beds mulched - they can be visited year-round.

Because his gas stations weren't open on Sunday, Sherwood spent them at home and enjoyed blending in with the visiting crowds.

"Occasionally someone near him would wonder aloud, 'What kind of people live in that place? That Mr. Sherwood must be a wonderful person to let everybody come in here,'" reported The Sun at his death. "He would reply, 'Oh no, he's probably just like everybody else.'"

Every year, Sherwood purchased at least five tons of tulip bulbs, which arrived by ship from Holland. After the blooming season, they were removed, because in succeeding years their flowers would become smaller and less attractive.

During World War II, Sherwood's supplies were cut off and he planted Cottage tulips from England and other American varieties. With the end of the war, he returned to his original Dutch suppliers.

Today, the Guilford Association, which plants approximately 80,000 bulbs, still maintains Sherwood's tradition of digging up this season's bulbs and replacing them.

Sherwood was always impressed by the respect that the visiting hordes displayed toward his garden and noted that the only thing that suffered damage was his lawn.

"Women's high heels do the most damage," he told The Sunday Sun Magazine, "especially when the ground is wet and soft. Some of those tiny heels sink in so far that the women step out of their shoes. Some take their shoes off and walk around in their stocking feet."

Sherwood was also proud of the fact that he paid his own water bill and received no special tax privileges from the city.

He felt that flowers brought out the best in people.

As The Sunday Sun Magazine reported, "Mr. Sherwood loves both people and flowers, and the time and money he has spent trying to bring the two together he feels were well worth the while."

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