

THE GREAT OUTLAW

By Walter LeMire
The Canadian Rose Grower

This is a story of a rose from yesterday that wore a mask of many names, return back to the times when ONLY roses registered with the American Rose Society were accepted in their competitions. The Great Outlaw was germinated more than forty years ago. Up to that time the most perfect stage of beauty was only seen either in manuals or for only a fleeting moment in real roses. This seedling held its high center in perfect symmetrical form long enough that an artists' perception could be painted in three dimensional colour...still, it held...

The story of The Great Outlaw is true. Only my fond memories of the times and people from yesterday could or may change a few dates. For the most part, I'll try and keep them straight. To tell the true story it's necessary to include the times and the many people involved. Allow me to start with the man that helped make the legend possible

Henry Webb came to Michigan from the Tennessee-Kentucky area, loved Beagle dogs so much that at times four or five met you at the gate. Henry worked at one of the leading rose nurseries, long before it was popular. H.W. grafted miniatures, producing plants of "STARINA" 30 inches high and at least half that wide. One thing H.W. could do was grow beautiful roses. His deep passion was exhibiting, even at work, he would dress a queen quality rose, it then was put on display in a clear refrigerated case in the middle of the room. Here, every person coming into the nursery would view the roses of the day. I refer to the man as H.W., my children referred to his visits by reporting "the man without shoe laces was here". Henry was tall, raw-boned man, but, as I stated earlier, those big hands and fingers could graft with great precision. Another thing Henry could do was talk roses. On almost any weekend in the rose growing season H.W.'s yard would be populated by rosarians from hundreds of miles away. To put it another way, he was the motor that kept dreams alive in the Great Lakes district.

The year Penn-Jersey hosted the American Rose Society National Convention, Henry attended. Conard Pyle Nurseries was on the tour. When the group came to the new seedlings, Henry saw this great rose. I was not there, but the story goes, "a black car with a person using long glasses followed every step and movement that Henry made." That night it rained very hard but Henry went back to the field without benefit of a flashlight and captured a stick of buddwood. The Great Outlaw was on its way to Michigan. Because the rose had so many petals, exhibitors saw a thing of beauty. However, the rose refused to drop its spent petals the general public saw a rose that ended up looking something less than beautiful. Conard Pyle elected not to introduce this rose. Because of this decision, The Great Outlaw was born and an extraordinary amount of rose history would unfold.

The Great Outlaw appeared under name names; "PAPA MIELLAND", "BIG BEN" and "BIG RED" just to name a few, and as each new rose became available, the name had to change. In the late '60's two entrepreneurs from Ohio came to Michigan and crossed

over to Canada gathering sticks of buddwood as they went. In just a few years the original eyes had become many plants. Now, a new life was about to begin, the mask was coming off...or so we thought.

In 1971, Kern Rose Nursery hit the ground running with its registration of a dark red called "UNCLE JOE" (Mirandy x Charles Mallerin) x unnamed seedling. Shortly after, Melvin Wyants' 1972 registration of a medium red rose called "TORO" (Karl Herist seedling x Big Red) very fragrant. Well, it's a good thing no one tried to make an identification based on the supposed fragrance or "TORO" would still be looking for its first ribbon.

For many years the debate of perceived differences of the roses rang loud in some camps, while just as loudly other camps swore there were none. In 1974, The Great Outlaw was shown, not only as "TORO" and "UNCLE JOE", but also as "BIG BEN". Yes, it made and English Box fit for any world competition, and it won. Thinking back to yesterday and remembering many conversations with rosarians from both camps, it's a wonder my tongue is not shredded from all the times I had to bite it.