

Profile of Oscie Whatley

By Michael Bouman

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In 1995 when I came to St. Louis for a job interview, I made sure to look up Oscie Whatley. I knew his name from the catalogues and Daylily Journals I had read during my few years of AHS membership, and I knew he was a hybridizer of national prominence.

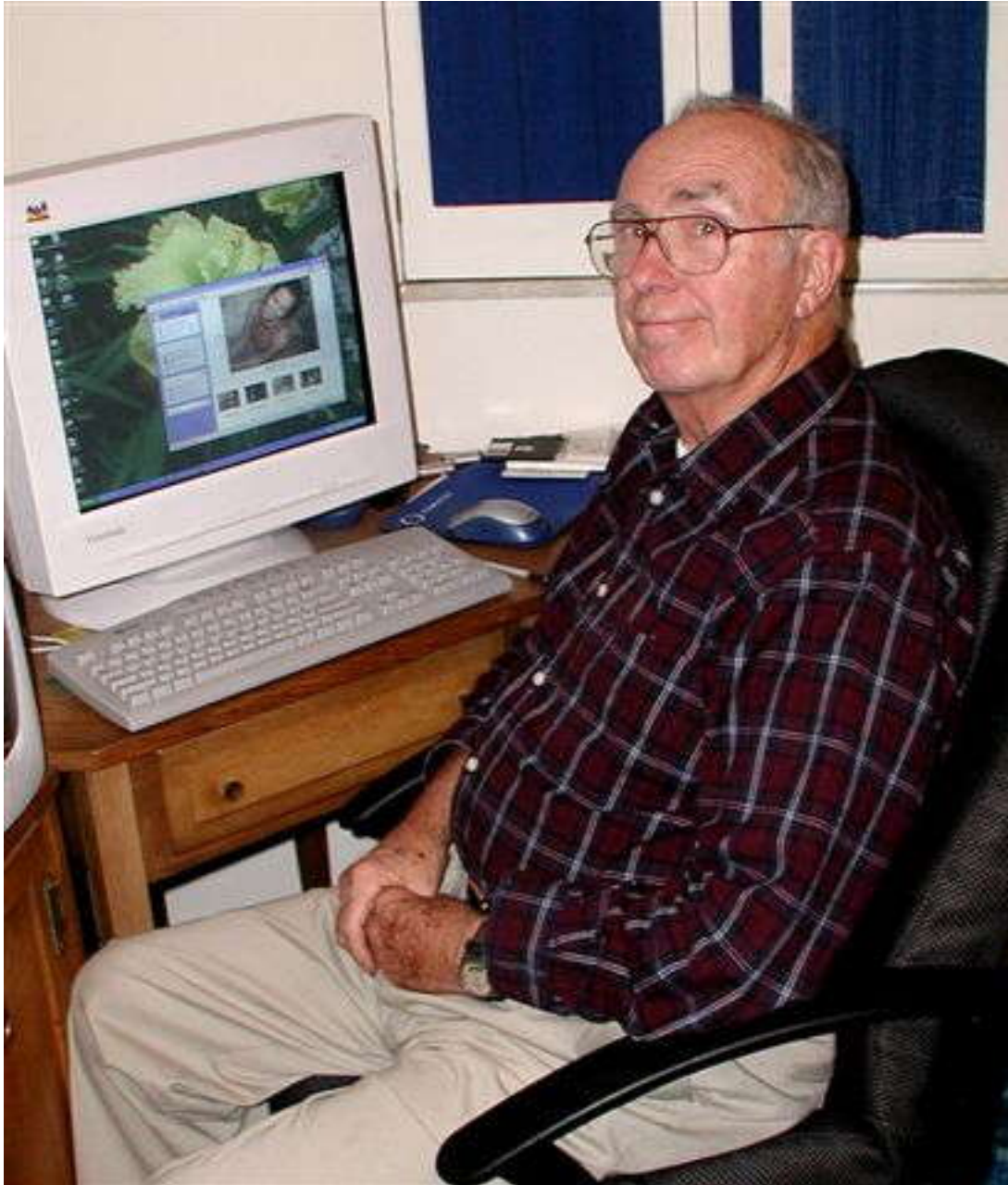
But I didn't have a clue about his name. When he answered the phone I asked for OH -ski WAIT-ly, and he kindly answered "yes?" and invited me over for a visit. A month later I was in St. Louis, house-sharing while my wife held the fort back in Vermont, and in need of friends and, as important, a garden connection. I had left behind a massive land -clearing project that resulted in my first big seedling bed and a planting of a thousand little green things that represented my entry to "square one." So early in my friendship with Oscie I offered to help him plant his seedling crop the following April.

He accepted immediately. Transplanting was his least favorite thing. And so, beginning in 1996 in a freezing sleet, and every April thereafter, we put out his seedling crop and passed the time. That spring I dug a small trench in a stretch of Bermuda grass and planted some of my collection. Oscie amended it with contributions from his own creations. So, in addition to seeing Mort Morss's PAPER BUTTERFLY in bloom for the first time, I saw Oscie's PERSIMMON PUNCH, BONHOMIE, JULIETTE WHATLEY MEMORIAL, and BRAVE ONE in my first little border. What a thrill!



I soon learned that my impression of being Oscie's close friend was shared by my colleagues in the Greater St. Louis Daylily Society. It seemed that EVERYONE considered Oscie a friend and mentor! In my opinion, that is the center of this profile.

Recently I gathered up some impressions of the past eight years and talked with Oscie about his life and his work in the garden.



Oscie's self-portrait in 2002, with his new computer. PARABOLA is on the screen.

Michael: Oscie, I understand that as a youth in east Texas, you had a lot of exposure to the plant nursery business. Were your family folks in Texas plant people?

Oscie: Yes, my aunt Mary Stevens belonged to the AHS and had a perennial nursery in 1951. My father, mother, grandmother, and aunt all had a strong interest in ornamentals. They made me help when I was a “chile” but couldn't appreciate the opportunities.

Michael: Do you remember when you took an interest in plant genetics and hybridizing?

Oscie: It was around 1950. I was living in St. Louis. My aunt Mary and William Dill, who was a nurseryman and hybridizer, encouraged me.

Michael: Did you start hybridizing daylilies or some other types of plants?

Oscie: Daylilies were my first and my last. But along the way I dabbled in Daffodills, Iris, Dogwoods, hardy Geraniums, and hellebores.

Michael: Did you begin to grow daylilies because you wanted to hybridize them, or did you get the hybridizing idea after you'd grown them a while?

Oscie: I enjoyed them in the garden first; and later I became interested in crossing them.

Michael: Where do your experiments with dogwoods and geraniums fit in the time line?

Oscie: The dogwood had my interest the most, in the late 60s. I remembered seeing red-leaf dogwoods in the southern woods. I bred for this leaf color with some success, only to discover I also inherited a hardiness problem.

Michael: I've noticed that you seem to take an interest in a broad range of distinctive plants in your home garden. You've taken an interest in Dave Niswonger's hybrid daffodils, in Hellebores, in tree peonies, and in all sorts of other things. Have you always been interested this broadly or did this range of interest grow on you?



Oscie: Well-grown companion plants make a garden whole and avoid boredom. My interest grew out of wanting more complementary plants near the daylilies.

Michael: When did you start daylily breeding? How old were you, and what got you started?

Oscie: I started when I lived in University City around 1947. I was 24 at that time with 2 young children.

Michael: Who were your mentors? Did you seek them out or did someone guide you toward them?

Oscie: My aunt Mary, William Dill, Robert Griesbach, and David Hall were the most free with sharing their knowledge with me. Aunt Mary and Will Dill encouraged me a lot. Earl Rexroad came later and we shared many dreams and pollen. I found them, and they were kind.

Michael: I've seen you working on tetraploid conversions for the eight years I've known you. How do you evaluate a diploid as a candidate for conversion? What are you looking for? Once you convert it, do you move on to something else after you get one productive cross from it?

Oscie: That's what it looks like to me, but maybe I'm wrong. I still believe the most notable genetic breaks come from diploids. They are very subtle then, and it takes lots of attention to determine the value. Once I see that a distinctive trait has been isolated in a diploid, I try to convert to tet so as to enhance the selected characteristic. When I accomplish the desired feature in the Tet line, I "fire" the conversion (maybe not wisely)

Michael: Although you've got a big reputation for yellow and red daylilies, I've seen a lot of near whites in your output in the past few years. What are the obstacles in getting whiter tets and how do you determine how to focus your efforts with so little space for seedlings?

Oscie: Elsie Spaulding proved to me that Lavender x Lavender will yield some whites. Lavenders are very recessive and apparently can counter each other's influence, leaving no color. This is not so easy in Tetraploid hybridizing because of the extra layers of pigment. Griesbach thought repeated back crosses might help to purify the whiteness. I did this for four generations and couldn't tell the difference.

Only a few breeding decisions turn out to be good ones. Breeding is a gamble, but analyzing a decision quickly and moving on is a skill that can be developed. Space is the least of my problems.

Michael: How did you determine your choice of profession and what was it? Did you go to school on the GI Bill after WW II?

Oscie: I have a love for mechanical engineering that equals my interest in hems. I went to Washington University and was a manager of Manufacturing Engineering for 20 years in two large companies.

Michael: With so many new daylilies coming on the market every year, how do you determine the very few additions that you seek for your outcrosses?

Oscie: Pauline Henry told me she would stand before her new seedlings and ask "what do you need." Of course she answered for them but it is that simple.

Michael: Everyone I talked to talks about your generosity. Where did you pick up that habit?

Oscie: I inherited it from my mother, NO GIFT COULD HAVE BEEN MORE VALUED.

Michael: What prompted you to study foreign languages and how many did you study?

Oscie: Spanish and Sign Language are the only two I gave much of my time. I guess it's like exploring MARS: go and see what is there I found the people who spoke those languages more like us than different. Except for the communication differences, a garden visit in any other language sounds much like ours.

Michael: What's your strategy to improve the blue illusion in daylilies?

Oscie: My long-range objective, assuming I'm allowed one, is to bring more blue into lavenders. Any lavender with red or violet in it just doesn't cut it with my comparison to other lavender species. I work a lot on the lighter side of violet. The good blue eyes are great but don't fit into my scheme.

Michael: Thanks, friend.

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On November 23 in a cold rain about a hundred people from all over the country came together at Westport Plaza in St. Louis for a luncheon celebration of 60 years of marriage. Oscie and Dorothy Whatley both looked wonderful, Oscie in a new sport jacket, plum - purple shirt and silver & plum necktie, Dorothy in a dazzling outfit of black and silver. There were four easels filled with collages of family snapshots covering both of their lives. One showed a 20 year old Oscie in flight gear climbing out of an airplane cockpit. Another showed Dorothy as a high school girl.



April 2003, following surgery for pancreatic cancer, with Michael Bouman. Bobbie Brooks photo

Once upon a time Oscie was a handsome, confident, Texas boy who'd come here to learn to fly airplanes in the war in Europe and Dorothy was a beauty with bright eyes and high cheekbones. Oscie's grandson Michael Whatley is the spitting image of Oscie the young pilot. There is more family resemblance there than in their two sons. One sees the recessives at work in this family! Their daughter Linda resembles Dorothy when you see her across the room, and the voice is nearly identical with Mom's. Both sons, and several grandchildren appear to have inherited the Oscie sense of humor.

Their children spoke of the lessons of loyalty they had learned in that family. David Whatley, the youngest of three children, said he was not known in the family as "youngest" but as "the accident." He spoke of Oscie's worn-out wheelbarrow. They were mixing concrete in it last fall and the concrete was dripping out through the holes, and David asked why Oscie didn't just buy a new one. David said he had seen Oscie replace worn-out parts in that wheelbarrow over the years. Oscie said, "Of course I could have afforded to buy a new one. But I got this from my father. If I bought a new one, where would my legacy be?"



With granddaughter Ava Wadley, Christmas 2004

Somebody told a story about Oscie's funny name. When he met Dorothy, he'd gone by the name "O.B." But Dorothy couldn't abide a name made of initials and demanded that he declare his true name, to which he seemed to her to reply, with a straight face, "O.C!"

Oscie took the microphone and said something like this: "Of all the places I could have lived and all the friends I could have had, none could have been better than this place and these friends. I did not choose you all. You chose me; and for that I am so grateful."

Then they exchanged anniversary gifts. Dorothy presented Oscie with a gold tie bar with a little diamond in the middle. Oscie gave Dorothy a Cracker Jacks box. Inside was a replacement for the engagement ring she lost last summer. It was a dazzler! Then they danced and their children danced as his sister sang their song, "As Time Goes By."

Last January most of us thought it unlikely that either Oscie or Dorothy would survive the cancers that were diagnosed within the same month over the Christmas season. Dorothy's inoperable lung cancer remains in remission. Oscie's pancreatic cancer appears to have been removed and arrested. A lifelong lover of scientific observation, he has become an ideal diabetic patient. Although he looks frail at his current minimal weight, he is not frail. The muscles on that frame still look for work to do. He still enjoys the rambles with little Max

the dog. He drives, shops, digs, and spends hours on the telephone with daylily people in the know.

Some people will say there is no such entity as "God." But they really can't say there is no such thing as prayer. For those of us who formed that international weave of prayers last spring, we can say with confidence that the "coincidental" miracles for Oscie and Dorothy happened at the same time as the prayers we thought and said on their behalf, and so we all have participated in this "coincidence" which can't help but fill us with awe at the mysteries we can't explain.

--MB



With granddaughter Diana Kelly, April 2005, three months before he passed on.