

John Alexander Chambliss on Reflection Riding

The results accomplished at Reflection Riding arise out of observation over a long period of living on Lookout Mountain, off and on since 1890. Familiarity developed as to its railroads, highways, inclines, hotels and parks; scenic and civil war interest to tourists had been obvious.

A major and lasting concept had come to me in 1925. The Chattanooga and Lookout Mountain Park was chartered under the leadership and financial generosity of Adolph S. Ochs. He lived in Chattanooga for many years. He announced that the purpose was to preserve and develop the slopes of Lookout Mountain as the "Hanging Gardens". Nearly 3,000 acres were acquired. He carried the major load in cost and his brother, Milton B. Ochs, the execution. Chartered as a public welfare corporation, with his aid, two large CCC camps constructed trails and roads of remarkable usefulness and rare scenic beauty. This made the terrain accessible.

About 1935, realizing his declining health and advancing age, the corporation deeded this well-developed area to the United States.

Those who became aware of the great work were filled with admiration and enthusiasm.

Having closely observed the magnitude of the work by walking, and on horseback, with the members of my family, who also were enthusiastic, I began to fully appreciate the value of the great creation around us.

In 1935 a book was published by the Cambridge University Press entitled *Scenery and the Sense of Sight*. I ordered the book, the Park having made me scenery conscious. Most of the text was difficult to comprehend. It was apparent that the author, Vaughn Cornish, D.Sc., of Surrey, England, had traveled widely and observed keenly.

He suggested that the enjoyment to be had from scenery is not just for the cultured or the widely traveled. Nearly all people have the gift. Landscape beauties "...fall into place in the decorative scheme of Nature which is the common inheritance of all" (p.30). Other phrases support the conclusion that the ordinary man enjoys beauty as well as the highly cultured.

He says "Scenic Beauty satisfied the eye, arouses an ecstatic mood," and that this satisfaction occurs before we have time to think, and exercises a predisposing influence on the mind.

His work and language indicate a man who would hold in high regard the capacity of the ordinary man to appreciate the beauty of a landscape, and it is reassuring to have him say that such appreciation is "a common inheritance of all...before we have time to think."

This opinion that people generally appreciate beauty in a landscape is an assurance that what was being done on the Hanging Gardens was worthwhile and worth extending. My application of these ideals thus began its development.

And here serendipity begins. About 1925 I bought 7.07 acres on Lookout Creek below the great cliff known as Sunset Rock, then called the "Face" later. The valley from 1200 feet above was intriguing and we would walk up and down in our vain efforts to "farm." Thus, I became aware of the natural landscape beauty.

Some fifteen years later on that cliff with Superintendent C.S. Dunn of the N.P.S. to point out the trails about 100 feet below, that extend for miles along the cliffs, I saw a lumber operator and the trees on what is now Reflection Riding were being cut. I expressed distress and Mr. Dunn (a trained forester) said, "The harder they hit them, the quicker they come back." This put me to thinking. Coincidentally, Harold M. Humphreys, after owning a farm in Lookout Valley, sold it and was living next door to us – we were close friends. He loved the landscape of that valley. Because he knew values there, a bank, after foreclosing on approximately 175 acres of what is now Reflection Riding, asked him to suggest a purchaser. He told me of the inquiry and assured me ownership of the tract could occupy my mind all the rest of my life, and probably increase in value. These two happenings were purely coincidental, if not providential.

Consequently, in 1941 I transferred bonds to the bank. I made vain attempts to farm, or use the tract for any purpose. At the same time I explored, constructed rough access trails, and stopped erosion.

The rocks and steep slope greatly increased the inaccessibility and ecological significance of the acreage.

Until 1945 the tract was 175 acres, 3,000 feet in length from north to south. Others owned 125 acres beyond on the south between the tract and the National Park. The first step was to survey the 175 acres for a 5% grade beginning at the gate. The 5% idea came from Henry & Morrison's text on *Feeds and Feeding*. This exhaustive work gives tests showing that for horses, it is ideal.

Fortunately, the survey upon nearing the south line which ran through a deep, wide gulch, doubled back on a fairly level bench, continuing up to the northeast corner, about 375 feet higher than the gate. A trail was cut though to walk or ride a horse. It served well for study and observation. This exploratory effort extended over several years.

From time to time I had pleasant contacts with the two owners of the 125 acres to the south. I first bought the south tract. Both were quite difficult to get to. But when I saw that the jeep was on the market, I bought the remaining tract. Now I could get over the ground – or a part of it. So, in 1945 the south and east boundaries adjoined the National Park. Such a neighbor I had found especially worthwhile, through dealing with other land bordered by the National Park. In 1950 an irregular-shaped area of about 15 acres, a fragment of a farm west of Lookout Creek and so isolated as to be neglected, was bought. The entire cost of the 315 acres was \$9,000. The 15 acres formed a great "V" as the creek flowed to the west and back. Later a transfer of part of the bend to Louisville & Nashville Railroad secured a deed to Reflection Riding of an easement in perpetuity to plant trees on a 100-foot strip along the west bank of the creek 6,000 feet long, a scenic easement of immense value.

In 1945 the road survey was extended from what is now called Bishop's Bench, the distance being about 2,000 feet. It had to be steepened at places and ended near the upper and lower corners of the a southern boundary. The southwest corner was at Lookout Creek. The southeast corner was some 500 feet higher. Every rise in height creates a different landscape effect on the eye. It also creates a different climate. A faint trail that one could walk through was made, though at first a horse could not be ridden. This was substantially improved during 1945 and 1946.

From 1942 for five years the question was how to make a profit on what many people said was a prospectively poor 300 acres which cost less than \$9,000, located six miles from downtown Chattanooga. Few other tracts of this size were located so near. Lookout Valley had drawbacks due to isolation as Lookout ends in a great cliff at the Tennessee River, though the road, widened and called the Cummings Highway, was built about 1921. The Valley was made more significant by the highway to Nashville, constructed about 1930. (In 1967, Interstate 24 was opened and made access much easier.)

Consideration as to building rough roads a car could travel in good weather, now came up. It was impracticable to expect people who might advise to walk or ride a horse. A vast amount of criticism was absorbed on this theory.

The possibility of roads a jeep could travel, to be gradually improved by grading, blasting rock, and controlling water, was considered. Detail on what was done is reflected in check stubs, especially those of a bank account under "Sunset Rock Farm." Roads would bring helpful comment from passengers who otherwise could not see the place.

It was suggested a bulldozer might be effective, and that step was considered thoroughly. It was essential to consider these various ideas with expense in mind. The expenditures specifically evidenced by check stubs show this slow and close attitude taken. Those experienced in construction work with dozers emphasized the importance of securing an experienced operator who had an eye for grading. An operator whose name is Ellis Bishop agreed a walking study was worthwhile. In January 1947 he walked the surveyed trail (some two miles were laid out) for five hours of study. Again after a period of nearly four months, another six hours of study was made. Big fulches, rocks, steep hillsides called for study. Today, with the roads built, it is apparent the problem was a problem. The cost of this was \$1.50 per hour. He, like many artists, knew only his "paint brush," the dozer. The observation was well worth the small cost. Then, in May, while the weather was perfect, 153 ½ hours at \$12.00 per hour (20 cents per minute), a total of \$1,882 resulted in 24,000 feet of road a jeep could get over. We gained

confidence and covered about three miles more than was contemplated. The cost and the grasp emboldened us. This was surprisingly low in cost and high in worth. I was astounded and gratified. Several “impossible” places were made passable, and especially valuable was the imagination Bishop displayed in building the interchange that I named Bishop Bench.

In 1947 the roads were far from generally and normally useable. There was much work to be done. These roads served for inspection purposes. During the years from 1947 to 1951 a very considerable sum was spent on improving and adding new roads. Blasting rocks in the road surface was a major item.

A tourist I helped see Lookout in 1946 had given me *This Green World*, by Rutherford Platt. It is about trees and from it came the idea that an effort might be made to develop a modified arboretum that would be a step toward a possible subdivision, the two not being in conflict.

Shortly after, I was informed that anew book on arboretums had been published. In June a check was sent to the author, Gordon D. Cooper, in Cleveland, Ohio to secure copies. But it developed there was no book. (The material, however, appeared in Volume X of *Chronica Botannica* and was published, some 75 pages, under the title, “The Arboretums and Botanical Gardens of North America,” by Donald Wyman, Ph.D., of Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University, July, 1947. The publication was printed and issued by The American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboretums.)

Mr. Cooper returned the check, but the fortunate contact resulted in his becoming interested and after some correspondence, he came to Chattanooga for a day at almost no expense to me. This was a major turn toward a real goal. Later he most generously compiled a report of his conclusions as to the practicality of an arboretum on the 300 acres. Nearly ten years later I secured the Charter of Incorporation of Reflection Riding which states that the corporation is created:

“...for the general purpose of operating a modified arboretum, promoting the conservation of resources by demonstrating to the public the need for conserving animal life, forests, water, soil, a love of nature and its beauty,....”

This charter appears in the records of the Secretary of State of Tennessee, September 15, 1956, in Record Book Misc. A-32, p.92, and in the Register’s Office, Hamilton County, Tennessee, on September 18, 1956, in Book 1239, p.557.

Mr. Cooper was shown over the area in a jeep using the roads roughed out. He was quite frail and if there had been no roads to use, he could not have seen the tract and would not have come down here. A fine example of the importance of access. If Mr. Cooper had after an inadequate inspection expressed a negative opinion, which he might well have done if he could not see the possibilities, the modified arboretum would have in all probability been abandoned. His opinion, earnestness, and report were vitalizing. And the broader conservation concept has thus been realized.

He then took some time to make his comprehensive report of some 80 pages and had soil samples from various points to show the various qualities of the soil. The area had in the main been abused. This report is an exhibit to the deed to Reflection Riding. He was here on November 29, 1947, and exerted a continued vast and encouraging influence. He graduated from Cornell University, School of Architecture, and became associated with Olmsted Brothers, coming to Cleveland, Ohio, in 1914 where he died in 1950. A memorial to him was published in *Landscape Architecture*. He played a decisive part at the time.

Landscape Architecture in a 1947 issue carried an advertisement of the La Bar Rhododendron Nursery in Pennsylvania and correspondence developed there was a vice presidency at Linville, North Carolina, near two of the great natural sources of growth owned by that company. Mr. Russell Harmon kindly detoured by Chattanooga on November 13, 1947. He was driven through, and though a sale of plants was his business, advised us against buying any until what was native and growing was given time to evidence itself. This was most generous and encouraging. It showed a fine and unselfish concern and along with it he expressed the opinion that the area showed promise. These two real

experts gave a sense of direction to the dream it had never before had an amply sustained a viewpoint that had been hazy by clearing it authoritatively. Now the aims could be discussed objectively, as men who were authorities had spoken.

One of the encouragers was Roland W. Olmsted of Chattanooga, who had a broad and comprehensive view in regard to such things.

As stated before, Cooper had worked for the Olmsted, a great name in landscaping – the greatest in the United States – and they had been a source of strength and vision to Cooper. It developed that the Chattanooga Olmsted, who was distantly related, also had sound landscaping ideas. And he encouraged us at a time when nearly all were discouraging. For a year before Cooper came, the books referred to later were studied, provided by him for that purpose. He was the only encourager in Chattanooga. He did more. He produced two authoritative and moving books, probably the only ones in Chattanooga. One was most practically helpful, a product of a great vision and intense experience acquired under Frederick Law Olmsted. It was *Charles Eliot – Landscape Architect*, published in 1902, a collection of reports, plans, letters, and comments by Charles Eliot who died at 37. It had been compiled and edited by his father who was president of Harvard University so long. When this book was mentioned, Mr. Cooper said that it was the landscape student's "Bible." It is over 750 pages of rather small type crammed with help. Also, Mr. Olmsted gave a 500 page elaborately illustrated volume, *Landscape Design*, published in 1917, by Hubbard & Kimball, pages of careful analysis and reference. These two were tangible clear guides. Thus, through these three personalities and two books the development was formulated along substantially sound lines.

It soon appeared that the book *Landscape Design* probably agreed with Cornish when it said:

In landscape architecture we are concerned almost exclusively with those effects which are made on the mind through our sense of sight. (71)

Eliot appeared to have the same opinion as he says:

It is sometimes said to be useless to spend time, pains, and money in making sure that public domains are made as beautiful as they can be made, because "ordinary people will not appreciate the difference." But what if fine results are not accurately valued and their causes discerned by the multitude? We, all of us, enjoy sensations and emotions, the causes of which are unrecognized and even unknown. When he comes into the presence of unaccustomed beauty or grandeur, the average man does, as a matter of fact, consciously or unconsciously experience a reaction which is of benefit to him. (687)

The years 1948 and 1949 confirmed the conviction that a modified arboretum with significant and pleasing roads was to be the goal. They were years of examination, of opinion gathering, of tests as to the reactions of various people. It was thought essential that the appeal be a general one. During that period a dozer properly sloped many of the roadside banks, and much rock drilling and blasting was done. And the books were read to test the development. People were shown over the property for different reasons, but all acted as judges of the soundness of the plan.

Late in 1949, on casual advise received from the National Park Service staff in the Smokies, a Mr. G.F. Sauter, who had done quite a bit of work on restoring raw banks along roads in the Smokies, was contacted. He came to Chattanooga the last of October and sized the situation up. His idea was to bring from the Smokies plants to set out. The rhododendron and azalea were to be cut off material. This is just the roots. The idea was to save cost and insure the plants better chance of survival, but no immediate beauty, the long view being fundamental and a willingness to await results being a principle of the plan. Accordingly, Mr. Sauter and a crew arrived in February 1950 and material trucked down was set out. However, he disregarded some of these instructions and arrived with some fine plants, explaining that as he knew it would be well to conciliate, interest and possibly intrigue others it would be essential to have some immediate results – some showing. He was correct in that about October 1950

the plantings, not the road layout, brought a real interest and “reluctant” bit of help from Mrs. Chambliss, whose innate botanical grasp and enthusiasm began to be of great influence and direction. And Robert Sparks Walker began a long continued help and brought encouragement. Also, *Landscape Architecture* and its editor, Bradford Williams, gradually became definitely helpful. During this period, American Forestry Association horseback rides took place in the Spring of 1951. Reactions from those who came, some thirty in all, were evidence of the significance of the area. The practical help and sensible advice of Paul S. Mathes, who had been, as Commissioner of Conservation of Tennessee, in charge of the State Parks, began. It was most valuable and continued until his untimely death in 1965.

A point of contact for tourists being important, steps were taken to acquire a site on the four-lane highway a mile from the gate, and these efforts are continuing.

An advertisement of Oswald Siren’s *China and Gardens of Europe*, published by Ronald Press, in *Landscape Architecture* brought about its purchase (\$30) and resultant deep influence, some by antithesis as to structures, buildings, etc. Especially did the word “Riding” (937) develop through the research evident in this publication. This purchase was in April 1951, and with the other books mentioned, opened up avenues of research and a tendency to study that was carried on while the ground work, planting, improving, etc., was going on, including such things as the small concrete relief of Lookout Mountain that is seen along the drive.

In 1950 a visit to the National Arboretum was arranged by Mr. Harry T. Thompson, one of the Trustees and a N.P.S. man who first advised as to *Chronica Botanica* and the arboretum book published in 1947. The National Arboretum was difficult to visit, as it was incomplete. Shown around by Mr. Oliver M. Freeman, a curator who happily had lived in Chattanooga, we made a contract and aroused an interest that resulted in several visits here, and he was capable of and did arouse botanical interest that continues and has been invaluable. Freeman Hollow is a small tribute to his influence. He was quite close to Robert Sparks Walker and the two were a great inspiration.

In June 1951, what is now Rickards Reflection was built. Even when it was far from filled with water, it evidenced the significance of reflection. In the fall of 1951, reflections along the Connecticut River, frequently seen in driving from Montpelier south with frequent reflections spontaneously brought from Mrs. Chambliss, the thought that “Reflection” was the word to couple to Riding. That was a fine reward for going to an A.F.A. meeting in New Hampshire. While there, we compared the Face on Lookout, to which all of us had been oblivious until prompted by a visitor from a distance; she had seen the Great Stone Face and broke through our blindness.

Fortified with these objective assurances, and prompted by the suggestions in the *Chronica Botanica* article on arboretums that in selecting the site it would be well to consider “a local spot of beauty, of historical significance, or any existing part of a part,” it became apparent that the great National Park flanking Reflection Riding on three boundaries conceived in 1925 by Adolph S. Ochs would be of a significance because of the proximity of plants that will inevitably seed their way to the tract and because the historical significance would also afford a background.

In March 1952, fortunately the research and practical resourcefulness of William O. Steele were enlisted. His work continued for several years, and he is still a prime asset, as well as Mrs. Steele, in the still developing arboretum. They have a historical, botanical, and natural appreciation that has meant a great deal. And, being authors of national reputes, they accumulate and transmit helpful ideas.