

A History of Ivan Racheff Park & Gardens

Article originally written by Lois Van Wie August 1993. Revised by Linda Ford April 2001.

During the Civil War, Confederate authorities confiscated equipment for the manufacture of wagon tires, horseshoes, and cannonballs in Loudon, Tennessee, and moved it to the existing Knoxville Iron Works location on Western Avenue in Knoxville. The business was not successful under the Confederate occupation.

During the occupation of Knoxville by the Union forces, there was another attempt to operate the mill. A Captain Chamberlain was in charge of the mill operation. After the Civil War, Captain Chamberlain returned to Knoxville and continued the iron business. Chamberlain also owned the Rockwood Iron Company in Rockwood, Tennessee. In April 1866, five Welshmen came to Knoxville on an inspection trip and were pleased with the place and decided to make it their future home. They had worked in the iron business in Wales and the Pittsburgh area. They formed a partnership with Captain Chamberlain. Knoxville Iron Works received a charter from the State of Tennessee on February 1, 1868, as a rolling mill for iron products. The location of the company continued to be near the Western Avenue viaduct. Chamberlain married a Knoxvillean and remained in Knoxville until 1871 and then moved to Chattanooga.

The company used pig iron from Rockwood and a location near Cartersville, Georgia, and coal from Coal Creek (now Lake City) and Briceville, Tennessee. Early production included nails, railroad spikes, and sheet metal. Most of the early production was used by railroad companies in the area or was shipped to New Orleans by boat.

In 1897, Knoxville Iron Works purchased a rolling mill in Harriman, Tennessee. The owners of the company decided to consolidate the two mills and in 1901 purchased 25 acres in Lonsdale from the Lonsdale Land Company. Operations at the new site began in March 1903.

Ivan Racheff was born in 1892 in Northern Bulgaria to a well-respected family. He intended to go to a university in Rome to pursue studies in diplomacy. When he read Edgar Allan Poe's stories about a tramp, the course of Ivan's life was changed for Ivan and he decided he wanted to become a tramp and see the world.

As a teenager, against his parent's wishes, Ivan came to the United States. He knew Bulgarian as well as some Russian and, from his travels, a little Italian and French. Ivan said, "I knew I had to learn English fast, very fast, for I was to become a citizen." He

became a United States citizen. He worked peeling potatoes and washing dishes in New York and saved enough money to buy a ticket to Chicago (approximately \$6.00 at the time). He thought Chicago was the heart of America.

He knew of Yale and Harvard but found that they were financially beyond his reach. Instead, he decided to attend the University of Illinois. He majored in metallurgy and graduated from the University of Illinois in 1917.

Ivan Racheff's first job after college was in Gary, Illinois, at Illinois Steel Company of Chicago, now part of U. S. Steel. He worked at other steel companies in the area and later set up a steel consulting business in Chicago.

In 1938, he attended a meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, to receive an award for the work he had done in the making of electric furnace steel in the United States and Canada. Someone from the Knoxville Iron Works was present at the meeting and asked Ivan to come to Knoxville, Tennessee, to assist the company. He later remembered his first impressions upon visiting Knoxville Iron Works: "I stood on the west side of the office looking toward the railroad track and saw all the piled up rubbish and garbage. I picked up an envelope post marked at the turn of the century. I went through the mill. It was very unsafe. The dust must have been three to four inches thick. I said they needed to clean it up. Three weeks later when I returned (at least the rubbish had been raked into piles) to tell them they should go out of business, before I knew it I stayed to buy what was *worthless stock*."

Ivan Racheff transformed Knoxville Iron Works into a successful electric steel plant while still conducting an active steel consulting business in Chicago.

Records show that he was president of the Knoxville Iron Works from 1947-1968.

In 1947, Racheff directed that a garden area be created at the site of the steel junk pile. Records show that \$76 was spent that year on grass seed, shrubs, and trees for the garden. Through the years, a teahouse, bulbs, flowers, and ponds were added to the garden. Mr. Racheff wanted people to enjoy the gardens as long as they respected them.

Mr. Racheff assisted people in the Lonsdale neighborhood by providing basic necessities, gardening and cooking lessons, and educational funds and scholarships for children. Visitors from the community who tour the garden now comment on the things that Ivan Racheff did for them and members of their families.

In 1961, the National Council of State Garden Clubs, Inc., awarded Ivan Racheff the Silver Seal at their National Convention in Philadelphia. This award was given for his work in creating the garden from a steel mill junk pile and his other efforts toward pollution control and conservation.

In 1968, Mr. Racheff sold his controlling interest in Knoxville Iron Works to Steel Services, (then Florida Steel, now Ameristeel) but retained the garden and the office and house, leasing the office to Steel Services. Mr. Racheff's desire was that his years of work in the gardens be continued. He approached the Tennessee Federation of Garden Clubs, Inc. (TFGC) and asked if TFGC would accept the gardens as a gift. In 1970, TFGC accepted the gardens with the understanding that there would be provisions in Mr. Racheff's will that an endowment would be provided for the maintenance of the gardens. Mr. Racheff died on October 26, 1982, at the age of 90. There were debentures and bonds left to TFGC to provide for the maintenance of the gardens.

In his will, Mr. Racheff requested that Ivan Racheff Park and Gardens be operated and maintained as a natural park for the benefit and enrichment of the public and to educate and encourage all persons to conserve and preserve the natural resources which surround them. TFGC and the Board of Governors of Ivan Racheff Park and Gardens are still striving to meet Mr. Racheff's request.

Several years ago, the Board of Governors had a landscape architect draw up a master plan for the garden and that plan has been implemented as money has become available. Mr. Racheff's garden was primarily a spring garden and the finest displays are still at that time of the year, but there are other features of the garden that can be enjoyed year round. Garden club members, school groups and residents of the neighborhood use the picnic tables located in the Park. A few years ago, during the Dogwood Arts Festival in April, it was noted in the guest book that visitors from 18 states and two countries had visited the garden. Visitors often repeat their trips to the gardens many times during the year to enjoy the seasonal displays of flowers and shrubs.

In recent years, the following additions have been developed at Ivan Racheff Park and Gardens: a Japanese Garden, fern cobble, wildflower area, flowering shrubs, rhododendrons and azaleas, an overlook platform, and Grandma's Garden (old varieties of flowers). Each fall, over 4,000 bulbs are planted in areas all over the garden. The newest addition is a daylily garden and improvements to the wildflower garden with large craggy, moss-covered boulders to enhance the natural setting in this beautiful area of the Park. A ramp was constructed to allow wheelchair access to the

gardens as well as a drinking fountain. A public restroom was completed in December 2000.

The beautiful gardens speak for themselves. The house is also maintained by TFGC and still remains much as it was when Mr. Racheff lived there. Just as any home needs improvements and maintenance, this house is no exception. In 1997, during the administration of Board of Governors Chairman Joe Monroe, House Chairman Pat Elsasser began a refurbishing project that is still underway.

The following improvements on the house have been completed: wood Venetian blinds were installed on eleven windows in the house plus the windows in the gift shop; the kitchen, workroom, and ladies restroom on the main floor were refurbished; dry walls were repaired; draperies and wall covering in the front kitchen were replaced; Mr. Racheff's office and the side entry hall were refurbished; the main hallway was refurbished, including the replacement of three light fixtures with fixtures donated by three garden clubs; the basement was organized into a floral design/work area; and four exterior doors were repaired and painted, including the addition of brass kick plates, house numbers, and a door knocker. These improvements represent an expense of approximately \$11,000 and 1,000 hours of donated labor.

All of the additions and improvements were made possible by grants from the City of Knoxville, Knox County, Ameristeel, and garden clubs throughout the State of Tennessee, and proceeds from the annual bulb sale in October and annual wildflower sale in April. Proceeds from gift shop sales and from the annual Christmas Greens Tea also contribute to the care of the house and gardens.

Ivan Racheff Park and Gardens' 36-member Board of Governors maintain the house and gardens. The members of this board are from throughout the state, including club members from Knoxville, Maryville, Farragut, Oak Ridge, Harrogate, Lenoir City, and Oliver Springs, as well as representatives from areas around Nashville and Memphis.

Ivan Racheff Park and Gardens are living proof that nature and industry can exist.