

The Weeders  
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For over sixty years Weeders donned hats and aprons in May to work at the Rittenhouse Flower Market and because there are a dwindling number of us who remember this event I thought it timely to recall what was, once upon a time, a command performance.

Like many things, the genesis of the Flower Market is a bit murky. An article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of May 15, 1921 claims it is the eighth consecutive year. Allowing for one year during World War I when the market was cancelled that gives us a beginning date of 1914, the year when four donkeys were brought from the zoo for the occasion and the market featured a lemonade booth. (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 9, 1914) The omnipresent Mrs. Eli Kirk Price, executive chair, is generally given credit for initiating the flower market, which was modeled on the open-air Parisian markets and raised money to benefit children's charities.

Our records are spotty but on March 15, 1916 fifteen Weeders met in Overbrook at Miss Pugh's to discuss the flower market and the May minutes note a profit of \$291.34 at the Weeder booth. While there is no written contemporary record, Miss Pugh was revered for coming up with the idea that became the Weeders' claim to fame – namely the Lemon Booth.

Margaret Schroeder, daughter, mother, aunt, cousin and in-law of Weeders, wrote an account of garden club activities from the perspective of her teenage self in the early 1930s...

First came the Flower Market, and after the dust settled over the annual argument about what kinds of hats to wear in the booth, the Weeders fell to digging up seedlings. Very few plants were bought for resale; our mothers potted the volunteers from their garden paths, labeled them what they were most likely to be, and hauled them to Rittenhouse Square. Clumps of white violets and lilies of the valley were spaded into newspaper parcels by reluctant gardeners, and Weeder husbands gazed wistfully after the bunches of asparagus cut in their well-tended vegetable gardens.

The daughters were sitting ducks for the lemon booth. It was Miss Annie Pugh who woke one morning thinking how nice it would be to sell candy sticks pushed into lemons. The rest is history.

Newspaper accounts from the teens and twenties showcase the largess of the "Prominent Matrons and Maids" while describing their clothes – "Mrs. Stacy Lloyd was at the Weeders booth. She wore a blue satin and georgette dress with a fancy colored apron" – and presenting a revealing view of the times. (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 21, 1920) In 1922, the paper claimed "...yesterday's affair was distinctly democratic in tone. For side by side with the spotlessly garbed children of Philadelphia's representative families, soiled urchins from back streets ran gleefully about while fine debutantes in crisp organdies and Swisses peddled wares among chauffeurs and nurse-girls and persons from every corner of the city." (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 20, 1922) Lest you think this commentary was an outlier, accounts of the flower market juxtapose the "pretty girls [who] rival the flowers" with notice that "for the avowed vulgarities in eating, a hot sausage and roll stand had been erected."

Clearly, the flower market, while charitable in purpose had elements of snobbery and competition. A few weeks before the May 1927 market, the Weeder committee reported "...our hearts grew heavy within us when a rumor became current that we were not as well turned out as people in other booths. Now, for a Weeder to be told she is not a 'glass of fashion and a mold of form,' is not to be borne and the ...committee were [sic] admonished to look to the apron question." (Minutes, April 13, 1927) The following year, "...there was a heated discussion of bandanas vs hats that was never satisfactorily resolved." (Minutes, April 11, 1928)

By the late 1930s, through the 40s and into the 50s, Weeders were toiling away at not one, but two, booths. Number 10 was the main Weeder booth and is variously described as offering cut flowers and plants. The show stopper was the Lemon Booth, which in 1948 netted \$1,400. The following year, the booth won first prize and over 12,000 lemons were sold "under the able leadership of Mrs. Bayard Roberts." (Minutes, May 24, 1949) In 1962, 14,000 lemons were sold and the booth was, one again, awarded first prize. (Minutes, May 29, 1962) Miss Pugh died in 1964 but the Weeders carried on with the entire membership required to participate either in set-up or on sale day, when, accounts report, it nearly always rained.

The "Weeds [sic] Garden Club" merited mention in a 1977 *New York Times* article for their "lemon sucking operation" at which they were expected to sell about 12,000 lemons at 40 cents. The first line of the article is a winner: "Thousands of Philadelphians decided to go suck a lemon this week, not because they were told to, but because this is a traditional ingestion at the annual flower Market on Rittenhouse Square." (NYT, 19 May 1977)

While it might have been clear to Weeders and to some Philadelphians where Miss Pugh's lemon stick began, in 1991 Baltimore lay claim to the confection: "The lemon stick started here both cities say tartly..." Philadelphians gleefully protested saying, "we did everything first," but Baltimoreans didn't take this lying down and consulted food historian William Woys Weaver who poked a hole in everyone's balloon by revealing lemon sticks were popular in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. He elaborated by demonstrating that Philadelphia and Baltimore are "sister cities" whose families intermarried and whose chefs moved readily from one place to the other. He did point out, somewhat in Philadelphia's favor, that we use a lemon candy stick while Baltimore uses peppermint. Case closed. (*Baltimore Sun*, May 1, 1991)

Although there's no written record, I suspect by the late 1970s the volunteer booths at the flower market competed unsuccessfully with garden centers and supermarkets for the patronage of city dwellers in search of cut flowers, potted annuals or veggie seedlings. It was hard work setting up the booth and lugging plants to Rittenhouse Square; we still wore aprons in the late 70s and gratefully darted into the Rittenhouse Club where I remember sorting through soggy dollar bills with Mrs. R.

Lea Cadwalader is listed as chair of the Lemon Booth in our 1979-1980 program and the dates of the market appear in our programs for the next three years but without any committee assignments. It is most likely the decision to end the Lemon Booth was made around 1982 but there is no record to support that claim. The Weeders had an illustrious run at the market and sixty plus years of fame selling lemon sticks is a tartly sweet legacy.

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