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Our People of the Century Clarence Wolf and Dan Fenton:

United By Chance, Pair's Interest in Holly Put Millville on the Map

Clarence Wolf looked out his office window one late afternoon to see one of his workers drive by with a load of holly. Curious, the then-president of New Jersey Silica Sand Co. dashed outside to find out where the man has found the berry-laden boughs.



The answer would one day result in Millville holly not only decorating the White House and hundreds of other homes during the holidays, but growing all over the world.

In fact, Wolf's curiosity that day sometime in the 1930s earned Millville the designation, "The Holly City."

Wolf's worker had cut the holly from hundreds of native trees growing on the Silica Sand property. And Wolf, a religious man who had come to Millville in 1918 as principal of Millville High School, decided to send boughs of holly to his customers nationwide instead of the customary cigars or whiskey.

His Christmas gifts were instantly successful, with executives and secretaries alike calling to request an extra bough for this relative or that friend.

One year, the holly was berryless. Although horticulturalists did not yet fully understand the cycle, a late spring frost when the trees were in bloom had probably nipped the berries in the bud.

Wolf sent out on the boughs anyway, hoping the barren branches weren't indicative of a trend and wondering how he could guard against a repeat in the years to come.

Meanwhile, Daniel Fenton has graduated from Rutgers University in 1940 and come to Millville to teach agriculture and science at the high school. When World War II broke out, he left and returned in 1944 with his wife, Katherine, hoping to teach again.

While waiting for a position to open, Fenton went to Wolf to ask about a job. Wolf, who had begun a holly orchard, assigned Fenton the task of taking care of

his beloved holly.

Together Fenton and Wolf moved holly trees from the woods to the holly farm where they would receive better care and perhaps protection from the frosts that stole berries. First, with bonfires and later with wind machines imported from California, Fenton guarded the trees.

He learned to propagate and over the years developed 14 varieties of holly, including Mamie Eisenhower and Eleanor Roosevelt, which grow with other varieties on the White House lawn. Fenton co-founded the Holly Society of America, became president of Silica Sand after Wolf's death in 1965 and, with several investors, bought the 55-acre holly farm after Silica Sand was sold.

People flocked to the farm to wander among the holly trees, shop in the gift shop and visit the cottage where furniture and window frames were made of holly wood and the china featured holly patterns. A heart attack in 1980 forced Fenton to stop work and eventually the farm was sold.

His lifelong passion was holly, never once getting up in the morning and dreading going to work, said his wife, who still lives in the Holly City with a yard peppered with he late husband's holly. Among the trees is the "Dan Fenster" holly developed by a professor at Rutgers and planted several months before Fenton's death at 69 in 1988.

A civic leader, Fenton was known as Mr. Holly and is credited for planting more than 4,000 holly trees.

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