

The Wanda Rezac 2016 Iris Rescue

by Susan A. Flow

*The Age of Nations is past.
The task before us now,
If we would not perish,
Is to build the earth.*

Teilhard de Chardin

Since 1952, Wanda Rezac has been lovingly cultivating irises on her small farm just outside Sidney, Nebraska. Her name and contact information has lurked for years in the HIPS forums and other venues where irisarians congregate. As a neophyte HIPS member, it was in one of these forums that I first heard about her and her amazing collection. She was revered and deeply respected. It was shared that in early times she had sent new HIPS members gifts of rhizomes. But now as she had gotten older and HIPS had grown, that practice became overwhelming. She was not on the Internet any longer, after being affronted by a scammer, and now managed everything by postal mail.

In eager anticipation, I sent her a letter asking for a list of her cultivars. A short while later I received a handwritten reply. The script was crisp, steady, tiny, and the sentiment was sincere of heart. I was invited to call her and come out to dig irises. Unfortunately, she explained, it would cost her \$5.00 to send me a list of her 3,000 irises. Little did I know that one day we would meet in person and I would assist her in preserving this legacy by helping to rescue her collection.

Wanda grew up in Ohio in the 1930s. On graduating from high school she began to look for a job. The wages, however, for the available jobs didn't amount to more than \$2.00 an hour. But Wanda said that she became aware via newspaper ads that farm workers out west were being paid \$5.00 an hour. So as a young girl she picked herself up, moved to Nebraska, and signed up as a farm worker. It was in Nebraska that she met her husband, Donald. Wanda continued to do farm work until taking care of her children required her to remain at home. Today, meeting her, one encounters this same work ethic and is left marveling at her deep-seated resilience and personal determination.

Wanda shared with me that her husband, Donald, eventually suffered from 12 different medical conditions, which over time became more

disabling for him and more strenuous for her. In 1952, Wanda began her first iris garden as a sanctuary from the burden of providing his care. She discharged her weariness and worry in her garden and emerged daily refreshed and renewed. This attention both to the earth and her husband continued until October, 2003, when Donald passed away. By that time, Wanda's iris garden had become famous, and after his death, she continued cultivate, collect, give, and sell. (Her favorite hybridizer, by the way is Keith Keppel.)

We're each reading this article because, as a member of HIPS, we have a special interest in historic irises. Some of us are also members of the Guardian Gardens program; we volunteer to rescue and nurture cultivars that are in danger of extinction. The idea of rescuing Wanda's irises all started as a conversation in March between Laetitia Munro and Leslie Rule, who wanted to acquire more endangered irises. Laetitia wanted some irises from Wanda, and Leslie lives in Nebraska. Instead of driving by and picking up some irises from Wanda, Leslie took it to a new level. She wrote



'Limerick' (Keppel, 1973) was rescued this year

Wanda a letter and began a discussion with her about “rescuing” her irises. Wanda, who is 86 and whose family does not share her passion for irises, was at first curious, then intrigued, and as the ball started rolling she became staunchly committed to putting her legacy into our devoted hands.

Soon after Leslie established this amazing connection with Wanda and plans were being pursued for a rescue, she found herself in a new job. This opportunity eliminated her ability to lead or participate in an excursion. In the initial email traffic looking for helpers for a possible rescue, I had volunteered to “man a shovel.” Living north of Denver, Colorado, I am only about 2.5 hours from Sidney. Douglass Paschall, administrator of the Guardian Gardens program, soon reached out to me and we discussed the possibility of me taking over for Leslie. Doug was creating a document that contained detailed information gleaned from others’ experiences on how to conduct an iris rescue. With that in hand and a promise from Doug that he would garner a team to assist, I accepted the challenge.

I had already updated a spreadsheet of Wanda’s cultivars and sent it to the conversing group. It had been sent from someone who had the last updated list of her iris holdings. The spreadsheet identified which of Wanda’s irises were no longer in commerce and which were not already being grown by HIPS members. The shorthand for this condition was 0-0: no commercial sources and not grown by any HIPS members. I composed an email with this document attached, outlining the process for adopting and paying for these irises. Wanda was going to sell us 2 rhizomes for \$2.00. I sent the draft email to Doug and asked him to forward it to the Guardian Gardeners. Doug, now coaching me in this rescue milieu, sent out this and other emails.

After several trials to produce a dynamic spreadsheet listing everyone’s choices, payments, and addresses, I finally built three operational documents that helped guide the rescue team to a successful outcome.



‘Wanda Rezac’ (Jedlicka, 2007)

Jedlicka photo

In the meantime, Doug began to contact HIPS and GG members in the surrounding areas to see if they wanted to participate in the rescue. Names started to dribble in. I called Brett Barney and Gary White in Nebraska to talk about a date for the rescue. Gary and Brett knew Wanda and her gardens already. Despite being in the same state, they both live a considerable distance away: some 350 miles. Yet both were committed to this endeavor and we targeted the dates of July 1-3.

I contacted Wanda, introduced myself, and explained what happened with Leslie. I asked if I could come up to meet her to discuss plans for the rescue. My husband, Michael, and I made a trip to Sidney on June 11, arriving at 6:00AM. Wanda was already out in the garden, pulling weeds. I presented her with three back issues of *ROOTS* that she had been unable to obtain, and we sat down in the alcove of her garage. We spent the next two hours reviewing the operational plans for the rescue, going through her location documents and transferring that information onto my spreadsheet.

We also labeled red flags to be placed in the ground to mark the irises locations. Wanda confirmed that the July 1-3 dates would work well for her. Mike and I offered to help her place the flags, but she said she could do that herself. So Michael and I spent another hour helping her pull weeds. By that time, the sun was high and it was very hot. Wanda only works outdoors in the early morning hours and retires to the house before 10:30AM to avoid the heat of the day.

I kept in touch with Wanda weekly and followed up with potential team members. By the end of June, we had eight people who planned to travel from Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma to help. We had one another’s cell phone numbers and a list of instructions, including what to expect and a list of items to bring. In the meantime, 19 Guardian Gardeners sent me lists of irises they wanted to adopt. There were approximately 150 irises on our list for this dig, and

by the third week in June every cultivar had been prospectively adopted by at least two gardeners. Judy Barton donated printed waterproof labels with rubber bands as well as printed mailing labels for the shipment. As Doug had promised, everything was falling into place.

Any of you who have been involved in iris rescues know that not everything goes according to plan. On June 30, two team members notified me that they would be unable to come to Sidney. But this was an eager, dedicated group of people and it felt like we could do whatever it took to rescue the irises—and we certainly did, and it was managed with aplomb. But not without another hiccup.

I arrived at Wanda's late Thursday afternoon and walked into the garage to discover that fewer than a third of the markers were in place for the dig. Despite her insistence that she could put them in the ground, our short window from June 11th to July 1st overwhelmed Wanda's good intentions. The gardens were still mostly choked with cheat grass, slowing her effort to locate the cultivars. The hot sun and effort of working four to five hours a day simply exhausted her.

"Is there any way you can come back later in the summer?"

"I don't think that will work, Wanda."

"I'll be fresh first thing in the morning and I can get some of them in."

I gave her four more back issues of *ROOTS* and sent her back to the house. I watched her painfully navigate the considerable trek. She had already spent five hours that morning trying to get prepared for us. Then for the next three hours I stalked her obscured rows in search of labeling tags. I was really worried at that point. Wanda's gardens are immense, and it started out as a true hunt and peck operation. As I persisted I got better and I also got lucky. By 6:00PM I had placed many markers in the ground. Shortly thereafter, as dusk lengthened into darkness, I reached a point of diminishing returns and quit for the day.

In the meantime, the iris "extractor team" was arriving in Sidney, texting and calling to touch base. Besides me, those hardy, dedicated, and resourceful few were: Brett and Becky Barney (Sterling, Nebraska), Nina Morris (Wellfleet, Nebraska), Debra and Ellie Scott (moving from Tinmath, Colorado; on the way to Minnesota, literally in transit with a

packed truck and trailer in tow), Wendy Scott (Oberlin, Kansas), and Gary White (Lincoln, Nebraska).

The next morning, Wanda was out before we all arrived at 5:45. She had handfuls of markers and was hunting the elusive tags in the tall, tall, over-your-knees grass. She had amassed coolers of water and for food, five-gallon buckets to collect the irises, tables to set up for the sorting area, and washstand and chairs—all to assist us in our efforts. And for some reason, on July 1st, after weeks of 90°F weather, the Nebraska morning dawned cool and misty, a most unexpected but welcome reprieve.

It took a matter of minutes to distribute copies of the dig sheets and instructions to everyone. We gathered around for a short briefing: go to a red flag, use the dig sheet to look up how many rhizomes we need, dig 'em, mark 'em, pop 'em in a paper bag and write the name and number of rhizomes on the bag. When you fill the bucket, bring 'em to the washstand. Save the paper bag so we can correctly count the irises and pay Wanda. Then figure out what job you want and do it. And boy, did they ever! The success of this rescue belongs to this team of individuals who dug, washed, tabulated, sorted, and boxed. And during some confusing times, it required a real Marine-like effort: "Adapt, Improve, and Overcome."

By noon, all the flagged irises were dug, trimmed, washed, and laid out to dry. In the afternoon, after a trip into town for lunch, we sorted all those irises according to the packing lists, then packed them into boxes for mailing. Wanda



Wanda with flags in the Irismobile beside the iris field

watched all of this happening, and helped where she could. She said she was impressed how well we all worked together, especially since most of us just met each other for the first time that morning.

It was all done in good spirit and with precise goals, and we were all friends well before lunch. Because of the extraordinary teamwork and heartfelt camaraderie, all the boxes were packed by 3:30PM. Wendy Scott and I hopped in the car and ferried them to the Post Office. We got there at 3:50 and sent everything Priority Mail before the Post Office closed at 4:00 for the holiday weekend. What was planned as a two- or three-day dig was accomplished in one.

In summary, how successful was this HIPS foray? Of the 150 targeted cultivars, we could not find 38. Wanda believes many of those were dead: "I lost them to the grass." Others were there, but we could not locate them that day. However, we were able to rescue the others on our list. Some of the rhizomes were very small, but they may represent the very last chance for these cultivars,



'Marmalade' (Keppel, 1979)

and these "babies" are now in the hands of our Guardian Gardeners, who will grow them on, confirm identity, and then propagate them to share with others.

Wanda was greatly pleased with our operation, and our efforts were so graciously buoyed by her generosity. This year targeted only a small part of her holdings, but Wanda is committed to continue the rescue. She realizes that her irises need to go to people who appreciate them and want to save them. As relayed by Gary White: "She is to be commended for saving all those old irises and for allowing us to help save and distribute her rare historic ones."

We will be mounting another dig and the targeted group will be larger. Wanda has already supplied us with the locations of the next group of rarities. The red flags are made, waiting to go into the ground this fall when the temperatures moderate. If you want to join us, mark your calendars for next year; that Fourth of July still looks like a good target date.

Wanda is 86 now. She still goes out to her garden every day. The depth of her knowledge about the irises in her garden is amazing. When I called her to check in, Wanda always started the conversation with, "Well, I'm still here." Considering that her doctor told her a year ago that she had four months to live, that's pretty good. Over the course of these last few months she has also said, "I hope I'll still be here." She said this a couple of times before we showed up at her door, and again before I gave her a hug and pulled out of her long driveway that final time. I can't forget the last look in her eyes. After twenty years in home health nursing, I can read eyes pretty well. Her eyes said all of these things: "I'm sorry to see you go," "I hope I'm here next year," and finally, "You are my legacy." ☘



Rescuers Nina, Wendy, Wanda, and Gary, July 2016

REZAC RESCUE 2017 - Part II

Finalizing a Legacy of Love

By Susan A. Flow

This article details the final installment of our effort to locate and distribute at-risk irises from Wanda Rezac's more than 50-year-old iris gardens in Sidney, Nebraska. It encapsulates our Guardian Gardeners' team success in July 2017, bringing to a close our determination to fulfill Wanda's sincere desire to see her irises placed into the hands of gardeners who would continue love and care for them.

Wanda, who is now 89 years old, shared with me during the winter months of 2016-2017 that keeping pace with the needs of her iris gardens was now exceeding her physical capabilities. She mentioned several times that she never thought she would reach this juncture. As in 2016, some of the irises were disappearing from lack of sufficient care.

However, we all know that despite our aspirations to keep forever everything that is dear to us, at some point circumstances extend an opportunity to make plans to transition those cherished possessions. This article, then, is also a synopsis of Wanda's transition, as well as the enthusiastic response from iris lovers who not only dug up the targeted irises, but worked fervently to collect other cultivars that they wanted in their own gardens.

All of us lucky gardeners who received rhizomes from this effort should turn and bow to the host of volunteers who made this rescue possible. No matter which tasks the volunteers chose to participate in—and there were several going on at the same time—they all



Wanda and Susan

worked industriously.

Our volunteers for this effort came from five states, with some people traveling more than two days to participate. Here are the iris lovers who constituted our team: Vickie Cobb, from Minatare, Nebraska; Franny Fisher, who lives in Colorado and who recruited her brother in Kimball, Nebraska; Cynthia and Raymond Gallegos from Norfolk, Arkansas (owners of Cynthia's Iris Garden); Angie and Eri representing The Denver Botanic Gardens in Colorado; Nina Morris from Wellfleet, Nebraska; Leslie

Rule from Hallum, Nebraska; Tammy and Tom Skahan from Belle Vista, Arkansas (owners of Ozark Iris Gardens); and Wendy Scott from Oberlin, Kansas. Wendy and Nina were recruited to assist me as an executive team since we were part of the effort in the summer of 2016. And did we ever end up needing an executive team!

Our first day was Friday, July 1, 2017. Wanda again with her generous spirit provided most of the infrastructure support: facilities, water, collection buckets, tables, and chairs. In early winter, Wanda sent me a copy of her "little book" which listed row by row, for each garden, the location of every one of her more than 3,500 cultivars. I typed these listings

into a Word document, creating maps for each garden location, and distributed them to the team. Wanda had worked up to the frost in fall 2016 to place flags next to the cultivars we were going to harvest. As soon as the frost left the soil in spring 2017, she resumed her efforts. As I received requests and



payment for irises, I made additional flags and mailed them to her for placement. I made a trip to Sidney in early spring to help locate the cultivars and flag them. But again, most of the flag placement was accomplished by Wanda.

We started our rescue on Friday, July 1, at 6:00AM, and it turned out to be a twelve-hour day: twelve hours in the sun, dirt, and the heat, retrieving the rhizomes from the rich dark soil of Nebraska. We found that some flagged cultivars were barely hanging on, but we gathered anything available. As the day progressed, rhizomes were flying out of the ground and were hastily pre-sorted into boxes for mailing.

When I sent most of the team home, it was after 6:00PM. However, there was still a great deal to be done before the team reappeared on Saturday morning to pack, seal, and label the boxes for shipment. We had a four-hour window in which to get the rhizomes mailed before the 4th of July holiday; if we missed it, I would have to take them back to Denver and mail them five days later.

After the rest of the team left, Nina and I started sorting through each order box, on direction from our inventory overseer, Wendy. Rhizomes were heaped up everywhere in Wanda's garage. As it got later, it also got darker. We only knew the location of one light switch, and it illuminated the rear of the garage. But hundreds of rhizomes had been sorted on tables in the front area of the garage. Pretty soon, we couldn't read the writing on the fans or see anything on those tables. Nina fetched a miner's headlamp from her car and got to work finding and bringing Wendy and me the missing irises.



Wendy Scott & Nina Morris at the P.O.

Around 9:30 we heard footsteps, and here came Wanda's son Bob. We were pretty sure Bob was going to kick us out, but instead he walked in and turned on the light in the front of the garage. Wanda was up and had been looking out her window. She spied the beam of light from the headlamp shooting all around and sent Bob out to figure out what the heck was going on. It was 10:00PM when we reached a point where Wendy felt OK about quitting and going back to the hotel.

The team reappeared early Saturday morning. Because of this hearty, dedicated group, all the irises that were dug on Friday were re-inventoried, packed, labeled, and sent to Sidney's Post Office at 9:00AM. Later, I heard back from some lucky Ggers who said that they got their boxes delivered on Monday before the Fourth of July holiday.

In summation, this team achieved a great success. Our hope was to locate 330 cultivars. We ended up locating 282, and only 48 were not found; 282/330 is 85%. This result is greater than last year's effort, where we achieved 70% success. But every rhizome saved is a step in the right direction. And because of the support of HIPS and our dedicated gardeners, we continue to make a difference for all cultivars at risk for extinction.

We have made a tremendous difference to



Part of the mighty crew: Tom & Tammy Skahan, Wendy Scott, Wanda Rezac, Leslie Rule, Vickie Cobb, and Nina Morris

Wanda too, who feels that she has accomplished what she set out to do all those 52 years ago: bring a sense of serenity and joy to all those people who marvel at the beauty of nature. Beauty transcends all human emotions except for love, and the love of the iris is what many of us share.

