

The Indomitable Isabella Worn

Thomas Ross Perry

At the turn of the 20th century, Isabella Worn was one of San Francisco's pre-eminent floral decorators, along with her sisters Annie and Grace. Foremost among the Misses Worn, though, was "Bella" who during her life (1869-1950) crossed paths with an astonishing number of notable figures in California history. She worked with Julia Morgan, John McLaren, Bruce Porter, Willis K. Polk, William Randolph Hearst, the Roth family, and William and Agnes Bourn. Her career took her from San Francisco's Palace Hotel to Heart's San Simeon, and from the Crocker family estate to Filoli, the Bourns' estate on the San Francisco Peninsula.

Isabella Austin Worn was born in 1869, one of five children whose maternal grandfather, James Ross, had immigrated to San Francisco from Scotland and Australia in 1849. Ross made a fortune selling liquor and lumber to the Gold Rush miners and had parlayed his success into the purchase of Rancho Punta de San Quentin, an old Spanish land grant of 8,877 acres in central Marin County, extending from Point San Quentin to what is now known as the Ross Valley. The Worn children, with their parents George and Annie, grew up in privileged circumstances until the financial collapse surrounding the Comstock Silver Mine fiasco in 1870, which largely wiped out the family's fortune.

In Marin County's Ross Valley, a tiny Episcopal church built on a piece of land donated by the Worn girls' grandmother, Annie Ross, glowed on Sunday mornings with flowers from the Worn garden. And while their father, George Worn, was a gifted horticulturist in his own right, an artistic strain ran through the women of his family. The Worn sisters delighted in decorating the chapel in Ross with the flowers they had grown and were encouraged to start a floral shop in San Francisco. Around 1888 the sisters opened a soon-flourishing floral enterprise in a storefront on Sutter Street. Later, they moved to the old Lick Building at 18 Post Street. Operating as "The Misses Worn" the sisters

were then about the ages of 22, 21, and 20.

The three, despite shy and retiring natures, were to demonstrate ideas on floral decoration that departed from the stiff formality that was the standard of elegant turn-of-the-century decor. Moreover, they insisted that their clients allow them to select and arrange the flowers. They succeeded in popularizing an entirely new, much freer style of flower arrangement, and it soon became the vogue to have decorations done by the Worn sisters. So despite their reduced financial and social circumstances, the Worn sisters were buoyed by a loyal cadre of well-heeled friends who transitioned eagerly to patrons.

After the death of sister Grace in 1915, the floral business was down to Bella and Annie. In 1915, prominent San Franciscan William Bourn commissioned his friend Willis K. Polk, the renowned architect, to design his family's new home on the San Francisco Peninsula in Woodside. Bruce Porter was engaged to assist in the furnishing of the house and to develop the layout of the gardens at Filoli, and Bella Worn was brought in to supervise the installation of the garden.

Porter had worked with the Bourns on a number of projects, including their home at 2550 Webster Street in San Francisco and, had collaborated with Bella Worn on other garden projects. In 1910, Porter designed and Bella worked on the gardens for the 700-acre Russell Crocker estate, New Place, which later became the Hillsborough Country Club. New Place was one of the earliest Italianate gardens in California, a formal landscape planted with specimen oak trees and pines purportedly grown from seed gathered at Hadrian's garden. Porter and Bella also collaborated on the Double-H Ranch in Carmel Valley, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Russell.

Lurline Matson Roth (whose family succeeded the Bourns in 1937 as owners of Filoli) described Bella's early role in the formation of Filoli's garden. In her 1981 oral history with the *Oakland Tribune*, Mrs. Roth recalled that Bella Worn had been brought in by Porter to supervise the planting of the Filoli gardens sometime after the Bourns had taken up residence in 1917, while it was still under construction. According to Mrs. Roth, at some

point later Porter and Bella had a falling out over the planting of the garden and Porter left the Filoli project. He would not return to see the garden until many years later, shortly before his death in 1953.

While Bella continued to work on the development of the Filoli gardens throughout the 1920s, she was invited to join another project. In 1919, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst had undertaken the construction at San Simeon of his iconic Castle on 275,000 acres of the central California coast. Hearst chose Julia Morgan to develop his grand vision for a California mansion surrounded by beautiful gardens. Hearst was notoriously headstrong and hands-on in his construction projects. Hearst and Morgan exchanged more than a thousand letters during the building of San Simeon. And he was famously fickle about those in his employ.

As the role of the gardens became more prominent in the development of the estate, Morgan brought in Porter in the early 1920s to consult on the design. She later hired Bella to assist in its implementation. According to San Simeon historian Victoria Kastner, Bella was recognized for her "excellent sense of color and would go round the garden with [Hearst]." He apparently was known to bombard Morgan with ideas generated from the 14 magazines he then owned, such as *House Beautiful*, *Town and Country*, and *Connoisseur*.

It is not clear just how long Bella and Mr. Hearst were able to work together without fireworks, but the association dissolved sometime shortly thereafter. As with her falling out with Bruce Porter, it was not the first time Bella had gone head-to-head with others on a garden project. In any case, during her tenure at San Simeon, due to the remote location, Bella would stay on site and socialize with the many famous guests. Her family constantly begged "Aunty" for details of these encounters. Bella would regale them with stories of some of the intriguing personalities gathered in the elegant dining hall, complete with ketchup bottles on the table.

But Bella's attention to Filoli was never entirely diverted. By 1922, Agnes Bourn founded the Hillsborough Garden Club, which became the Garden Club of America in 1929. During this time, Filoli

(continued)

Opposite: Isabella Worn in Filoli's lavender field with head groundskeeper Louis Moriconi, sometime in the late 1940s. All photos in the article are courtesy of the author.



Isabella Worn (continued)

was the site for many teas, receptions, and theme parties, all decorated by the two [Worn] sisters and made vibrant by their floral decorations.

But the latter half of the 1920s were a time of decline for the Bourns, as both William and Agnes were in failing health. Bella's involvement in Filoli gradually diminished, and with the death of the Bourns in 1936, her emotional connection to Filoli seemed severed. Meanwhile, the floral business continued to flourish and Bella remained active in other landscape projects, including the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island where "the Misses Worn, under the supervision of John McLaren ... created floral designs and arranged for the planting of evergreens indigenous to the Pacific coast."

Sometime thereafter, William and Lurline Roth, heirs to the Matson Navigation Company who had bought the Filoli estate in 1937, convinced Bella to resume supervising the Filoli gardens. By the 1940s, she had a regular Thursday appointment at Filoli and came down from Marin County, usually wearing a big floppy hat, and in a truck, chauffeured by her faithful right-hand man, Emilio Dentoni. Lurline Roth recalled those years in her 1981 oral history with the *Oakland Tribune*:

Everybody loved Miss Worn. But she in some ways was hard to get along with because she was very opinionated and wanted to do things her way. But as her way was always perfect, I didn't find anything to argue about and so we were great friends.... She always made you feel that the garden was absolutely yours. She made me feel as if I had made the garden. Well, I didn't make the garden, of course. But she always gave you that feeling.

Bella remained active in other landscape projects as well. One of her last was Stern Hall on the campus of UC Berkeley. John W. Gregg and Isabella Worn are credited with the landscape design of the 1941-42 building on Hearst Avenue—the first women's dormitory in the University of California system.

During all these busy years, "Aunty" Bella was the quiet benefactress of her nieces and nephews—putting them through school, helping them get started in business and supporting the family through the Depression years.

Bella never married, but among her suitors was Herman Jaehne. The two became engaged, but Jaehne's medical condition prevented the marriage; they remained devoted "soul mates" for the rest of their lives.

Bella continued visiting Filoli until the week before her death on November 9, 1950. The outpouring of condolence notes sent to her sister and partner, Annie, read like a "Who's Who" of Northern California society during the first half of the 20th century. Over the years, Bella had made many friends and was much loved. Annie died less than 3 months later on January 20, 1951. And so *The Misses Worn* passed into legend. In 1953, in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park in Humboldt County, friends of Isabella Worn dedicated a redwood grove in her memory. ■

Editor's Note

This article is based on a wonderful talk the author gave at Filoli in 2012.

Thomas Ross Perry is the great-nephew of Isabella Worn. The de facto family historian, Perry says that he is "in possession of a lot of boxes of old family stuff... and as a nurseryman at Sunnyside Nursery for the past 36 years, I feel a kinship to those who made their mark in the horticultural field before me."

Above, left to right: Annie Worn Perry, Donald E. Perry, Grace Worn (seated), Annie Ross Worn, and Isabella Worn (seated) in the family's Marin County garden.

Above right: Isabella Worn, ca. 1897.

W. B. BOURN

FILOLI
SAN MATEO, CALIFORNIA

15 April, 1920.

Dear Bella:

I have sent you cheque for my flower account, but I have not received your bill for my Christmas purchases with full description, etc., etc., as requested. Please send it not later than next Monday.

Agnes told me she had a bill from you long delayed. Now, Bella, it does not make any particular difference to Agnes or me, but to some of your clients it might make a big difference; you are not fair to yourself, or to some of your clients - particularly yourself. Our bills amount to over \$1400. Interest on that for one year is atleast \$80. You have lost \$80 and nobody gains. Collect your bills, and if your banker does not pay interest I will send you to a banker who does, or invest your money where you can make 6% or 7% and see what it amounts to on the bills you have let run. Take me into partnership and let me have a small percentage of the money I will save for you.

Be good, but not too good, and next year you have got to come to Muckross with us.

Affectionately yours,

W. B. Bourn

Miss Bella Worn,
Lick building,
San Francisco, Calif.

For the Worn sisters, bookkeeping took a back seat to artistic expression. Invoices were often tossed in a chest and clients billed when the mood would strike, as this letter from William Bourn attests.



Eden

Journal of the California Garden & Landscape History Society

Winter 2014 • Vol. 17 No. 1

