

## **MCLELLAN ACRES OF ORCHIDS**

By Jacquelyne Kious

What world-renowned SSF company offered a unique “spa” service to its customers? Hint - the spa wasn’t for people or pets.

“The year was 1947 when a secret request from Buckingham Palace reached horticulturist Rod McLellan in South San Francisco,” said Michael Svanevik, Palo Alto Daily News, February 2008. Amazingly the surprise order was for a bouquet of white orchids for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip.

In the late 1930s, McLellan began experimenting and within two years he had a salable orchid. McLellan immediately invested in public education and community outreach programs to show that orchids were easy to grow and not just for the rich. The gamble paid off as McLellan’s soon became the world’s largest orchid nursery. Many wealthy peninsula residents would actually board their orchids at McLellan’s orchid spa during the dormant season and pick them up when they started blooming.

The Gold Rush brought Rod’s grandfather, David McLellan, to San Francisco in 1850. But like so many others, he did not come to San Francisco to “strike it rich” but rather to grow fruits and vegetables for the city’s booming population. In 1860 the McLellan’s started a dairy and produce business, but soon found out that flowers they gave their best paying customers were more profitable than milk. Son Edgar opened a nursery in Burlingame in 1895 serving San Francisco’s huge demand for fresh cut flowers, primarily roses and carnations. By the early 1920s, though, land in Burlingame was too valuable to be used for an expansion of the nursery. Edgar’s son Rod would purchase land in SSF in 1926 and build his own nursery empire.

The popularity of corsages in the 1940s and ‘50s led to a shift from roses and carnations to gardenias and cattleya orchids (made popular by Mamie Eisenhower), for use in corsages. By 1935, McLellan’s was the nation’s leading gardenia grower with 80,000 plants.

At its height, Rod McLellan’s company, Acres or Orchids, occupied 38 acres west of El Camino in SSF opposite the current site of the SSF BART station and Kaiser Hospital. The nursery tours were very popular with tourists and locals alike. Acres of Orchids was visited by such notables as European royals, Mamie Eisenhower, and actors Montgomery Clift, Bob Hope, and Raymond Burr.

Acres of Orchids would eventually succumb to the same fate as the Burlingame nursery. The SSF property was just too valuable and was sold in 1998 for

housing. The orchids were moved to McLellan's Watsonville facility. By 2000, SSF's last remaining undeveloped properties were sold to housing developers.