

## “THE FLOWER LADY OF ELMA”

by Donna Lowry



### ANNA KUHRI RETTIG

January 17, 1919 – March 9, 2013

Anna was an unpretentious, wonderful woman who had the most impressive “green thumb” of anyone I have ever met. It was a joy to sit at Anna’s kitchen table and listen to her talk. She was so knowledgeable and shared her knowledge with anyone who asked. I could listen to her talk for hours and never be bored. I am so proud that she was my friend.

Anna was born in Yugoslavia (now Serbia) 94 years ago. Her family was very poor. At age 12, she had to leave home to work as a housemaid.

At age 19, Anna married Martin Rettig, the youngest son of a farming family. With the two of them doing most of the work, the little farm did not bring in enough to support both Martin’s family and his parents.

In 1939 when their first child, Maria, was a year old, they moved to Germany to find better paying farming jobs. Then in 1941 a second daughter, Elfriede (Elli), was born. Anna struggled through World War II after Martin was drafted into the German army. She worked days in the fields taking the children (Elli in a basket) with her and spent nights in bomb shelters. Food was scarce. Soldiers would come and raid the fields. But Anna would always find something to use to make soup for the family. So they never were hungry.

Luckily, Martin returned from the war unharmed. In 1947 a nephew, Tony Rettig, joined their family since his mother had died and his father was a POW in Yugoslavia. Maria and Elli were pleased to have a “brother”.

Qualifying under the Displaced Person’s Act, in May of 1952 the Rettig family immigrated to Erie, PA. In September, they moved to Buffalo, NY. In 1970 Anna and Martin moved to Elma on a 4.5 acre lot where they built a new retirement home. Martin grew 2 acres of fruit and vegetables while Anna grew a front yard full of flowers. From March to November there was a riot of color in her front yard. Among her favorites was the giant *Hibiscus moscheutos*, but she loved irises most of all.

One day, Anna visited Al Wirtz’s garden and saw his Japanese irises. Of course, she was hooked. Anna went on to hybridize and introduce Japanese irises. Anna was very selective and would only introduce the seedlings that met her standards.

The Western New York Iris Society’s Wirtz-Rettig Award is given in their honor to the highest award-winning Japanese iris in their annual Japanese Iris Show. In addition, the Conroe Award was given to Anna Rettig to recognize her outstanding contributions to Region 2.



Anna’s ‘Grand Island’