

# The Sunken Gardens-



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## *Tranquility for the Shell-Shocked*

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...” And the Garden of Eden! Remember that story? The garden was beautiful. Adam was weak. Eve was curious. And the Serpent was beguiling. God created a perfect garden for Adam and Eve. But they didn't maintain it too well and got kicked to the curb. Ever since then, kings and queens, and the rich and humble alike have attempted to recreate that perfect lost paradise.

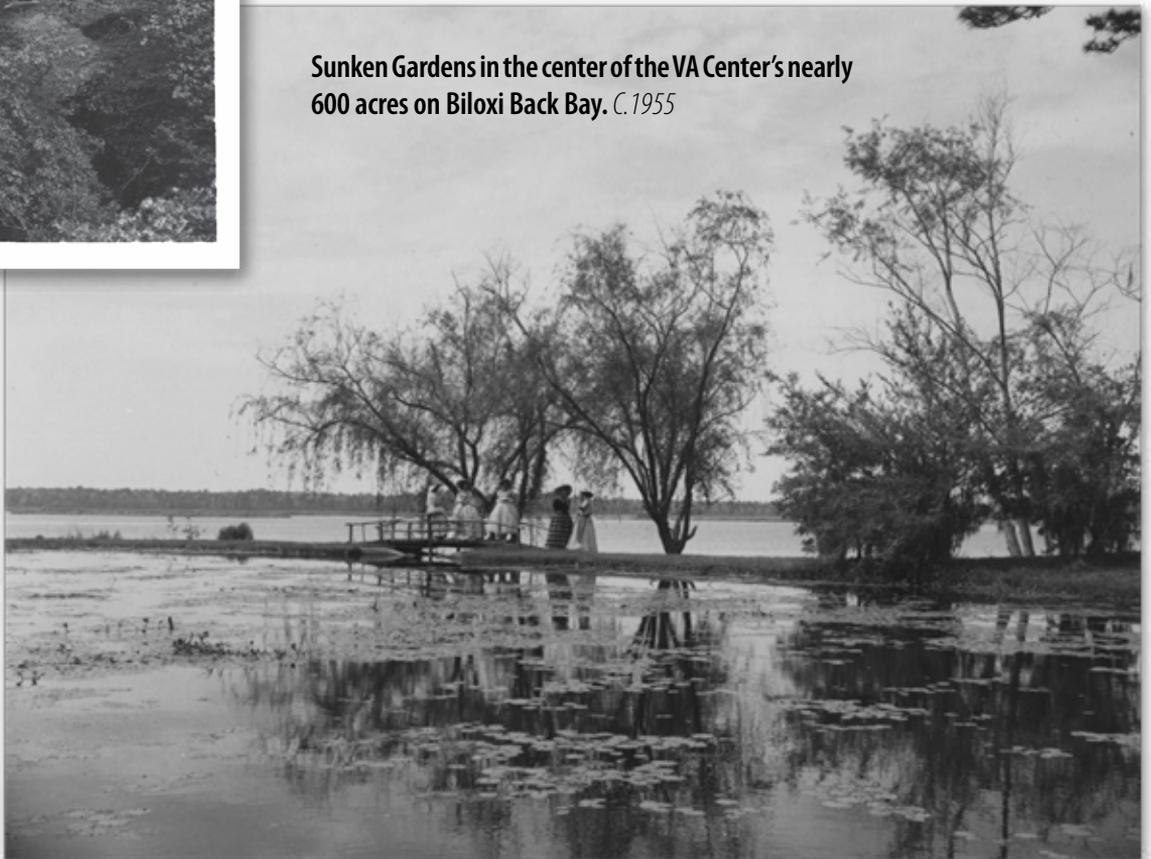
King Nebuchadnezzar II built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon - one of the seven wonders of the ancient world - for his wife, homesick for the green mountains of her distant

homeland. There's debate over their actual existence, but archaeological digs near Babylon have unearthed massive mud brick arches, which many scholars believe are the foundations of the famous gardens. The jury's out on this.



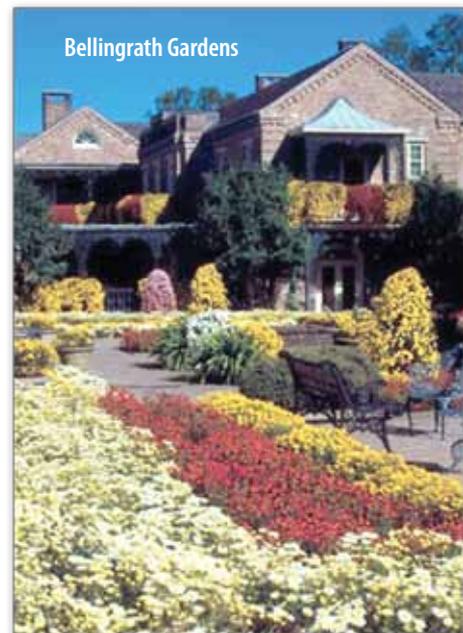
Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College C.C. "Tex" Hamill Down South Magazine Collection.

**Sunken Gardens in the center of the VA Center's nearly 600 acres on Biloxi Back Bay. C. 1955**



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In the early days of the French Revolution, Marie Antoinette is often quoted as saying, "Let them eat cake," to a mob of starving Parisians who had marched to Versailles, the gilded palace of the Bourbon kings. The jury's also out concerning dear Marie's statement, but there's one thing that's not in doubt: The meticulous manicured gardens of Versailles are some of the most magnificent in the world.



Closer to home, Bellingrath Gardens has been tried by a jury of its peers and found guilty - guilty of being one of the South's grandest gardens. Created in 1927 by Bessie Mae and Walter Bellingrath, then president of Mobile's Coca-Cola Bottling Company, the gardens are a testament to their love of Southern horticulture and continue to delight thousands of visitors year round.

Perhaps the famous gardens of the world were an inspiration to two local gentlemen who were instrumental in creating a once-lush Eden called the Sunken Gardens. Major Eugene Hiller, the manager of the Biloxi Veterans Administration Hospital in the late 1930s, is said to have taken his wife's love of roses to heart. That love put him on a path that eventually lead to the tranquil paths of the Sunken Gardens. And Frotscher Steckler, a friend and employee of the

Major, created those paths.

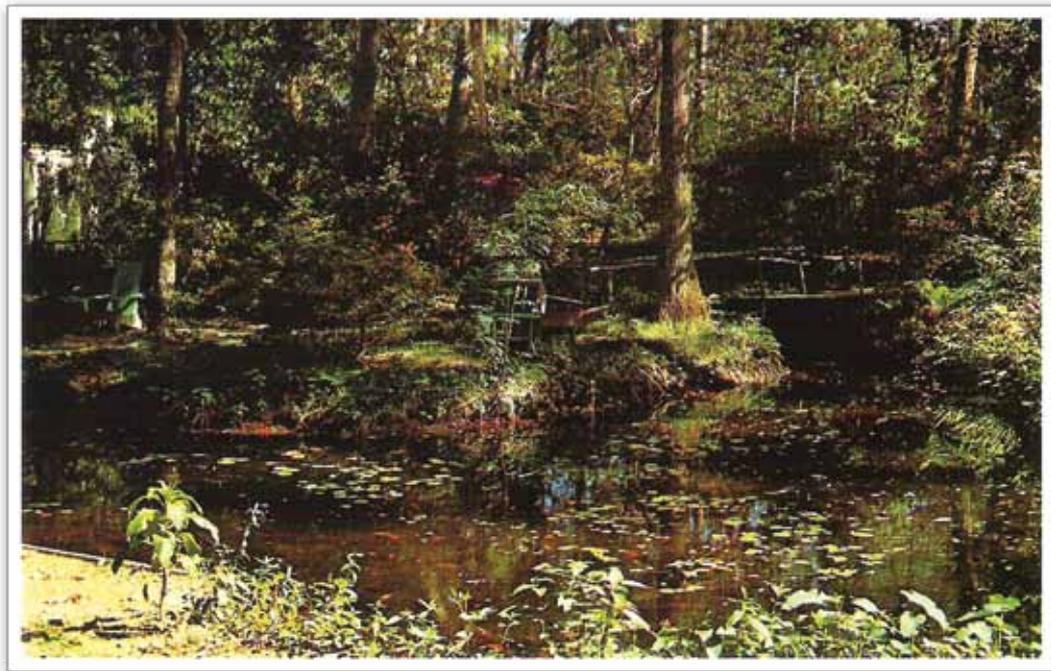
According to Frotscher's son, Judge Sandy Steckler of Biloxi, his father

moved his family from New Orleans to the Coast in the late 1920's. Frotscher's father owned and operated a very successful business in New Orleans, The Steckler Seed Company. And Frotscher followed in his father's footsteps, setting up his own seed business, which was once located on Biloxi's Reynoir Street. But his dreams of success, like his seed business, evaporated in the suffocating folds of a cloak worn by Ol' Man Depression. Like a good father should, Frotscher sought other ways to provide for his family. And he soon discovered the Civil Service jobs at the Biloxi VA were his ticket out of the financial chaos created by the stock market crash of 1929.

A 1959 Daily Herald article stated: "Frotscher R. Steckler, well-known along the Coast as a horticulturist, landscape designer and flower arranger... was announced as Biloxi's outstanding citizen...in the Hurricane Room of the Buena Vista Hotel...." That outstanding citizen had also been instrumental in the beautification of Keesler Field, planting flowers and shrubs around the administration buildings, and trees on the grounds. That beautification caught the eye of Major Hiller, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The Sunken Gardens, as they were aptly called, were nestled in a ravine located at the northwestern end of the VA grounds. The ravine, separating one of the hospital buildings from the nurse's dormitory, was traversed by a decorative wooden bridge. Neither Judge Steckler nor anyone else I spoke to could tell me exactly when the gardens were first conceived and created. But it is certain that Frotscher, along with his landscaping training, was the driving force behind them. The gardens were also a source of fascination for yours truly, when, as a boy, I often explored them in the carefree days of my youth.

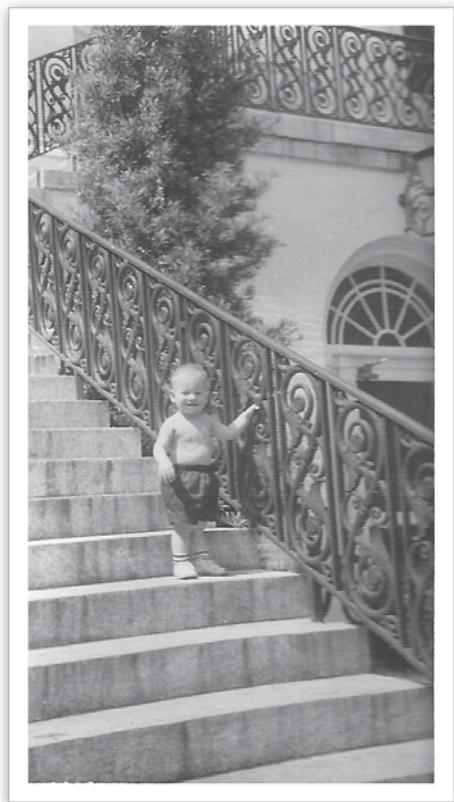
My father, the Marine, was oft times a patient at the VA due to a heart problem created by childhood rheumatic fever. From an early age,



I wandered around the grounds often to the dismay of my mother. Before her memory faded, she would reminisce about the time I came up missing, only to be found at the end of a pier on Back Bay, which skirts the VA grounds. According to her, I was jabbering with the veterans, who at that time were allowed to live on small houseboats or in quaint fishing shacks. To pass the time, they fished and created colorful whirligigs, which danced in the gentle breezes of the Bay. The locals called them pogies. Years later when I asked why, I was told they were like pogie fish, “not much good for anything.” But they must have meant something to Frotscher, because he saw their need, and created a place of tranquility for them.

Following the horror and death of World War II, many veterans returned to this country suffering from shell shock. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, as it’s called today, can manifest itself in many ways: intrusive memories, insomnia, nightmares, and depression. In those days, therapy consisted of rest and relaxation. And what better place to do both than in a garden. I was told that many of the veterans helped create the Sunken Gardens as part of their therapy. They dug the holes that became quiet pools of babbling water. They dug the little streams that connected the quiet pools. They planted a symphony of flowers and shrubs; a year-round garden of Southern delights such as magenta-colored azaleas, delicate camellias, sweet-smelling roses, dancing tulips, and vibrant hydrangeas. A 1956 article in the Herald’s “Know Your Coast,” written by Ray M. Thompson, described the gardens as “traversed with clear running water, rustic bridges, footpaths meandering and climbing their way among flowering shrubs and frequent hidden nooks where beautiful flowers in season await smiling.” As a child, I often discovered veterans sitting in lawn chairs in those hidden nooks, or quietly walking along those meandering footpaths.

The Sunken Gardens were a favorite place of outdoor pleasure and relaxation for both VA patients and local citizens. But their relaxing atmosphere didn’t stop there. According to Mr.



*Author, as a young boy, on the steps of the Administration Building at the Biloxi VA.*

Thompson, “The recurrent floral show of the Sunken Gardens is only one scenic feature in its (the VA’s) 203 acres of woodland and 227 acres of improved green velvet lawns, through which ramble nearly five miles of roadways and two miles of sidewalks.” Many of those sidewalks and pathways were accentuated by groupings of granite rocks. Judge Steckler stated his father acquired the rocks from ships in Gulfport harbor. The rocks were used as ballast for the voyage to this country, and when the ship’s cargo was unloaded, the rocks were considered surplus weight for the return home. Some of those rocks can still be seen today.

Due to a heart attack in the mid-60s, Frotscher Steckler retired from his duties at the VA. As a teenager in the late 60s, I still enjoyed visiting the gardens, which by that time were not as well maintained as they once were. I went off to college in 1970, and by the time I thought of the old gardens again in the early 80s, they were gone. Today, it’s almost impossible to tell where the gardens once existed. The only clue is the

bridge that still connects the old nurse’s dormitory (now the Sleep Center) to the hospital. The area beneath the bridge has been declared wetlands, and has been allowed to grow naturally. Where shaded paths and babbling pools once existed, snakes and alligators bask in the late afternoon sun.

There is however one legacy of Frotscher’s that has not succumbed to the grinding gears of progress. The next time you enter the brick and gated entrance to the Biloxi VA, there before you, stretching as far as the eye can see, will be an undulating avenue of live oaks, their over-lapping branches like the delicate tracery found in Gothic cathedrals. Frotscher planted those oaks. And they, along with the memories of the Sunken Gardens, will remain a monument to Frotscher Steckler, and his friend, the Major. Two local gentlemen who attempted and succeeded in creating the Coast’s own Garden of Eden.

I would like to personally thank Judge Sandy Steckler for his remembrances of his father; Dr. Charles Sullivan for granting access to the C.C. “Tex” Hamill Down South Magazine Collection; and Butch Martin who was kind enough to answer my plea for help in locating information about the old gardens. If you would like to actually hear Major Hiller “praising the grounds and gardens” of the Biloxi VA, please log on to <http://www.kfk.com/Down-SouthMagazine.htm>. The interview was recorded April 25, 1954, for WVMI AM 570, which had a weekly radio show in partnership with Down South Magazine. The show is listed as Number 17. Enjoy!

*Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart!*

*Kal*



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