

From Red Radical to Green Thumb

Roscoe Fillmore

1887-1968

By the time Roscoe Fillmore moved his family to Centreville in 1924, the New Brunswicker had run a Siberian collective farm, been president of the New Brunswick Fruit Growers' Association, helped found the Canadian Workers' Party, and written scores of articles promoting socialism. He was also penniless. His communism had cost him his job managing New Brunswick's largest orchard and Roscoe had come to Centreville to start over. Charles and Mabel Macdonald lent the Fillmores enough money and concrete to build a greenhouse and a concrete-block home next to theirs.



storage; and government and private concerns are struggling to find a market for these goods."

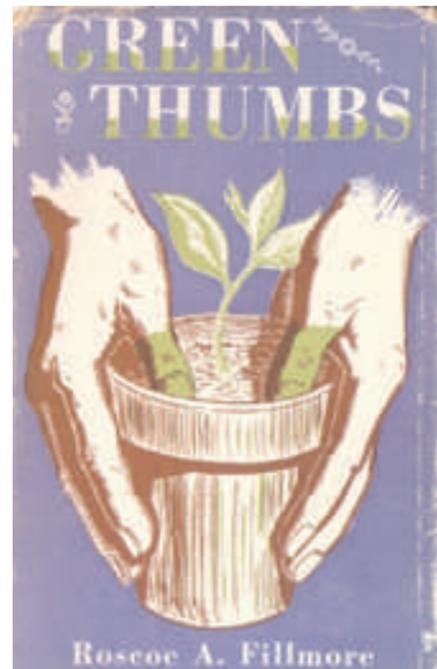
Roscoe joined the central committee of Canada's outlawed Communist Party in 1935 and in 1943 helped found the Labour-Progressive Party. In 1945 he ran as the "Farmer-Labour" candidate for Digby-Annapolis-Kings. He lost.

Meanwhile, Roscoe's wife and five children helped make the greenhouse pay. They peddled flowers door-to-door, sold plants on consignment, and made apple-tree grafts in the living room. Having the fantastic Macdonald concrete house next door also attracted customers. In 1938, Roscoe became Head Gardener at Grand Pré Memorial Park and put his unstable greenhouse business on the back-burner.

In the 1950s, politics went on the back-burner. Sim's 1951 death broke up the Centreville Socialists and Roscoe renounced the LPP. Roscoe and Frank threw themselves into developing The Valley Nurseries; flower beds stretched half a mile behind the house. An innovative experimenter, Roscoe developed new plant varieties suitable for Nova Scotia's demanding climate, forty strains of rhododendron alone. Although Margaret's death in 1954 devastated Roscoe, he kept working, musing that gardeners know nature's

"infinite patience in repairing the wounds and scars administered by life. My interest in my plant experiments, heathers, rhododendrons, new shrubs and trees has helped me to overcome the terrible sense of loss."

Roscoe considered gardening "much-needed escape from the machine existence of modern living," and wanted it



universally accessible. Reading about the rising incidence of job-related stress, he declared, "I am going to prescribe that these suburban dwellers get their hands into the mud and never mind the rubber gloves." Since existing gardening books used obscure terminology and offered little advice on coping with Canada's "rather rugged climate,"

Fillmore wrote a gardening series: *Green Thumbs* (1953), *The Growing Question* (1957), *Roses for Canadian Gardens* (1959) and *The Perennial Border and Rock Garden* (1961). A conversational prose style avoiding terminology suited Roscoe's books for the "thousands of people who hanker for a little beauty and colour around their homes and who know little if anything of how to start." Gardeners responded enthusiastically, and Roscoe spoke across Canada and on radio as "Mr. Green Thumbs."

Political activist and horticulturist seem disparate occupations, but Roscoe thought both promoted "continuous change with the emphasis on progress . . . due to modifications and adaptations forced upon us by necessity."

Semi-annual Roscoe Fillmore Picnics held in July since 1978 commemorate this exceptional Nova Scotian.



A family picnic in 1944, L-R Front: Frank, Nick, Lorraine, Irene, Becky. Back row: Rosa, Margaret, Flora Munroe, Bill Putnam, Roscoe, Dick



Soviet visa 1922 when Roscoe worked in Siberia

Fillmore, Macdonald, and Northville farmer Jim Sim organized the Centreville Socialists, who spent Sunday afternoons at Sim's farm enjoying political debate and homemade apple cider. The Canadian government mistrusted the leftists, and put several Centreville Socialists under RCMP surveillance. To frustrate attempts at listening in on their meetings, the Socialists sang Christian hymns with new lyrics celebrating socialism. From the road, it sounded like a prayer meeting.

Economic inequality sickened Roscoe, who noted that government gave the unemployed only 25-cents per week, per child. For impoverished children,

"milk is out of the question, for milk is 12-cents a quart. Lacking milk, these children are malnourished. This is a country where thousands of tons of butter and cheese are always in



Roscoe, far left, on a Soviet farm