



The Rose of the Unknown Soldier

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The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery is an iconic monument dedicated to members of the United States armed services whose remains have not been identified. It was first authorized on March 4, 1921, when the U.S. Congress approved the burial of an unidentified American serviceman from World War I. Thereafter, on November 11, 1921, an unknown soldier brought back from France was interred below a three-level marble tomb. Congress subsequently appropriated funds for the construction of the superstructure above the tomb which was completed in 1932. Since that time crypts have been added to inter the Unknowns from World War II and Korea. A crypt was later added that once contained an Unknown from Vietnam whose remains were positively identified in 1998 and were removed.

On October 22, 1921, four unknown servicemen were exhumed from four World War I American battlefield cemeteries in France and taken the following day to the city hall in Châlons-en-Champagne, France where they were draped with American flags. U.S. Army Sergeant Edward F. Younger, who had been selected as one of the pallbearers, was handed a bouquet of white roses and ordered: "You will take these flowers, proceed to the chapel, and place the bouquet on one of the four caskets resting there. The one you select will be the Unknown Soldier." After kneeling in prayer, Sergeant Younger stood and circled the caskets three times, touching each casket. He then saluted and placed the flowers on the second casket to his right. The roses remained on the coffin throughout the journey home and were buried with the unknown soldier at Arlington National Cemetery along with some soil taken from France.

Later recalling the reason for his selection, Sergeant Younger said: "It was as though something had pulled me. Something seemed to stop me each time I passed grew irresistible; I could not have turned back now had I tried.... A voice seemed to say, 'This is a pal of yours....' Something seemed to say 'Pick this one.'"

The 100th Anniversary of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier will be commemorated at Arlington National Cemetery at 11:00 AM on November 21, 2021. The commemoration will include the dedication of "Never Forget" gardens throughout the United States, including one at America's Rose Garden in Shreveport.

In preparation for the commemoration of the Centennial, the Historian of the Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier contacted the American Rose Society to ask if it is possible to identify the white roses used in the selection of the American Unknown Soldier in France in 1921 by Sergeant Edward Younger. As President of the American Rose Society, and a student of American history I undertook this project. In doing so I determined that since there is no historical record that specifically identifies the roses used, it is impossible to answer that question with certainty. There are, however, some references in the historical record that provide clues that suggest a likely candidate.

For purposes of my examination I studied the detailed historical account of the selection set forth at the following link:

<http://www.smootheedges.com/selecting-unknown-soldier-ww1-edward-younger/>

From that account I have noted that the selection took place in the French town of Châlons-en-Champagne on the morning of October 24, 1921. Châlons-en-Champagne is a city in the Grand Est region of France. It is the capital of the department of Marne, despite being only a quarter the size of the city of Reims. Formerly called Châlons-sur-Marne, the city was officially renamed in 1998. The account goes on to say: "He stood alone in the small, dark

octagonal room holding the bouquet of white roses cut from the garden of French parents who had lost two sons to the war.”

From the above, the record tells us that the roses were cut from a French garden, perhaps locally, prior to October 24, 1921. That tells me the rose must have been introduced in commerce, most likely in France, some time prior to 1921. The time of year also indicates that the rose was a repeat-flowering variety that would have been blooming in the fall, as opposed to a once-flowering rose that blooms only in the spring.

A photo of Sergeant Younger “re-creating” his selection on May 30, 1930 has a close up of white roses of distinctive tea form, also popular among florist roses at the time. That however is a “re-creation” that took place nine years later in Washington DC so it is unlikely that the same variety of rose was used in the re-creation. The type of rose, however, is likely to have been the same. The indistinct photos of the actual bouquet on the casket in 1921 also suggest that the rose was a tea rose. Tea roses are also typically repeat blooming, which suggests that they could have been in bloom in France in late October 1921, however because of the time of year, it is most likely the roses were blooming in a greenhouse. Tea-formed roses were then, and indeed now are, the primary type of rose used by florists and recognized by the public as “roses”. They also typically come with long stems which admit to arrangement in a bouquet such as the one used in the selection.

Taking this information, I studied likely candidates of white tea roses popular in France *circa* 1921. I did this through an advanced search of the website HelpMeFind. That turned up several candidates, the most likely of which is ‘Niphetos’ a white tea rose hybridized by the French breeder Bougere in 1841.

‘Niphetos’ is variously translated from the Greek as “snowing” or “falling snow”. The rose is also sometimes referred to as “The Wedding Rose” or “The Bridal Rose” because of its use at weddings. Contemporaneous accounts described it as: “Large, full, tulip-like form, pure white, buds long...a delightful rose.” Others said, “No white Tea can beat it for purity in color.” The French Journal des Roses summed up the description thus: “Represents among roses, a perfect distinction, a supreme elegance, finesse and finally nobility.”

Because of these characteristics ‘Niphetos’ was a popular florist rose following its introduction and would likely have remained so after the War in 1921. It was not, however, considered a good garden rose because of its susceptibility to rain and because it opened poorly. Its quality as a bud, however, marked it according to then contemporary sources as “in essence ... a greenhouse rose.”

The fact that the selection roses were cut in late October in France increases the likelihood that the roses were from a greenhouse instead of a local garden at the end of the French rose growing season. In addition, it is fair to assume that the destruction in France during the Great War would have made it unlikely that there were many local gardens in October 1921 that could supply a bouquet of white roses.

This leads to an intriguing reference that may be just coincidence but perhaps not. There is an article in the 1922 *American Rose Annual*, at p. 132, titled “Among European Rosarians”, by E. A. White, Professor of Floriculture, Cornell University. The Editors Note by J. Horace McFarland, the Father of the American Rose Society provides further detail on Professor White:

“Editor’s Note: To get rose observations at first hand by a competent rosarian is very much worthwhile. Professor White, who was the efficient secretary of the American Rose Society for several years, and until his increasing duties made continuance impracticable, has provided us with just such observations.”

Professor White’s trip include one to France where he visited prominent gardens and nurseries in the fall of 1921, coincidentally at the same time of the selection of the American Unknown Solider. Among those gardens were the nurseries of Joseph Pernet-Ducher.

Joseph Pernet-Ducher (1859–1928) was a French rosarian and hybridizer. Born near Lyon, the son of Jean Pernet, he was a third generation rose-grower. In 1879 he began his apprenticeship in the rose-breeding business with the Ducher nursery in Lyon. In 1882, he married Marie Ducher, the owner’s daughter, and adopted the name “Pernet-Ducher” to signify the two rose growing entities.

Using *Rosa foetida* in 1887, he and his father began developing yellow rose cultivars through a cross between a red hybrid perpetual and ‘Persian Yellow’. After his father’s death in 1896, Joseph Pernet-Ducher carried on the experiments and developed a worldwide reputation in 1900 when he introduced ‘Soleil d’Or’, the first yellow Hybrid

Tea. This rose it is now recognized as the first of the “Pernetiana” roses (Roses of Pernet) and an important ancestor of the legendary rose ‘Peace’, introduced in 1945 following World War II.

Between 1907 and 1925, Joseph Pernet-Ducher won the Gold Medal thirteen times at the “Concours de Bagatelle”, the international competition for new roses held each June in Paris.

Recalling his trip in 1921, Professor White went on to say:

“On my arrival at Lyons, I found a note from M. Pernet-Ducher saying his daughter would call for me early Thursday to take me to their nurseries. Mlle. Pernet speaks excellent English and acted both as guide and interpreter for me during the entire day. The war brought deep sadness to their home in that it took both sons, Claudius, 31 years old, and Georges, aged 28 years. The morning was spent among the roses.”

Recalling the detail of the origin of the roses used in the selection, we are told they came from “the garden of French parents who had lost two sons to the war”, I compared that to the note of Professor White that “The war brought deep sadness to their home in that it took both sons, Claudius, 31 years old, and Georges, aged 28 years.” In fact, Joseph Pernet-Ducher’s named the roses ‘Souvenir de Claudius Pernet’ and the ‘Souvenir de Georges Pernet’ in their memory.

I looked at the Google Map and note that Lyons is some distance to the Southeast of the town of Châlons-en-Champagne, albeit on the rail lines. The nurseries of Joseph Pernet-Ducher in Lyons were not therefore local. On the other hand, we do know that Joseph Pernet-Ducher was a prominent rosarian and nurseryman in France whose garden and greenhouse were full of roses in the fall of 1921, including no doubt the popular white Tea rose, ‘Niphetos’.

The account of the selection of the American Unknown Soldier has a number of “coincidences” and perhaps the visit of Professor White to the nurseries of Joseph Pernet-Ducher in 1921 is just that. Then again, how many greenhouses existed in war-torn France on October 24, 1921 owned by a man of roses who lost two sons in the War? I suspect there was but one, which fact would explain the voice in my head that seems to say: “the roses used in the selection of the American Unknown Soldier in France in 1921 by Sergeant Edward Younger were a bouquet of the pure white Tea rose ‘Niphetos’ from the gardens of Joseph Pernet-Ducher, the famous French nurseryman near Lyons who had himself lost two sons in the Great War.”

‘Niphetos’ continues to be available from three US and six foreign sources to this day.

Photos: In 1930, Sgt Younger recreates his selection of the second casket as the one on which to lay the white rose bouquet; Sgt Edward Younger; Bouquet of ‘Niphetos’ – thought to be the rose used in the bouquet for the casket of the Unknown Soldier; The Unknown Soldier selected. 1921; ‘Niphetos’ rose painting on a cigarette card; Burial of the Unknown Soldier at his Tomb at Arlington National Cemetery; “Toward Havre,” flag-draped casket with ‘Niphetos’ rose bouquet; Rose Man Joseph Pernet-Ducher; “White Niphetos roses by Williams Anderson on Artnet;” The Tomb.



Press photo of Sgt. Younger taken 1921 / From the collection of the author.



'Niphetos,' the 'Bridal Rose,' and 'Ivy of the Valley.' (See pages 31 and 53)

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