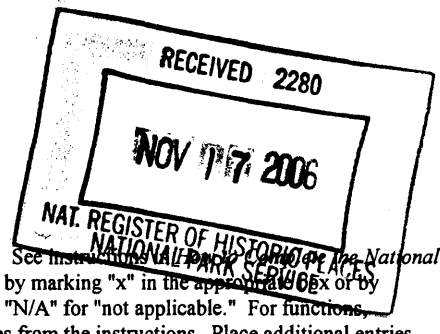


1172

**United States Department of Interior
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900A). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Sisson's Peony Gardens
other names/site number Windmill Garden

2. Location

street & number 207 North Main Street (Highway 26) N/A not for publication
city or town Rosendale N/A vicinity
state Wisconsin code WI county Fond du Lac code 039 zip code 54974

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets _ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant _ nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

11/13/06

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State Historic Preservation Officer-WI

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property _ meets _ does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

Sisson's Peony Gardens

Fond du Lac County

Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

4. National Park Service Certification

- hereby certify that the property is:
 - entered in the National Register.
 - See continuation sheet.
 - determined eligible for the National Register.
 - See continuation sheet.
 - determined not eligible for the National Register.
 - See continuation sheet.
 - removed from the National Register.
 - other, (explain:)

[Handwritten Signature]

12/22/06

[Handwritten Signature]
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

| Ownership of Property (check as many boxes as as apply) | Category of Property (Check only one box) | Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count) | |
|---|--|---|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input type="checkbox"/> building(s) | <input type="checkbox"/> contributing | <input type="checkbox"/> noncontributing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-local | <input type="checkbox"/> district | 1 | buildings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-State | <input type="checkbox"/> structure | 3 | sites |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> site | 4 | structures |
| | | | objects |
| | | | 0 total |

Name of related multiple property listing:
(Enter "N/A" if property not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources
is previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

LANDSCAPE/garden

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

LANDSCAPE/garden

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN
MOVEMENTS

OTHER: gardens

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls limestone

roof asphalt

other wood

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Name of Property

Fond du Lac County
County and State

Wisconsin

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for the National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce

Period of Significance

1928-1968

Significant Dates

1928

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Sisson, Wilbur
Phillips, Jesse

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Name of Property

Fond du Lac County
County and State

Wisconsin

9. Major Bibliographic References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous Documentation on File (National Park Service):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- X State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State Agency
 - Federal Agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - x Other
- Name of repository:
Rosendale Historical Society

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property under one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 1/6 3/6/5/2/4/0 4/8/5/1/8/4/0
Zone Easting Northing

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing

2 _____
Zone Easting Northing

4 _____
Zone Easting Northing

See Continuation Sheet

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet)

11. Form Prepared By

| | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|-----------|---------|
| name/title | Lee Somerville | date | 5/23/06 |
| organization | | telephone | |
| street & number | P.O. Box 5141 | zip code | 53705 |
| city or town | Madison | state | WI |

Sisson's Peony Gardens

Fond du Lac County

Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional Items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

| | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|---------|
| name/title | Emajeau Westphal, President | Date | 4/15/06 |
| organization | Rosendale Historical Society | telephone | |
| street&number | PO Box 254 | zip code | 54974 |
| City or town | Rosendale | state | WI |

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects, (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 1

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

Introduction

The small rural village of Rosendale (population 923) in Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, is located at the intersection of state highways 23 and 26, which bisect the county. For over sixty years, Rosendale was the home of Sisson's Peony Gardens, a regionally and nationally renowned peony nursery, display garden and commercial enterprise, established by Wilbur E. Sisson between 1918 and 1922. Over 16,000 peony plants of 2,500 different varieties created an astonishing sight for the thousands of visitors who crowded into Rosendale during blooming season to purchase plants and cut flowers, and wander through the gardens. Sisson's peony roots were shipped throughout the United States during peak years of operation, and the business hired up to twenty seasonal workers, providing employment and revenue to the community. Although the business closed in 1988, traces of the legacy that established Sisson's Peony Gardens and Rosendale as a regional center for peony lovers can be seen today in the unusual varieties and numbers of peony plants evident in village gardens and the cemetery.

Specialty crops have been frequent by-products of the rich agricultural heritage of Wisconsin, and this unusual garden epitomizes the enterprising and successful market niches that emerged during the first half of the 20th century. Of the original Peony Gardens, only the Windmill Garden and its three contributing structures retain integrity today. This site is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A with Criteria consideration G.

Narrative Description

Sisson's Peony Gardens are located on the west side of highway 26 at 207 North Main Street, one and one half blocks north of the intersection of state highways 23 and 26, in the village of Rosendale, Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin. At its peak, between 1950 and 1979, Sisson's Peony Gardens occupied over four interconnected acres within the village and consisted of three display gardens (the Home Garden, the Windmill Garden, and the Memorial Garden) and two acres of nursery beds.

In 2005, the former Windmill Garden and adjoining smaller Home Garden were donated to the Rosendale Historical Society. The remainder of the land had been sold for development when Sisson's Peony Gardens closed in 1988. Because the Home Garden is less accessible and has lost historical integrity, it is not be included in this nomination.

The nominated site which contains the extant peony garden (The Windmill Garden) is a .304 acre rectangular lot (221ft x 60ft), in an area of small residential homes, on the west side of Main Street. Its signature windmill is visible from Main Street. The lot was purchased by Wilbur Sisson in 1928 to add

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 2

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

to his existing nursery acreage.

The garden contains remnants of six long rows of peony beds, laid out in an east-west direction along the length of the property at approximately five foot intervals, separated by grass paths. Each bed is approximately four feet wide and separated by a five foot grass path. Peony plants are visible in the beds and emerging in the pathways. Volunteers from the Rosendale Historical Society have embarked on a rehabilitation project to restore the Windmill Garden and open it to the public as a historical display garden, using both extant plantings and favorite Sisson varieties of peonies. Existing peonies are in the process of being photographed, identified and moved back into restored beds. A total of 250 peony plants have been identified in the garden. The beds on the west side of the garden were restored in 2005 by the Rosendale Historical Society volunteers, with peony plants from those beds, pathways and the Home Garden re-situated in single rows at approximately three foot intervals. The beds and pathways on the east side of the garden are presently overgrown with grass and weeds, but include several large peony plants that will be moved back into rows as the beds are restored. The century old chain-link fence that enclosed the garden in recent years has been removed and a white picket fence is being installed in its place by the Rosendale Historical Society.

The lot contains three original structures, built between 1929 and 1930 by Jesse Phillips, Wilbur Sisson's assistant and eventual owner of the property after Sisson's death in 1950. These are all constructed of fieldstone harvested from the foundations of the Rosendale Methodist Church and the Rosendale State Bank when they were moved in the mid-twenties.¹

The windmill that gave the garden its name sits centrally in the foreground of the lot, 43 feet from the Main Street boundary. It is a round, fieldstone structure in a rustic style, twenty-one and one half feet in circumference and eight and one half feet in height. It is topped with a square concrete slab which supports a two foot high stone gabled roof, surrounded by a narrow band of decorative wood trim. A narrow wooden door (twenty inches in width and five feet in height) gives access to the interior on the east side of the structure. The original Gothic-style black metal hardware on the door has been recently repainted. The door and all other wood decorative elements of the structure have also been repainted in their original blue. Three small windows of differing dimensions and sizes are installed in the thick walls. Flat narrow stones project about nine inches from the sides of the exterior at random intervals. The blue frame pinwheel above the door consists of four, fifty three inch long wooden sails. A three by four foot stone extension from the base of the west side of the windmill at a height of twenty inches, presently contains garden soil but was once used as a small goldfish pool.² The water circulation

¹ Mrs. Milo (Harriet) Scheid and Mrs. John (Carrie) Griffiths, *Village of Rosendale, Wisconsin, 1847-1974* (Appleton, Wisconsin: J. & J. Printing, 1975).

² Betty Dahlke. Interview with Lee Somerville, March 21, 2006. On file in the Rosendale Historical Society archives.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 3

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

system is still evident in the metal pipe and concrete spout protruding from the windmill.

The original gateway entrance to the complex of gardens is on the northeast edge of this lot and opens directly from Main Street. Two rustic fieldstone posts, three feet apart and four feet high are topped with concrete slabs. A wooden, heavily weathered Gothic-style gable roof stretches over the gateway from post to post, and a white swinging wooden gate connects them. A single modern cement step-down step, installed after recent road work raised the Main Street sidewalk, gives access to the gateway.

The simple small stone marker which was the third structure built by Jesse Phillips marks the southeast boundary of the garden. It is 38 inches in height and 18 inches square, and constructed of fieldstone topped with a concrete slab.

The windmill has retained its original integrity, with the intact architectural and decorative elements noted in the period photographs reproduced in this nomination. The original gateway entrance and the marker on the south-east corner of the property also retain much of their integrity.

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**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 8 Page 1

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

Statement of Significance³

The Windmill Garden, one of several former display areas of Sisson's Peony Gardens, is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the area of commerce. It is an important intact symbol of the success of the enterprising spirit that typified the agricultural specialty niche market in Wisconsin during the early part of the 20th century. Since its establishment in 1928, the Windmill Garden served as the main entrance to the nurseries and display gardens comprising Sisson's Peony Gardens, and was a featured site for visitors, containing numerous varieties of peony plants. Its visible entrance on Rosendale's Main Street contributed to the distinctive identity of the village, while the success of the commercial operation enhanced the local economy.⁴

The period of significance for Sisson's Peony Gardens extends through 1968, thus warranting an assessment of the property with regard to Criteria consideration G. The traditional opening of the gardens to visitors during blooming season was a long-standing custom initiated by Wilbur Sisson in 1929, which continued until the gardens closed in 1988. The importance and popularity of the gardens was acknowledged in 1968 when Governor Warren Knowles honored Wilbur Sisson posthumously, by proclaiming the week of June 16-22nd 1968 "Peony Week" in Wisconsin.⁵ An annual Peony Festival was inaugurated that same year by the Rosendale Lion's Club, and continued until 1982.⁶

The 1968 proclamation is considered to be integral to the historical significance of the gardens, uniting the business with the community, and recognizing the importance of the commercial enterprise to the state of Wisconsin. Furthermore, the annual festival was closely intertwined with the commercial success of Sisson's Peony Gardens, reflected in the sale of plants and flowers. The period of

³ Much of the information in the following section was either derived from or taken verbatim from "Sisson's Peony Gardens: A Determination of Eligibility Form" prepared for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation by Tracy Schnell and Lena L. Sweeten, Heritage Research Ltd, Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, December 1998.

⁴ *Sisson's Peonies*. Retail price list 1936-7.

⁵ The text of the proclamation reads as follows: "WHEREAS, fifty years ago in 1918, Mr. W.A. Sisson received his first peony plants which led to the development of the famous Sisson's Peony Gardens of Rosendale, Wisconsin; and WHEREAS, these peony plants have further enhanced the beauty of the Rosendale area and of Wisconsin, and have provided enjoyment for thousands of flower lovers throughout the State; and WHEREAS, the height of the peony's bloom comes during the month of June; NOW THEREFORE, I, WARREN P. KNOWLES, Governor of the State of Wisconsin, do hereby proclaim the week of June 16 through 22, 1968 as PEONY WEEK in the State of Wisconsin." The original framed proclamation can be seen at the Rosendale Historical Society offices, Rosendale, Wisconsin.

⁶ Scheid and Griffiths, *Village of Rosendale*, 274.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 2

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

significance therefore extends from the year the Windmill Garden opened in 1928, until 1968, although the business remained in operation until 1988.

Cultural and Historical Context

The general history of the Village of Rosendale is discussed in several sources, including Westphal's *Yesterday, Today & Forever*, Scheid and Griffiths *Village of Rosendale, Wisconsin 1847-1974*, and McKenna's *Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, Past and Present*.

Rosendale is situated in northwestern Fond du Lac County, which was established in 1839 in east-central Wisconsin. The first known settler in the community, Samuel Sanborn, arrived in 1844 from Waukesha County. Approximately 40 families had reached the area when the township of Rosendale was created two years later. The community of Rosendale was formed shortly thereafter in the southern part of Section 35. In 1848, with the creation of Springvale Township from a portion of Rosendale, the village straddled the township line, partially extending into Section 2 of Springvale. Most of the community's early settlers were from New England and the Mid-Atlantic states; however, after the Civil War, contingents of German settlers began to arrive as well. According to *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin* (CRM), the state was actively promoting immigration at this time, particularly through its generous land policies. Land-seeking German settlers typically chose sparsely populated areas with agricultural promise that allowed them to establish cohesive communities and to acquire small farmsteads.⁷

Agriculture played a leading role in the settlement's early history. As a result of glaciation, Springvale and Rosendale townships are composed of relatively level land with fertile soil and moderately wooded sections. The west branch of the Fond du Lac River provides a water source along the eastern and southern portions of Rosendale Township, while Springvale received its name for the prolific number of springs and streams within its boundaries. Farmers in the Rosendale vicinity organized the Fond du Lac County Agricultural and Mechanical Society in July 1852, and held their first fair at Rosendale that

⁷ Barbara Wyatt, ed. *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, vol. 1: Settlement (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, Historic Preservation Division, 1986), 2/5;
Emajean Westphal, *Yesterday, Today & Forever: A Pictorial History of Rosendale, Wisconsin and 100 Years of Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Ripon: Ripon Community Printers 1984), 57;
Scheid and Griffiths, *Village of Rosendale*, 28;
Maurice McKenna, ed. *Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, Past and Present*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Western Historical Co., 1880) 55, 276-277.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 3

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

same year. As was typical of many Wisconsin settlements in the mid-1800s, farmers cultivated wheat as their first crop. By the 1880s a more diversified approach had been adopted.⁸ While grain crops continued to be a significant component, cattle, hog and sheep raising occupied a growing niche in the local agricultural community. In 1864, Chester Hazen, a New York dairyman who had settled in Springvale township, established Wisconsin's first commercial cheese factory in Ladoga, five miles south of Rosendale, quickly followed by others such as George Curtis who built a cheese factory in Rosendale. (In 1870, Hazen helped to found the first Dairymen's Association in Wisconsin.) Dairying quickly assumed a leading role in Rosendale's economic development, as in the entire state. Potatoes, root crops, fruit, and grasses were also commercially produced in Rosendale and Springvale townships.⁹

In 1872, Rosendale's inclusion on a Sheboygan and Mississippi Railroad route guaranteed the community's success as an agricultural center. The company had been incorporated twenty years earlier and owned a line that extended from Sheboygan to Princeton, Wisconsin. In 1897, the Sheboygan and Mississippi was absorbed by the Chicago and Northwestern, one of the largest railroad companies in the state, thus providing Rosendale with access to numerous distant markets for its locally produced agricultural products.¹⁰

The railroad's proximity and the success of local farmers provided the impetus for commercial expansion in the village of Rosendale. By the mid-1890s, the community included an assortment of enterprises, including a hotel, railroad station, farmers' insurance company, wagon maker, post office, harness maker, two general stores, two blacksmiths, three physicians and five creameries, with two grain elevators located alongside the depot. Early industry in Rosendale also depended upon agricultural interests. For example, at the turn of the century, Otto Siebenhaar began designing and manufacturing manure spreaders at a small factory in the community.¹¹ This pattern of agriculturally-based economic development continued in Rosendale for decades. In 1923, the Central Wisconsin Canneries built a canning factory in the village and planted 2,000 acres of peas in the surrounding vicinity. The factory remained in operation for more than fifty years. (It was operated by Green Giant

⁸ Barbara Wyatt, ed. *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, vol. 1: Settlement (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, Historic Preservation Division, 1986), 2/5.

⁹ McKenna, 137, 276-277; Scheid and Griffiths, 40; Ray Thornton and Ruth Shaw Worthing, *A Photographer's History of Fond du Lac County, City and Townships* (Fond du Lac: Badger Freund, Inc., 1977) 150; Wyatt, 1:2/5.

¹⁰ Scheid and Griffiths, *Village of Rosendale*, 22-23; Michael Mentzer, *Fond du Lac County, a Gift of the Glacier* (Fond du Lac, Wis.: Fond du Lac County Historical Society, 1991), 35.

¹¹ *Wisconsin State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1895-1896* (Chicago: R.L. Polk & Co., 1895), 922.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 4

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

between 1940 and 1970, and is the present site of Power Packaging Inc.)

Clearly, agriculture has historically formed the base of Rosendale's economy, as commercial enterprises were established to meet the needs of farm families and to process and ship agricultural products. Farmers in the vicinity have primarily engaged in crop cultivation and livestock-raising, both of which are typical of the majority of Wisconsin farmers. However, since the mid-1800s, commercial growers in all regions of Wisconsin have pursued specialty agricultural production to benefit from advantageous markets. For example, ginseng, hemp, mint, and small fruit cultivation figured prominently in the local economy and agricultural development of some Wisconsin communities. In Rosendale, Sisson's Peony Gardens, which specialized in the cultivation of numerous varieties of the flower, occupied an important market niche for decades. Established in the early 1920s, Sisson's consisted of up to four acres of gardens and a showroom, employed twenty people during peak season, and shipped its products across the nation.¹²

Resource-specific history

Wilbur A. Sisson was born in 1869 on a farm near West Rosendale. He grew up in Ripon where he attended school and later, Ripon College. He continued to live with his parents in Ripon as an adult, and established a typewriter rental business in 1913, while managing the Western Union Telegraph office. His gardening hobby of growing gladioli and iris was augmented by a gift from a sister of what he called "cheaper varieties" of peony roots in 1915.¹³ When his mother died in 1918, he resigned from his job and moved to Rosendale to live with his widowed sister, Ida Pinch, bringing his beloved plants with him and planting them in her back yard. He later named this area "The Home Garden." His office records indicate that by 1920 he was ordering peonies, gladioli and iris from national and international nurserymen and in 1923 had enough plants to donate a sizeable memorial bed (52 varieties) to Riverside Cemetery in Oshkosh as a memorial to his parents, and to make a similar donation to the city of Galt, Ontario in memory of a college friend. Although he continued to operate his typewriter rental business as a sideline, his emerging interest in the nursery enterprise is reflected in his active membership in the American Peony Society and the Wisconsin State Horticultural Society during this period. In 1925, he listed himself as a nurseryman in Polk's Directory.¹⁴ His nephew and namesake, Wilbur Lawson, became Sisson's partner, and his farm "Elmway", situated just north of the village of

¹² Wyatt, Barbara, ed. *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, vol. 2: Agriculture (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, Historic Preservation Division, 1986), 7/8-7/10.

¹³ Mrs. W.A. Lawson (Lura), "Peony Time is Here," *Wisconsin Horticulture* (June 1928).

¹⁴ *Polk's Wisconsin State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1924-1925* (Chicago: R.L. Polk, 1924).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 5

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

Rosendale, provided a four acre outdoor nursery for the expanding business.

Papers presented and published by Sisson, Lawson and Lawson's wife, Lura, at horticultural meetings between 1923 and 1928 not only discuss peony cultivation and varieties, but also detail the background of the emergence of their business.¹⁵ In 1928, Sisson's Peony Gardens advertised in *Wisconsin Horticulture* for the first time, a tradition that continued for at least thirty years.¹⁶ The first text-only advertisement stated: "our aim is to make Rosendale the peony hub of the world."¹⁷ Succeeding advertisements in this monthly journal include a photograph of Sisson and Lawson amongst the peonies. The same photograph formed the cover of the first Sisson's catalog published in 1928 which listed 520 named varieties of peony plants, grown at Elmway Farms and available for purchase at varied prices. The catalog also advertised the availability of several varieties of gladioli and iris; in that same year Wilbur Sisson had been elected vice-president of the newly established Wisconsin Gladiolus Society.¹⁸

Sisson wrote the weekly "Garden Clinic" column for the Fond du Lac *Daily Commonwealth* during this time, and published occasional articles in regional and national magazines on gardening and related topics. Donations of plants and cut flowers to worthy organizations and individuals are documented in his files, as is his impatience with people who did not treat his "family of peonies" as he wished.¹⁹

In a 1928 article, he described himself as a "grower" of peonies, gladioli and iris, rather than an "introducer" – one who creates new varieties – which he said was frustrating, slow and hard work "unless their families pave(d) the way for them."²⁰ His philosophy is clearly expressed in the same article, in which he wrote: "I do not like to write and I don't like to talk, but I do like to crawl around the plants in my gardens and work with roots and bulbs and so have learned a few things." Records from the time period indicate that Sisson was selling to a wide variety of regional and national customers, with large orders shipped to New York, Virginia and other states. His tax records between 1924 and 1935 record annual sales between \$600 and \$2100.

¹⁵ Wilbur Sisson, "How to Grow the Peony," *Minnesota Horticulturist* 51, no. 10 (October 1923), 300-303.

Wilbur Lawson, "The Peony," *Transactions of the Wisconsin State Horticultural Society* (July 1923), 136-142.

Mrs. W.A. (Lura) Lawson, "Peony Time is Here," *Wisconsin Horticulture* (June 1928).

¹⁶ Henry Rahmlow, *The History of Seventy-Five Years Active Service* (Madison: Wisconsin Horticultural Society, 1943).

¹⁷ Sisson's Peonies. Advertisement in *Wisconsin Horticulture* (January 1928), 120.

¹⁸ Rahmlow, 1943.

¹⁹ Wilbur Sisson, "My Peony Family," *Garden Flowers* 1, no. 1 (February 1928), 6-13.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 7.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 6

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

In 1927-1928, Sisson purchased the lot behind his sister's house on Main Street, naming it "The Memorial Garden." The next year he bought the lot adjoining her house to the south and hired Jesse Phillips, a young graduate of Ripon College, as his assistant. According to a local resident, Sisson said to his new employee: "I want a windmill here," to which Phillips replied "I'll build you one." The idea may have come from a Dutch catalog in Sisson's collection showing a windmill on its front cover.²¹

Building the windmill, gateposts and markers became Phillips first job, followed by construction of the decorative white picket fence that once enclosed the property. The 1934 Sisson's catalog not only featured the windmill on its cover, but also announced that "many peony varieties are on show in the Windmill Garden."²² Entry to Sisson's Peony Gardens led on foot through the Main Street gateway to the windmill, where visitors signed a registration book inside.

Wilbur Lawson sold his farm, Elmway, and moved into Rosendale during World War II. In spite of the loss of the nursery acreage, Sisson's Peony Gardens prospered, supported during the lean years of the war by the continuing success of the typewriter rental business, and an additional sideline selling Estey organs "for homes, schools, hospitals etc.", used by "The Dionne Quints exclusively."²³

The importance of Jesse Phillips to the success of the business cannot be overlooked. Phillips, born in 1902, lost his mother at an early age and was brought up by aunts, first in Oshkosh and later in Rosendale, where he attended school. After graduating from Ripon College, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, reputedly visiting every state but two.²⁴ He returned to Rosendale to visit his aunt in 1928, and was immediately hired as an assistant by Wilbur Sisson. Phillips and his wife Marie settled in a home on Main Street, opposite the peony gardens, and he continued as Sisson's assistant and eventually his successor in both the typewriter and peony business until his own retirement in 1977.

While Wilbur Sisson's primary interest was growing and caring for his plants, and supervising the business, Jesse Phillips was interested in breeding peonies, and is recognized by the American Peony Society as introducing three new varieties, registered by the society in 1953. These were "Tinka Phillips" (double blush pink variety), named for his daughter, born in 1942; "Kathryn E. Manuel"

²¹ Velthuys' Gladioli, Holland. Betty Dahlke. Interview with Lee Somerville, March 21, 2006.

²² *Sisson's Peonies Retail Price List, 1929, 1932, 1936.*

²³ Rahmlow, *The History of Seventy-Five Years Active Service* (Madison: Wisconsin Horticultural Society, 1943).

²⁴ Emajejan Westphal. Interview with Lee Somerville, March 21, 2006. On file in the Rosendale Historical Society archives.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 7

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

(single, white with pink tints), named for the aunt who had raised him; and "Owen F. Hughes" (single light pink), named after his grandfather.²⁵ "Tinka Phillips" is available in specialty catalogs today, and several survive in Rosendale gardens.

Jesse Phillips inherited the business on Sisson's death in 1950. He capitalized on its continuing success by purchasing additional acreage adjoining the Memorial Garden, thus creating an interlocking four acre garden within the village boundaries, intermixed with residences, commercial buildings and the Methodist Church. During blooming season, he delivered vases of fresh peonies to every business in town, and replenished the bouquets as needed. Churches held special events on the two "Peony Sundays" in June and, according to a local resident, the whole town was perfumed with the scent of peonies during this time.²⁶ Bus groups and crowds of individual visitors arrived in the village to wander through the gardens and order plants and cut flowers. The local Lion's Club organized a Peony Festival which included the crowning of the annual "Peony Queen." The growing importance of Sisson's Peony Gardens to the village culminated in the 1968 proclamation by Governor Warren Knowles. The business continued to prosper and thrive under Phillip's leadership and for a number of years was an important employer in the community, hiring up to 22 seasonal staff each year to help with shipping, disbudding and garden work.

After Phillips' retirement in 1979, ongoing problems led to the gradual decline of the business. The Peony Festival was cancelled after 1982, and, in 1988, Sisson's Peony Gardens closed its gates and sold most of its acreage for home and apartment development.

The peony

The genus *Peonia* includes up to 40 species, including both herbaceous and tree varieties. Its popularity in Europe since the early 18th century, and the United States since the 19th century, is due to its longevity, hardiness, disease resistance, ease of growth, and most importantly the beauty of its flowers. The "piney" was particularly popular in Midwestern gardens, often being given a place of honor on the front lawn.

Typically the herbaceous peony blooms in the Midwest in early June, producing shades of red, pink or white flowers on upright thick stems with shiny leaves. The tree peony, actually a shrub with woody

²⁵ Greta M. Kessenich. *Peonies: Favorites of the Greek Gods and Chinese Emperors: History of the Peonies and Their Originations* (Detroit: American Peony Society, 1976).

²⁶ Emajean Westphal. Interview with Lee Somerville, March 21, 2006. On file in the Rosendale Historical Society archives.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 8

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

stems blooms earlier and has a wider variety flower color. *Paeonia albiflora* is known to have originated in China, and is thought to have gradually spread to Europe, over a period of thousands of years. *Paeonia officinalis* is thought to be of European origin, and was listed in Hill's British Herbal of 1756 as a medicinal plant that cured nightmares.²⁷ The two interbred over the years and according to the American Peony Society, formed in 1902, there was a need to untangle the complicated and confusing lists of the thousands of different named varieties offered by breeders. The Society spent several years researching this with the help of European growers. The 1929 publication of the American Peony Society lists "Chinese Peonies" as the favorites in this country and classifies them according to single, double and Japanese. They are further divided by color and described by name. According to Sisson and Lawson, popular varieties in the 1920s included *Festiva Maxima* (white), *Edulus Superba* (pink) and *Felix Crouse* (red). Both Sisson and Mrs. Lawson suggest numerous other varieties for growers in the articles referenced below.

Conclusion

While Wilbur Sisson transformed his hobby into a practical commercial business between 1918 and 1928, the 40 year period between 1928 and 1968, the year that Sisson's Peony Gardens achieved state-wide recognition, is the significant time period for the development of this commercial enterprise. Sisson's successful business strategy of growing high quality plants and marketing them on a regional and national basis continued long after his death in 1950, when Jesse Phillips succeeded him. Phillips not only maintained the original commercial nursery, but expanded the site and developed new registered peony varieties. The high reputation of Sisson's Peony Gardens was the result of the contributions of both Wilbur Sisson and Jesse Phillips who created and operated a nationally respected nursery whose specialty niche market success impacted not only the surrounding community but the entire state.

The Windmill Garden, the remaining intact fragment of the original four acre site that made up Sisson's Peony Gardens, is an important representation of the development of a successful private commercial enterprise that benefited the surrounding community for decades. It typifies the initiative shown by Wisconsin agriculturists in creating unusual specialty crop niches in the early part of the 20th century.

From the time of its construction in 1928, the Windmill Garden was one of the most important

²⁷ James Boyd, ed. *Peonies; the Manual of the American Peony Society* (Philadelphia, PA: American Peony Society, 1928).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 9

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

elements of Sisson's Peony Gardens, highlighting the commercial aspect of the business with its display garden, used to promote the popularity and sale of peonies. Its location on Main Street was a highly visible advertisement for the business, and the main entrance to the rest of the gardens. It alone has retained most of its integrity, including original structures, materials and workmanship, exhibited by the windmill, gate and marker on the site, and the approximately 250 peony plants that still survive in their original and restored beds.

In conclusion, the significance of Sisson's Peony Gardens, under Criterion A at a local level in the area of commerce is documented by the success of the commercial enterprise throughout the mid-twentieth century. The argument for extending the significant dates to 1968 and including the site under Criteria G consideration is the continued seamless operation and expansion of the business through change of ownership in 1950, and its subsequent significance to the commercial, agricultural and social structure of the community of Rosendale.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 1

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 2

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 3

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 10 Page 1

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

The nominated boundary corresponds to the legal parcel of the property described below.

Lot One(1) of Certified Survey Map No. 6792, recorded at the Fond du Lac County Registry in Volume 47 of Certified Survey Maps on pages 89,89A, as Document No. 839123, and being part of the Southeast $\frac{1}{4}$ Southwest $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 35, Township 16 North, Range 15 East, Village of Rosendale, Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin.

The area is a rectangle, 67.36m (221 ft.) by 18.3 m (60 ft.) the long center axis of which is perpendicular to Main Street/STH 26. The partial lot on the north-east side of the property (the original "Home Garden") is non-contributing, and therefore not included. The south boundary coincides with the existing property line. The east boundary was extended further to the east to the existing edge of the Main Street sidewalk in order to include the stone marker and gate entrance and to provide for their appropriate setting.

Boundary Justification.

The nominated parcel corresponds to the extent of the Windmill Garden established by Wilbur Sisson in 1928. The boundary includes all features associated with the garden. While the gardens were much larger during the historic period (as indicated on attached site map), the other areas no longer retain integrity.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin

Section photos Page 1

SISSON'S PEONY GARDENS,
VILLAGE OF ROSENDALE
FOND DU LAC COUNTY, WISCONSIN
Date: March 2006
Negatives at the Wisconsin Historical Society

Photo #1 of 4
Taken by Emajean Westphal
View of Windmill looking West

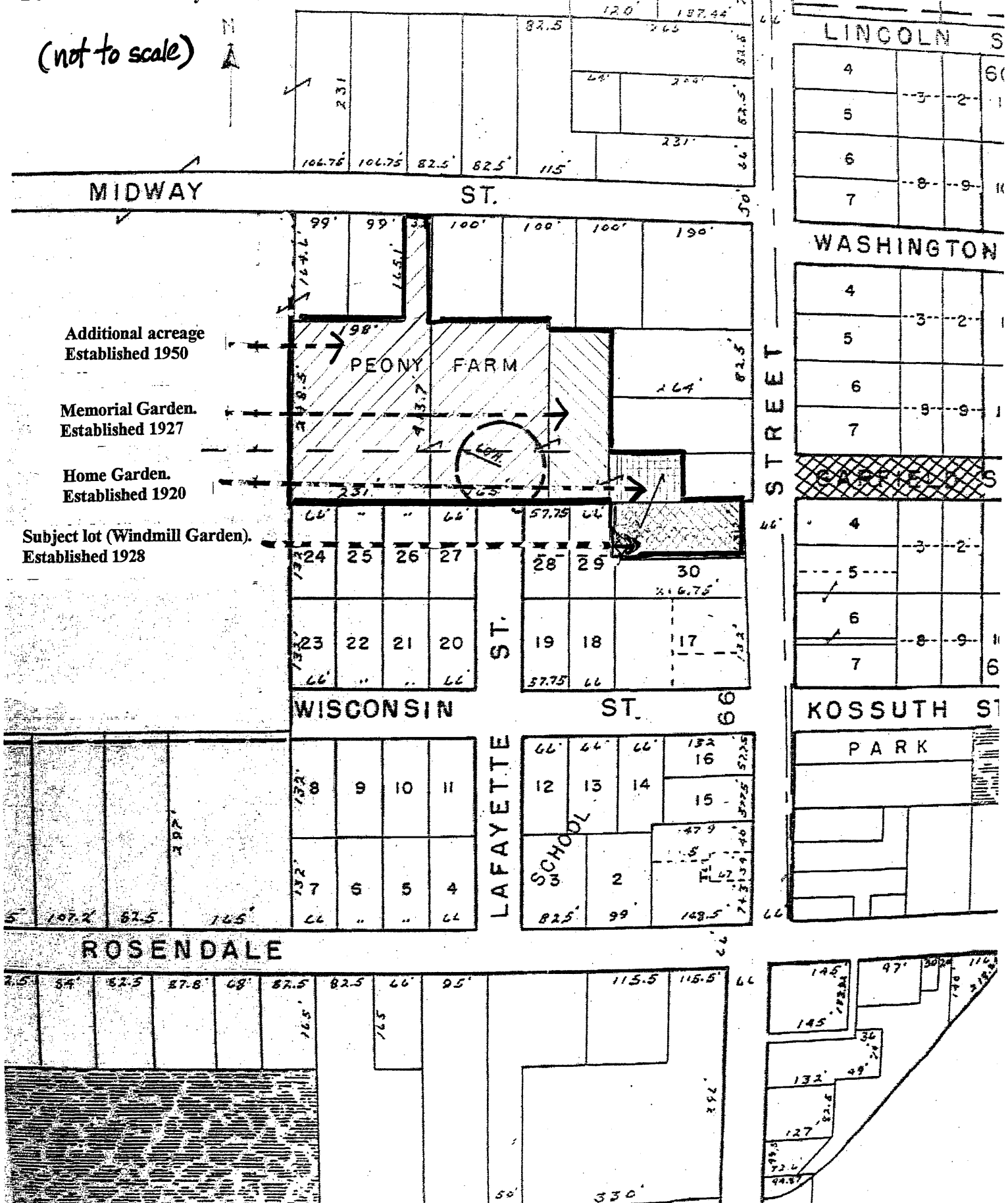
Photo #2 of 4
Taken by Lee Somerville
View of Gateway to West

Photo #3 of 4
Taken by Emajean Westphal
View of Gardens to West

Photo #4 of 4
Taken by Lee Somerville
View of Gardens to East, showing contributing structures (stone marker, windmill and gate)

Sisson's Peony Gardens
 Village of Rosendale
 Fond du Lac County, WI

(not to scale)



Additional acreage
 Established 1950

Memorial Garden.
 Established 1927

Home Garden.
 Established 1920

Subject lot (Windmill Garden).
 Established 1928

PEONY FARM

ST.

WISCONSIN ST.

ST.

LAFAYETTE

SCHOOL

ROSENDALE

LINCOLN

WASHINGTON

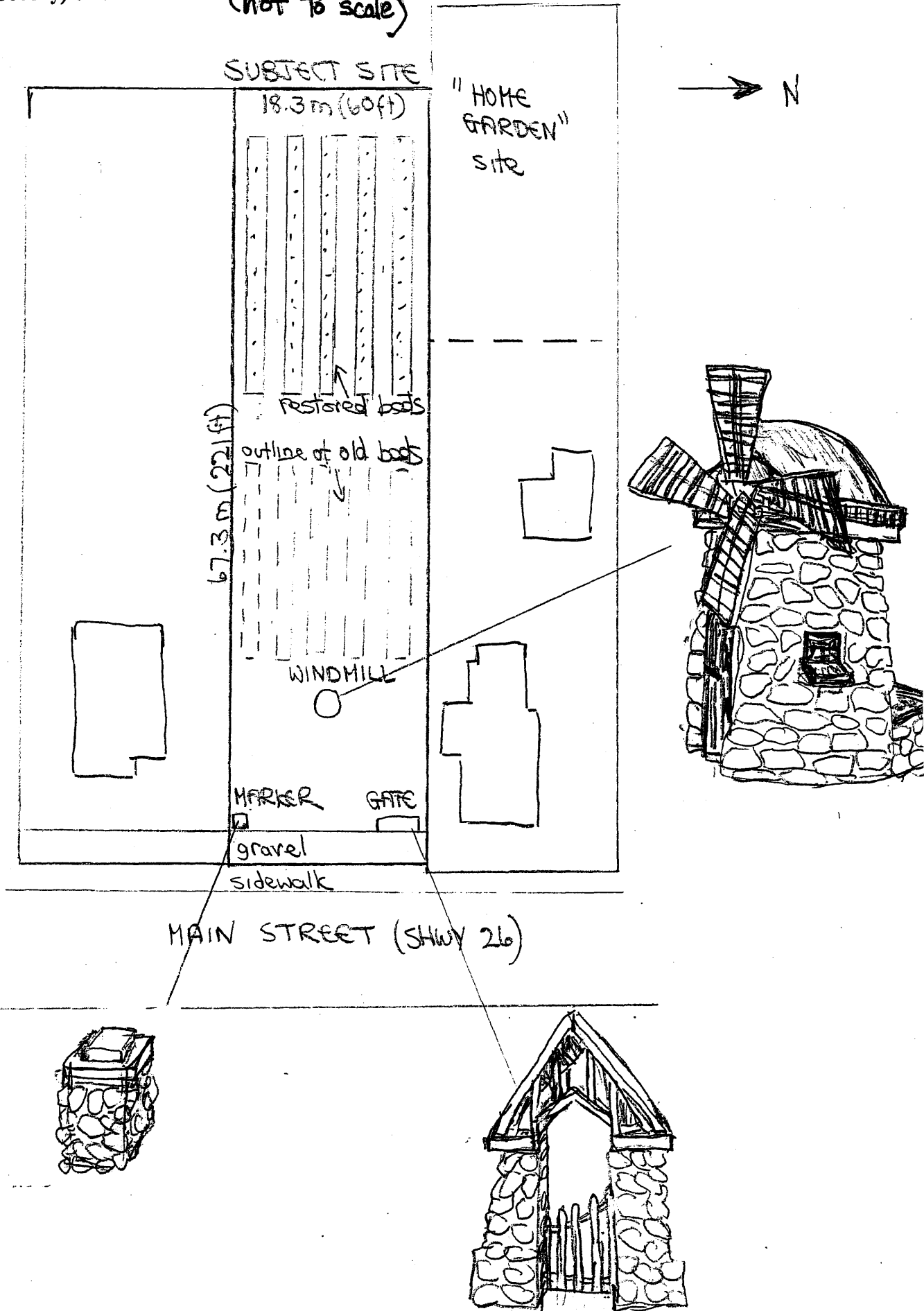
STREET

KOSSUTH ST

PARK

Source: "Tentative" Official Map for the Village of Rosendale. Sheet 1. October 1958. On file in the Archives Room, Wisconsin Historical Society (uncatalogued community maps - alphabetical)

SKETCH MAP
(not to scale)



Sisson's Peony Gardens
 Village of Rosendale
 Fond du Lac County, WI

WISCONSIN HORTICULTURE JAN 1928

We Specialize in .

**PEONIES
 IRISES
 and GLADIOLUS**

With emphasis on peonies. We grow 600 varieties including all the standards and the latest introductions.

We have the 13 new "Brands" seedlings priced at \$50.00 per root. Cannot be sold for less until 1928. Also Alice Harding, the new French white, introduced at two hundred dollars per root.

Our aim is to make Rosendale the peony hub of the world.

We retail only

May we start you out in the peony business?

If you wish to add to your collection write us or head your auto this way.

Intersection Highways 23 and 26

SISSON'S PEONIES

Rosendale, Wisconsin

Memorial Peony Bed at Riverside Cemetery, Oshkosh.

WISCONSIN HORTICULTURE FEB 1928



W. A. Sisson W. A. Lawson

Sisson's Peonies

Rosendale, Wisconsin

Specializing in

Peonies—Irises and Gladiolus

Let us start you in the business or send you additions to your collection

Write or head your auto this way.
 Intersection Highways 23 and 26

Memorial Peony bed at
 Riverside Cemetery, Oshkosh

WISCONSIN HORTICULTURE MAY 1928

SISSON'S

PEONIES—

International reputation. Our peony roots correctly planted and cared for will outlive the owner.

TYPEWRITERS—

All makes including portables rented. Largest rental service in the state. We teach "Touch Typewriting" through booklet in your home.

ORGANS—

Peonies inspire music so we added a line of portable organs in all sizes for sale or rent.

Write

SISSON'S

ROSENDALE, WIS.

Hi-ways 23-26 intersection

We have advertised in Wisconsin Horticulture since 1928

*The Dionne QUINS use our
 Estey organs exclusively*



SMALL SIZE ORGAN
 for homes, schools, hospitals, etc.

We have a two manual organ
 with chimes on exhibition.

Sisson's Peony Gardens
Village of Rosendale
Fond du Lac County, WI



WINDMILL ca 1930. Source: Rosendale Historical Society archives