

There was frost here on Coe Creek this morning, and we were glad we had covered the tender plants in our unheated greenhouse. But, there was no damage outside, either, as far as we could determine. Last year, lilac bushes didn't even try to flower—they were blackened much earlier in a heavy freeze. This morning, though, every lilac in the area must be in full bloom. The distinctive perfume of the lilac has permeated the entire area. And, a bouquet from the bush in our yard sits on the windowsill, ensuring that our cabin, too, is scented with lilac.

We made a trip to Leroy Milling this forenoon, a distance of about 16 kilometers. Lilacs were blooming along the way, and on our return trip, I counted the bushes in flower.

I have read—and, observation confirms it—that almost every old homestead had a lilac bush. Some elementary archeological work has resulted in a theory that most lilac bushes were planted in front of or near to the outhouse, perhaps to shield it from public view.

That wasn't the case here on this place, though. I know where the outhouse stood, and the lilac bush is nowhere near it. So, perhaps, my ancestors were far enough from the road that they did not worry about the position of either outhouse or lilac bush. In fact, the lilac bush is in the same vicinity as the Wealthy apple trees that were destroyed in a storm years ago.

I probably missed a good many lilac bushes on the way home from Leroy this morning, but I did end up with a few statistics, suspect though they may be in terms of complete accuracy. I counted 106 separate bushes, large and small, of old-fashioned, traditional "lilac-colored" lilacs. In addition there were at least eight homes that had lilac hedges, although all had grown far larger than a trimmed hedge. Most were several feet high and full of blossoms.

Then, too, there were fifteen bushes of white lilacs. I also counted eleven deep purple lilacs, especially beautiful when mixed in a bouquet with the white and lavender varieties.

My favorites, though, are the "regular" old time lilacs that can be seen on nearly every abandoned homestead in the area. The lost dreams, the failures in early days, the places that were left by people who encountered difficulties along the way—the bushes on these old farms tell the real story of settlement of marginal farming country. Most of these stories will remain unknown to us. And yet, an otherwise unremarkable bush that explodes in color and fragrance during late May—if we don't experience a hard, but not unusual frost at the wrong time—is, I guess, the gift from those past occupants of these hardscrabble farms.