"CALL FITCH FOR FRESH FLOWERS"

TANGULA CARTER
8TH GRADE

MIDDLE SCHOOL (JUNIOR DIVISION)
MAY 1, 1982

CARTER G. WOODSON MIDDLE SCHOOL
10720 Southview Street
Houston, Texas
77047

Sponsor
Mrs. Willie Lee Gay

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"CALL FITCH FOR FRESH FLOWERS"

"People are going to continue to buy flowers as long as they live. They are going to buy flowers for weddings, funerals, sickness, and special days. They bought them during the depression and they are still buying them today, even though they are expensive. Somehow people just manage to buy flowers." Pearl Fitch, the former owner of the oldest black floral shop in Houston, spoke these words with the soft warm laughter of someone who understands what flowers mean to people.

Pearl with her late husband, Nathaniel H. Fitch, opened the floral shop with its own greenhouse in 1936 at 1811 Dowling, but the "roots" of their business go back to around 1932. It was during this period that American cities were experiencing the Great Depression. The depression was very apparent in Houston where the Fitches lived; however, Houston's economic problems were not as severe as other cities. Although it was said that business prospects in Houston were good, this was not the time to venture out in a business, especially a black Texan.

Loans for businesses were far and between, if any, because small Houston banks had to close and major Houston banks were having "anxious moments" calling in their loans. Bankers Jesse H. Jones and Joseph T. Meyer "saved two very large and prestigious banks" and perhaps many others in the city.

Fortunately, Pearl and Nathaniel had chosen a business which required their own resources and very little capital. They didn't have to worry about securing a loan and their floral business stemmed from planting and growing flowers at their home on Bremond. Because Nathaniel and Pearl both liked flowers, they had a common interest which brought them prosperity and enjoyment. It was this common interest which led to their courtship and later marriage.
The courtship between Nathaniel and Pearl Fitch began in 1924 while she was attending high school at Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College. Nathaniel, who was helping his brother through school, would occasionally visit Prairie View and it was on one of these visits that he met Pearl.

During the same year, Pearl received her certificate and returned to her hometown, Austin, Texas. She and Nathaniel kept in touch.

Pearl became quite busy teaching school at Blanco, Texas and going to summer school at Samuel Huston in Austin, Texas. Later, she taught in a small community near Elgin, Texas. After three years of teaching school, Pearl decided she didn't particularly care for teaching. Meanwhile, Nathaniel tried to persuade Pearl to marry him, but Pearl decided that she wanted to pursue a career in nursing.

She applied as a student nurse at White Memorial Hospital in Los Angeles. Due to her "light complexion," she was accepted and assigned a room with a Chinese girl. Pearl became enthusiastically involved in her studies, but she didn't do as well as she should have grade wise. "Perhaps this was due to the fact that I had not attended college long enough for preparatory purposes," says Pearl. On the other hand, she encountered many discriminatory practices. She worked very hard at the hospital taking care of patients, emptying bed pans and going beyond the "call of duty." But she was still criticized and accused of not doing enough. As she told this story, tears swelled in her eyes, not the tears of weakness, but perhaps the tears of mixed emotions as she thought about her trials and those of her parents. Then, she added this bit of family history by saying:

My father was a slave and a houseboy. His sister was often beaten by the master. He lived in Tennessee. My father played a part in history by fighting in the Civil War.
After he moved to Texas, he helped to haul granite to build the capitol. My father was much older than my mother. She was born on March 1, 1863. Since she was the oldest in an adopted family, she did most of the heavy work. When the adopted parents died, she was not given her share of the property. My mother learned how to read and write and she taught other freed slaves. She even taught my father. They were both hard workers and wanted all twelve of their children to receive a good education.

Although her parents did not have a formal education, they did everything possible to encourage and help their children pursue an education.

Pearl wanted to live up to her parents' dreams for their children, but after three months of hard work and discouragement in nursing school, she decided to leave Los Angeles and come to Houston, Texas.

Being ambitious, Pearl began advertising in the paper to do home nursing. Most of the people who hired her were Italians and elderly whites. For about three years she was busy with her nursing and she didn't see Nathaniel, who was also living in Houston at this time. Finally, their paths crossed and Pearl found that Nathaniel had been busy trying to improve himself and his financial position. He had taken a correspondence course and passed it. In addition, he had taken a civil service examination and was working as a clerk at the post office. Nathaniel was also buying a brick veneer home at 3702 Bremond. He again asked Pearl to marry him. This time she accepted. The couple went to Galveston and married in 1931.

For about three years the couple continued working on their respective jobs. Then, Nathaniel began talking about "going into business for himself." Since he liked to take pictures, Nathaniel suggested that they go into "photography business" but Pearl had no interest in taking pictures. The two discussed
this idea extensively and searched for a common interest. Finally, they decided to go into "flower business," because both loved nature and had lived close to the soil as children.

Nathaniel and Pearl began to "read up" on everything they could find about growing flowers. Nathaniel was especially interested in landscaping. In fact, he kept the dining room table scattered with books on landscaping. In 1934, Nathaniel built a small greenhouse behind their home. And this was the beginning of Fitch Floral Company originally named Leeland Park Floral.

They first started with all kinds of bedding plants. In addition, they began growing flowers on two extra lots next to their home. Since Nathaniel worked at nights, he would use his mornings to work in "the garden of flowers." Pearl "handled most of the greenhouse work."

The flowers in the garden began to blossom and were very plentiful, so plentiful that they decided to sell them. This was mainly Pearl's venture. She said:

During the evenings about 4:00 or 5:00, I would take the car over on the corner of Main and McGowan Streets - a busy route from town. I would place some cut flowers on top of the car and sell them for 25c or 50c a bunch. I sold marigolds, gladiolus, roses and all kinds of little flowers. Mixed flowers were sold for 25c and up. By 5:30, I had sold all my flowers and was on my way home.

To advertise her fresh flowers, she would donate them to churches and organizations for special occasions.

While Pearl was selling the garden flowers or cut flowers, Nathaniel was busy selling bedding plants and doing landscaping. By 1935, their business
had grown by "leaps and bounds" so they decided to build a larger greenhouse.

Nathaniel and Pearl chose a site on Dowling Street, the black business

district located in Third Ward, to set up their business. Recollections

of this business district by two native Houstonians who were teenagers revealed

the following types of black owned business:

- Taverns, drug stores, taxi lines, theaters, an ice cream
parlor, service stations, a garage, barbecue stands, beauty
parlors, a radio shop, dress maker, undertakers, dance halls or
night club, a saddle shop, a shoe shop, cafes, restaurants,
a beauty school, and a cleaning and pressing shop.

They also recalled other professional black businesses such as an
insurance agency, dentists and doctors' offices and a music studio, plus
several white and oriental businesses. These recollections cover about
seventeen blocks of the black business district. In 1929, a survey of the
types of black business enterprises in "thickly settled black Houston business
districts" revealed almost the same information as the recollections.

In a thinly settled section of the Dowling black business district,
Pearl and Nathaniel leased property from the Seventh Day Adventists Church.
They bought a two story house which Nathaniel wrecked. The lumber was hauled
to the site and a building was erected. It consisted of two bedrooms, a
bathroom, a kitchen, a workroom and a greenhouse. The front part included
a display room and a flower shop with the name, "Fitch Floral Company,"
printed on one of the windows.

When they opened the business, their venture was greeted with gloomy
predictions and apathy from a few of the businessmen in the community. One
businessman said, "You see those two people. They are going to starve to
death." However, the businessmen were not aware of the strong determination
Pearl and Nathaniel had.
The two had set goals to give "satisfaction to the customers" and provide services such as flower arrangements, wreaths, sprays, and landscaping. Nathaniel took care of the landscaping and Pearl took care of the floral arrangements. But Pearl did not know how to arrange flowers and she could not get any florists to show her. Although there were designing workshops held in Houston, Pearl could not attend because she was "colored." Finally, Pearl asked a white friend who had a greenhouse in the Heights area to show her how to arrange flowers. The lady agreed and Pearl watched her very carefully as she made a wreath and a spray. Afterwards, Pearl began looking at pictures and reading books and magazines about wreaths and sprays. From then on, she created and designed her own. She sold small sprays for $1.50 each and wreaths for $5.00 a piece.

During this time "most colored shops and white ones were using artificial flowers." Pearl was eager to learn, however, nobody would share the secret of making artificial flowers. She went to a floral shop on Gregg Street and asked the florist to show her how to make artificial flowers. The reply was "no." So, Pearl purchased some artificial carnations and roses from the florist and took them home. At home, she took the flowers apart and cut them up. Pearl looked at other patterns and bought materials from a five-and-ten cents store. From then on she was in business selling both artificial and real flowers.

The Fitches had a good supply of cut flowers because they had leased an acre of land on Almeda Road. The land had a well on it and the Fitches irrigated the land when it was necessary. They grew all kinds of flowers and some garden plants.

Since Nathaniel had retired from the post office, he had more time to spend working in the greenhouse and the flower garden. He also experimented with bedding plants and fertilizing the soil. He became very successful at
growing a variety of plants such as marigolds, gladiolus, daisies, feverfew, candytufts, etc. Pearl said, "One Easter we raised all of the flowers we sold but carnations and roses. We made a lot of money selling our own flowers." And the slogan, "Call Fitch for Fresh Flowers," was coined.

Nathaniel became well known as a "landscape gardener." "His personality advertised the business," says Pearl. "He was self-taught, self-educated and loved people." His personality attracted many customers who bought bedding plants for 10¢ a dozen and were given "little extras" by him and Pearl. The landscaping customers were mostly Jews. Later, blacks began to buy plants from the Fitches. Nathaniel landscaped schools, the Riverside National Bank and homes of prominent people in Houston.

While Nathaniel was busy with landscaping, Pearl was busy managing the floral business. She would spend long hours making floral arrangements while standing behind a meat box used as a refrigerator and counter. One day while Pearl was working a ball rolled into the shop. She looked up and there was a little girl about eight or nine standing in the doorway. With her friendly smile and soft-spoken voice, Pearl invited the little girl in. This little girl was Olivia L. Thompson. Olivia, whose mother had died three months before, developed a friendship with Pearl and began coming to the shop daily to help Pearl in the greenhouse.

Whenever Olivia had finished her work in the greenhouse, she would sit and watch Pearl design unique floral arrangements. One day Pearl was very busy and she asked Olivia to make a floral. Olivia did such a good job that Pearl decided to teach her floral designing. Olivia developed into an artistic designer and worked side by side with Pearl. On special occasions the two would work long hours, stopping only at intervals for one to rest while the other continued to work. Later, Olivia received a floral designing certificate signed by Pearl and Nathaniel.
Also, Olivia "traveled" with Nathaniel and Pearl to make deliveries and pick-up gray moss, pine cones and flowers. One of these "pick-ups" is very memorable, because Olivia recalls going to Tyler, Texas with Nathaniel to purchase some roses from Earl Campbell's mother.

For over 35 years, Olivia worked with the Fitch Floral Company off and on. Though she would sometimes go to work for other florists for more money, she always came back to the Fitches because they were so much like a family to her.

Lionel Stroud was another person who worked at Fitch Floral Company as a teenager. He, too, like Olivia felt a part of the Fitch family. He says that Pearl was more like a relative than an employer. She was very kind and would let him use her old Dodge car on weekends to take his date out. Recalling some of his training at the shop, Lionel said:

Roscoe Lofton, another young boy who worked at the shop, and I use to go to Harmon Park and pull the moss out of the trees. We would go back to the shop and use the moss for stuffing wreath frames made of wire. Then we would cover the back of the wreath with green crepe paper and designed flowers on top of the wreath. For baskets, we would take quart motor oil cans and cut the top out of them. Then we washed them and boiled them. I took clothes line wire and made the handles. Mashed wire was used inside the cans to hold the flowers. At first, we covered the outside of the cans with crepe paper and later we changed to foil.

"All of these ideas were Mrs. Fitch's and she was very creative and thrifty."

"Mrs. Fitch is quite a woman," says Lionel.
Pearl Fitch worked hard at being creative and kept abreast of the new artistic floral designs. Whenever the local wholesale florists held their annual workshops, Pearl was permitted to attend. At these workshops, she became familiar with seasonal flowers and floral designs.

However, Pearl was not satisfied with just attending wholesalers' designing workshops, so she decided to venture out and attend a workshop in another state. In March of 1946, she decided to attend the New York School of Floral Designing for a week. She was one of the first black women from the south to enroll in the school. At the workshop, she realized that she was using some of the same techniques in her shop. What she really wanted to learn was how to make a wedding bouquet, however, this was not demonstrated. Pearl stayed an extra week in New York and then returned to Houston.

Later, Pearl heard about a design workshop scheduled at the Rice Hotel. "I wanted to attend and I knew that they didn't want any colored people," said Pearl. She decided to discuss this problem with Bud Moore, a wholesale florist, from whom she had been purchasing flowers. Pearl vividly recalls Bud's reply:

Well, Mrs. Fitch, I would like for you to go but they aren't allowing colored people to go.  

Pearl's reply to Bud Moore was: "I am going." And she went:

When Pearl arrived at the workshop, a demonstrator was just beginning the making of a wedding bouquet. She watched intently and when the bouquet was completed, Pearl had "caught on." This was what she needed to make her wedding business grow. By using the techniques learned from that one lesson and looking at pictures of wedding bouquets, Pearl began to create her own designs. For advertisement, Pearl added the words, wedding bouquets, for the first time in the floral company's listing of the Houston City
Pearl's wedding business became prosperous. She was very proud that she was now providing a variety of services to her customers.

In 1948, the Fitches had to move their floral shop from Dowling Street because a freeway was being constructed in the area. They sought loans from banks to finance the moving and remodeling of their shop, but to no avail. A wealthy black couple, Clarence and Anna Dupree, came to the Fitches' rescue and financed their loan at a rate of 6% interest. After the loan was granted, the Fitches bought one-fourth of a block on the corner of Dowling and Leeland Streets and moved the floral building to the new site.

They remodeled the building by covering it with "rock stone" and making it a two-story. The Fitches lived upstairs and the shop was downstairs with a glass display room. They also included a refrigerated walk-in storage downstairs. In the back of the building were a greenhouse and a nursery which added to the floral business.

The business became very successful and the Fitches were able to pay off their loan. However, around the early 1950's the clientele in the community began changing and moving in the direction of Riverside, formerly a predominately Jewish section. The Fitches decided to sell their building and property and began looking for a site in the Riverside area. Fortunately, they were able to lease a building in the area which was then becoming a black middle class community.
The Fitches moved to the Riverside area in 1959 at 2916 Blodgett. Due to the lack of space, the Fitches could not continue to grow their own flowers. They had to depend solely on the wholesale florists to supply their fresh flowers. However, customers could still call "Fitch for Fresh Flowers" and receive satisfaction.

With competition from other local florists, there was one service which Pearl needed to make her business unique and more prosperous. She tried to become a member of the Floral Telegraph Delivery, so that she could wire flowers. However, she was refused admission because it was said that "Black floral shops didn't qualify."

Being aggressive, Pearl didn't let this denial hinder her from wiring flowers for her customers. She used "floral shops' books" and made contacts in such cities as Dallas, Fort Worth, Chicago, and San Francisco. She explained to the different florists her business and assured them that she had a delivery service. All of the florists whom she contacted agreed to accept her orders, but they didn't send her any orders of theirs. One of the floral shops which accepted Pearl's orders was "Darbee's Florists" in San Francisco. Pearl recalls a legend that "Mother Darbee was the first florist in the United States to ship flowers."

When Pearl mentioned shipping flowers, she vividly recalled her early shipping experiences and described them by saying:

Before I could wire flowers, I shipped them. We had shipping boxes to put the flowers in. I would take the flowers to the bus station and ship them to Austin, Dallas or wherever. They didn't have to be refrigerated going a short distance. Sometimes we drove to places like Conroe or Galveston to deliver our flowers.
By the mid 1960's, Pearl did not have to worry about how she would get her floral orders shipped or wired. She had been accepted in Teleflora which also brought in calls from outside Houston. Evidence of her telegraph service appeared in one of the very few ads which was taken out by Pearl.

FITCH FLORAL COMPANY

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

FLOWERS FOR:
- WEDDINGS
- HOSPITALS
- PARTIES GIFT
- SPECIAL DECORATION
- HOLIDAYS
- FUNERAL SERVICE

TELEGRAPH SERVICE
Phone JA 2-3437 If No Answer Call JA 3-6100
Closed Saturdays, Open Saturday Nights And Sundays

The nursery was not listed in the ad because Nathaniel had discontinued having one. However, he was still landscaping on a small scale. He bought his shubbery from wholesalers for several years. Later, his health began to fall and he had to give up his landscaping business completely. After a brief illness, he died in 1970.

Pearl continued to operate and manage the shop as she had always done. She remained busy making her artistic floral designs for all occasions and still enjoyed every moment of it. Pearl began to realize that her dreams and ambitions had been fulfilled. She and Nathaniel had built a business that had satisfied many customers over the years. Several of Pearl's former employees and those she had trained in her floral design school were now in the floral business carrying on her tradition.

Suddenly, Pearl felt tired. She began to think of retirement and
mentioned to friends that she wanted to sell her business. Mr. Ken Hoyt contacted Pearl and made an offer to buy the business for his wife. Pearl accepted and sold the "Fitch" name and accounts to the couple in September, 1977. Pearl worked in the shop for three months to help familiarize the new owners with the business. Even now, Pearl can be seen occasionally in the shop helping with flower arrangements for special days.

For over forty years, Pearl and Nathaniel Fitch provided flowers for all the occasions people buy flowers. The reputation of Fitch Floral Company was due largely to Pearl's hard work. She often worked six days a week well into the night cutting and arranging flowers to "give satisfaction to the customers" who bought her arrangements.

The slogan, "Call Fitch for Fresh Flowers," was more than an advertising gimmick. It represented a standard of dependability and excellence that Pearl Fitch'strived to achieve in the floral industry. Pearl says, "The floral industry will always be a prosperous business and specialized trade for anyone who is creative, industrious and willing to give good service, because people will always buy flowers for special occasions."
FOOTNOTES

1. Pearl Fitch to Tangula Carter, June 16, 1981.

2. Fitch, Nathaniel H. (Pearl), (Fitch Floral Company), Houston City Directory, 1936, p. 564.


6. Ibid.

7. Fitch, Nathaniel H. (Pearl), (Leeland Park Floral), Houston City Directory, 1934, p. 574.


9. Ibid.

10. Fifth Annual Art Exhibit Program, Sunday, June 27, 1937.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.


24. Ibid.
26. ibid.
32. ibid.
33. ibid.
34. ibid.
35. Bischoff, op. cit.
38. Bischoff, op. cit.
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Fitch Floral Company - School of Floral Designing, November, 1952.
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Pearl Fitch to Tangula Carter, June 16, 1981.
Pearl Fitch to Tangula Carter, July 14, 1981.
Olivia L. Amboree to Tangula Carter, February 6, 1982.
Lionel Stroud to Tangula Carter, February 22, 1982.
Olivia L. Thompson Amboree to Tangula Carter, April 18, 1982.
Andrew Sessum, Jr. to Tangula Carter, April 18, 1982.
FITCH FLORAL COMPANY

Opened in 1936 at 1011 Dowling Street

Greenhouse can be seen in rear.

Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Pearl Fitch.
CALL FITCH FOR FRESH FLOWERS

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF
MRS. JUNIUS J. AMBREE
Fitch Floral Company (1948 - 1959)
The old building was remodeled and moved on this site, the corner of Bowling and Leeland streets.
A nursery and a greenhouse are in the rear.
Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Pearl Fitch.
A float of the Darbee's Florists in San Francisco.
Darbee's Florists agreed to accept Pearl's wires for flowers. She became a friend of the Darbees and was given this picture.

Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Pearl Fitch.
Fitch Floral Company

From the 1960's to 1981. (2916 Blodgett)

Mrs. Fitch sold the shop in 1977.

The shop is now located on Almeda Road

Photographer: Junior Historian
James Kibble
Mrs. Pearl Fitch opens door to flower cooler
in her floral shop at 2916 Blodgett. October, 1960.

Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Fitch.