



In appreciation of Jerry and Rhona Meislik

By Jack Wikle, 2020

It would be difficult to overstate Dr. Jerry Meislik's impact over the past 42 years on our Ann Arbor Bonsai Society, on bonsai activity across this continent and, ultimately, on bonsai art internationally. Not surprisingly, our Society has benefited enormously from Jerry Meislik's membership in our group and from his growth, at the same time, as a bonsai artist, as an educator and as a prolific author on bonsai subjects.

Jerry and his wife Rhona joined our Ann Arbor Bonsai Society in 1978, and he remains with us as an Honorary Lifetime Member since receiving this special recognition in 2000.



Jerry Meislik, Rhona Meislik, Bob Grese and Jack Wikle finishing ribbon cutting at the formal opening of Matthaei's new Bonsai Garden. May 19, 2013. Photo my Michael Field.

Jerry's fans, who follow him on his website, know him as bonsaihunk (www.bonsaihunk.us). Jerry is noted especially for his success in growing subtropical and tropical tree species indoors, as bonsai, year round, relying, almost completely, on artificial light and supplemental heat as needed.

Jerry's books, particularly those on Ficus (figs), basic yet comprehensive in their content, have been well received by the "bonsai world" and become "go to" sources for information on fig trees and their culture as bonsai. His most recent book is the culmination of many years of research on Ficus and is a 300 plus page work entitled *The World of Ficus Bonsai*. The Ficus Study Group he started on Facebook now boasts more than 1,500 members.

Jerry tells us his first awareness of bonsai began as a Brooklyn, NY, teenager who really enjoyed escaping into the greenhouses of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, especially in cold, miserable, wet, winter weather. Seeing the bonsai collection there, Jerry found it fascinating to realize it was somehow possible to shrink a large tree, to make it small and portable.

After a little reading, most of it not too helpful in learning how to plant trees in containers and keep them alive, Jerry's first experiment was to dig a couple of small quince shrubs from the family's yard and plant them in sardine cans. Not having access to bonsai pots, the cans looked, somehow to Jerry, like little bonsai trays. The sardine-can-bonsai were put up in the windows of his parents' bathroom where they received very little light. Jerry's memory is that, in less than six months, these first bonsai efforts were dead.



Jerry Meislik, Joan Overmire and Bill Heston very intent in their study of one of Matthaei's group plantings. Photo by Jay Sinclair.

It wasn't until some years later, 1977, when he lived a year in Florida, that Jerry's bonsai interest was rekindled when, by chance, he found some small bonsai (Ficus) for sale in a shop and bought "one or two, very small, insignificant things." His thinking was, "I'm an adult now, I have learned a lot of things so far in my life. I can learn how to grow trees in pots."

It was only a year later, that Jerry and his wife Rhona moved to Ann Arbor and joined the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society. Jerry has written that he has learned from "many excellent bonsai teachers," but "Jack Wikle was and continues to be one of my favorite bonsai teachers and he been instrumental in advancing my bonsai knowledge." Writing this text today, and thinking back, I have to say that, as I had hoped when Jerry joined our club, he and I soon became collaborators in many ways. We were having fun, learning from many sources and learning from each other.

Actually, Jerry credits a number of people as becoming major influences as his circle of bonsai contacts expanded. Some names which stand out are Joe Samuels, and Jim Smith, both long recognized as tropical bonsai authorities in Florida. Dan Robinson and David Fukumoto are also bonsai people Jerry tells about learning from. And, it is clear that David De Groot and John Naka, whom Jerry traveled with to Japan twice, were very highly regarded by Jerry as sources of information and inspiration. Jerry has also emphasized enjoying a long friendship and mutual love of bonsai and information sharing with his bonsai buddy Bruce Baker.

Jerry remembers particularly one of his early face-to-face interactions with John Naka, who was in Ann Arbor as the featured visiting artist for a regional bonsai conference. This meeting, as I remember, was organized by Bruce Baker, who after joining our Society about the same time as Jerry, also became quickly very active in promoting bonsai art, not just in our club, but in southeast Michigan.

It seems that, at one point, John was walking with Jerry through that event's bonsai exhibit, and commenting on the trees, talking about their visual strengths and weaknesses. Then they came to a group planting, a grove of European white birch, designed and exhibited by Clive Taylor, one of our AABS members who has since passed away. As Jerry tells this story, John suddenly stopped talking. He wasn't saying anything, seemingly transfixed.

Meanwhile Jerry was seeing this planting as somewhat ordinary with a number of things about it that could be improved. When John finally spoke, he said, "This is so wonderful; this is so wonderful." Jerry tells us he was dumbfounded because this was not the reaction he had expected. So he asked John, "You are obviously having a major reaction to this, why are you feeling this way?" John's response was, "When I was a child, I was raised by my grandparents on their farm in Colorado. And, on their farm was a birch grove. This reminds me of the time I spent on my grandfather's farm."

As Jerry retells this story, he explains that it illustrates how emotional response to an artwork is very much an individual thing. Here was a highly regarded, nationally recognized bonsai artist being "blown away" by a piece of art Jerry felt was pretty good but much less than a masterpiece. As Jerry observes it is so hard to know how the individual viewer will react. One person may think, "Oh my gosh, this is horrible," and yet to someone else it's exciting, even incredible.



Jerry sharing his perceptions at Matthaei on fig tree use as a group planting. Photo by Jay Sinclair.

I believe Jerry's first election to office in a bonsai organization - - - the first of many - - - was in 1980, the second year after joining our Ann Arbor Society, when he agreed to serve as co-vice president/program chair with Joan Bonnette. The next year he and Rhona were elected treasurers, and his ongoing involvement as an officer snowballed from there.

It has to be emphasized in remembering what Jerry has done for bonsai that Rhona was always very much a part of this. She supported Jerry and helped with all our club's bonsai activities in many ways. Just one example of her work was doing most of collecting and accounting when she and Jerry were AABS treasurers in 1981.

I believe the last year Jerry held an office in our Bonsai Society was 1998, when he served, once again, as our vice president/program chair. Counting up, this was Jerry's sixth year as program chairman for our club. This close involvement in the meeting to meeting activities of our group changed radically in year 2000 when Jerry retired from practicing ophthalmology and doing eye surgery in Ann Arbor and he and Rhona moved permanently to what had been their vacation home in Whitefish, Montana.

On the national level, Jerry was elected to the American Bonsai Society's Board of Directors in 1989 and served in that capacity for eight years. Jerry was also a member of the American Bonsai Society Editorial Committee from 1989 through most of 1996, serving the last four years as its chairman.

Meanwhile, in 1993, Jerry was elected to membership of The National Bonsai Foundation's Board of Directors. This Foundation is the "private, non-profit organization" . . . "responsible for funding capital improvements and for assisting in interpretive and educational activities . . ." in support of the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, DC.

Closer to home, over the years, Jerry taught many well received classes and did numerous programs for our Society. Some of these presentations were reports with slides from his extensive travels studying the practice of bonsai not just in the United States but in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Malaysia.

As his reputation grew, Jerry also visited, as guest artist, many clubs across the country and internationally in Canada, Chile and South Africa. Presentations and demonstrations at national level conventions were part of this labor of love too.

Yet another aspect of Jerry's and Rhona's ongoing support of Great Lakes area bonsai art, has been their direct intervention in the elevation of bonsai culture at The University of Michigan's Matthaei Botanical Gardens from a "closet activity" to the extraordinary display the public enjoys today.

Among the many Meislik contributions to Matthaei, Jerry's donations of a number of large, high-quality, tropical bonsai are especially noteworthy. By far the most imposing of these gift bonsai is the ponderous *Ficus microcarpa* (Chinese Banyan) which Jerry, wanting a really outstanding specimen, purchased in Taiwan in 1999. Although this tree was exceptionally nice when



Jerry leading a ficus workshop the night after delivering "exposed root style tropical bonsai" to the club at the June 2017 meeting. Photo by Jay Sinclair.

purchased, Jerry has made some adjustments to suit his own tastes. One thing he found "really disturbing" was the elevation of the lowest left branch which he felt should be horizontal or nearly horizontal. After making a wedge-shaped undercut and keeping it guyed down for almost two years, the branch's response was to keep popping back up when the guy wire was removed. Finally, in 2010, Jerry resorted to drilling a small diameter hole crossing the saw cuts and installing a four inch long screw in that hole. That branch has now stabilized where Jerry envisioned it being.

While Jerry was practicing ophthalmology and doing eye surgery in Ann Arbor, Rhona enrolled in the University of Michigan's Master of Science in Landscape Architecture degree program. And, what do you know? One of Rhona's favorite instructors was Robert ("Bob") Grese, the man who would become Director of Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum. This relationship grew into personal friendship between Bob and the Meisliks. And, it is my impression that, through this acquaintance, Bob's appreciation for bonsai as a horticultural art form and for the people involved in this art grew quickly. Ultimately an alliance between Bob and the Meisliks

contributed greatly to pushing forward preliminary planning and the formation, in 2010, of a Matthaei committee dedicated to fund raising to actually build a garden for bonsai display. Jerry has served as chairman of that committee since its inception.

Today, visitors to Matthaei enjoy the result of the funding committee's effort and its success under the leadership of Jerry and of Gayle Steiner, who was Matthaei Development Director when the committee came into being. Ultimately, contributions, including one large, anonymous gift, made construction of the present display garden possible. But for those donations, large and small, this garden would not, could not, be at Matthaei today.

Looking back, it has been a rich bonsai life that Jerry and Rhona have shared with us. Members of our Society have been particularly fortunate. We have benefited enormously from their deep involvement in the "bonsai world."

Previous issues of this publication are located in the [History section of the AABS website](#)

NEXT WEEK: *Bruce Baker: From Novice to Rootslayer*

HOW YOU CAN HELP WITH OUR 50TH CELEBRATION

1. To help us in this celebration effort, all Ann Arbor Bonsai Society members present and past, and all others wishing to contribute are invited to submit personal statements (60 words or less) to be published in our Yearbook. Each text contributor is also strongly encouraged to submit a favorite photo (with caption) of a bonsai tree or a bonsai activity to accompany his or her personal statement. (We can scan old prints or digitize color slides for anyone needing this help with old pictures.) [Upload Form is here](#)
2. Let's all Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the AABS in style with shirts that have our commemorative logo printed on the front. Shirts will be available for purchase for \$20 each at our monthly meetings, at the Annual Club Show August 29-30, and at The Flower Market in Dundee, Michigan.



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