

The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden



Betty Bridgman (1915 - 1999)

Elizabeth (Betty) Bridgman (Mrs. Donald) had a long association with the Friends as a board member, volunteer and newsletter editor. She first joined the Friends Board of Directors on Jan 10, 1961 and was re-elected in 1962 and '63.

Betty was a regionally recognized poet. She wrote her first poem in 5th grade. Many of her works were originally published in the *Christian Science Monitor*. When the Martha Crone Shelter was dedicated in May 1970 she wrote a poem for the occasion with a very long title: *A letter of thanks from the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden on the occasion of the dedication of the Martha Crone Shelter on May 13, 1970*. The opening lines are:

You are good people. You mean well.
You kept the houses off my hill.
You saved my elm and tamarack.
You love this place, which loves you back.
Thank you for sixty years' restraint
of urge to tidy up and paint,
to straighten rows or trim a tree.
Neatness doesn't count to me.

Betty was a member of the nominating committee for our Board of Director elections from 1972 through 1975. She then rejoined the Board of Directors in 1982 and served until 1990.

Being a poet, she took issues with inappropriate use of words. At the 1976 annual membership meeting on May 15 she made a motion from the floor to remove the word "false" from any Garden sign, as there were no "false" plants, just different plants, and they all had alternate names. Her motion was as follows:

"I move that we request the change of every marker in the Garden which has the word "false" on it. No natural plant is false, and none imitates another plant, "False" is the word for phony or artificial, False flowers are plastic, paper, glass or wood. Every plant has a name that does not include the word "false", For instance, where our marker says False Solomon's Seal, it should say Solomon's Plume or *Smilacina racemosa*."

The motion passed after she agreed to bear the cost of new signs. It is not known if new signs were ever procured.

After election to the Board in 1982, she stepped in as co-editor of *The Fringed Gentian*TM for the autumn issue (Vol. 30 #4) and then became sole editor beginning in 1983, continuing to March 1990.



Betty Bridgman in 1988. Photo by Mary Slettehaugh.

At the 1982 annual meeting of The Friends she read a new poem she had written that had another long title: "Ode for the 275 members of the Friends of the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden and Bird Sanctuary." This was the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Friends and the 80th anniversary of the Garden.

One stanza reads:

Friends say to them,
"What! You're volunteering on behalf of worthless weeds
nobody needs?
Think what beautiful homes would fill the scene
in that ravine!
Think of the expanse of lawn
When the clutter is gone!
The happy homeowners out with their mowers
and snow-blowers,
Their dandelion-diggers–
Sales in six figgers!"

In later years, several of Betty's poems would be published in the newsletter.(1)

In late 1984 (December 4) Betty was one of four members of The Friends who met with Park Board staff to air concerns of the Friends for the future care and development of the Wildflower Garden. The budget for the Garden had been lowered and Gardener Ken Avery was now usually working alone instead of having the usual two helpers of earlier years. This would be a recurring subject that would occupy the attention future board members also. The consensus of the group was that their ideas were at least listened to.(2)

In the first issue of *The Fringed Gentian*TM that Betty was sole editor of, (Vol. 31 #1) she published an article by Dr. Marian Grimes about Henry Thoreau's visit to her Grandfathers orchard. (3) Betty had a personal connection to the story and inserted the following:

The editor has lived on what was the Grimes farm for 43 years, and has heard that Jonathan Grimes kept a rowboat moored at what is now 42nd Street and Grimes Avenue, and that he could row from there through swamps to Lake Calhoun.

Betty could write with humor and tongue-in-cheek. At the 1986 annual meeting Betty's report as newsletter editor included this bit:

It has been over a year now since our President, Patricia Thomesen, made my assignment more pleasant by arranging to have a committee mail each issue of *The Fringed Gentian*TM. The present editor, though widely regarded with affection and tolerance, as it proved, did not have the required IQ to handle the permit mailing without getting our 35-year highly respected organization into deep trouble and possible loss of our mailing rate of \$.08 cents per copy.

In one her many writings she wrote something about herself as a child that echoed what Eloise Butler had wrote about herself, although it is certain Betty had never seen Butler's unpublished work.(4)

Try to imagine what I looked like in fifth grade. You'd say right away that I probably wasn't much to look at. Come to think of it, I never heard anyone say to my my parents, "What a

beautiful child!" And for a girl growing up, this could be a tragedy considering the value the world places on a pretty face. (*Elementary English*, 1974).



After Betty passed away in July 1999, her son George who was also a Friend's member and shelter volunteer planted a Witch Hazel at the north end of the Garden in honor of his mother. George continues to be a Friends member. The photo shows George watering the Witch Hazel he planted in the fall of 1999.

Text by Gary Bebeau

References:

(1) Examples include

A Nut, A squirrel, Winter 1998 Vol. 49 #3

First Night of Frost, Winter 1999 Vol. 50 #3

A word for Box Elder, Winter 1998 Vol. 49 #3

In 2008 her estate published "*Collected Poems and Selected Other Writings of Betty Bridgman*," hard cover, 722 pages.

(2) The others were President Pat Thomesen, Natalie Adler, and Betty Bryan.

(3) Dr. Grimes had been the Friends volunteer Coordinator from 1971 to 1980.

(4) Eloise Butler - [An Autobiographical Sketch](#) from the unpublished *Annals of the Wild Life Reserve*.