

The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden



A History of the Friends Clinton M. Odell and Burma-Shave. Story of the 'First Friend'

The story of the Friends is about the influence a teacher had on one of her students. It is also about Burma-Shave.

Clinton M. Odell: Eloise Butler taught science in Minneapolis high schools from about 1874 to 1911. One of the students in her botany class at Central High School in the mid-1890s was Clinton Odell. Butler was known for taking her students on field trips to the woods, swamps, and bogs at the edge of Minneapolis. (At the time, woods and swamps stretched from near Cedar Lake to Lake Minnetonka.) These botanizing expeditions made a lasting impression on Odell.



Years later, in an article that appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1949, Odell recalled how Eloise Butler and a few other teachers used an area in Glenwood Park (now Wirth Park) for their own special wild garden. "They used to go out there in their spare time and collect plant specimens. I just got interested in going out there in the spring to see what came up." The spot frequented by Eloise Butler and her fellow teacher-botanizers would become the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden. The interest in nature Butler sparked in Clinton Odell would lead to Odell becoming a benefactor of the Garden, and to his founding the Friends of the Garden in 1952.

Now for the Burma-Shave part of our story.

Clinton Odell's father was a lawyer and a tinkerer. He had a side business, the Burma-Vita Company, selling a liniment product. Clinton also practiced law for six years, then formed an insurance agency, White and Odell, an agency of Northwestern National Life, but his doctor advised him to find a less stressful line of work.

In 1924 he joined the Burma-Vita Company and With the help of a chemist friend, Odell developed the family liniment recipe into a formula for a brushless shaving cream, a product popular in England at the time. Thus, Burma-Shave was born. But the product was hardly an overnight success. Odell's two sons, Allan and Leonard, sold the product door to door and to pharmacies in the upper Midwest.

As the story goes, when Allan was on a sales trip in rural Illinois in 1925, he saw a series of roadside signs advertising a gas station. Each sign pitched a single product, culminating in a sign pointing toward the

Burma-Shave signs

Listen birds
these signs cost money
so roost awhile
but don't get funny
Burma-Shave

Don't take a curve
at 60 per
we hate to lose
a customer
Burma-Shave

The wolf
is shaved
so neat and trim
Red Riding Hood
is chasing him
Burma-Shave

Round the corner
lickety split
beautiful car
wasn't it
Burma-Shave

gas station itself. Allan thought it could work to sell Burma-Shave. He convinced his skeptical father to spend \$200 to try the idea. Allan cut and painted boards, wrote a simple three-phrase jingle, and erected the first Burma-Shave signs on Highway 35 between Minneapolis and Albert Lea. After the Odell's had put up a dozen sets of signs, orders started pouring in. They had so much business they built a new factory at 2318 Chestnut Avenue West, just west of Penn Avenue, in the Bryn Mawr neighborhood of south Minneapolis.

Martha Crone.

Meanwhile at the Garden, Martha Crone became a regular volunteer assistant to Eloise Butler. When Eloise Butler died in 1933, Martha Crone took over sole responsibility for maintaining the Garden. Odell's Burma-Shave plant was a short walk from the Garden at 2318 Chestnut Avenue West. As he stated in a letter, he found his "interest in the Wild Flower Garden revived." Odell became a regular hands-on volunteer, helping Crone pull weeds, transplant flowers, and manage the Garden. He became a familiar sight to visitors, digging in the dirt while dressed in suit and tie. One of Martha Crone's recollections of Odell was that in early evening would take a chair into the lower garden and sit there and test various mosquito repellants that his company was developing. In a damp year she said, we can all appreciate what an excellent testing ground this would have been.

Clinton Odell became the Garden's benefactor, paying for materials and labor out of his own pocket. In June 1944, Odell wrote to the Minneapolis Park Board superintendent, proposing to donate \$3,000 to cover the cost of clearing an upland garden, fencing in the new area, surfacing the paths, and constructing a small summer house. The Park Board gratefully accepted his offer but with reservations about what should be done, but at least the upland garden was partitioned off from the rest of Wirth Park and added to the Garden.

Odell made a donation to the Park Board so they could hire a man to assist Crone at the Garden in 1946, donated \$1,000 for the 1947 season, and made annual contributions thereafter. (details Ref. A below).



Clinton Odell created this sketch of the old office at the Garden and titled it "Early Spring in the Garden." Undated but circa late 1940s - early 1950s. Image courtesy of the Martha Crone Collection, MHS.

He was mentioned in several newspaper articles on the Garden. On May 21, 1950, the *Minneapolis Tribune* ran a double page spread in their Picture Magazine about the Garden and said this about Odell:

"Another who has had a big hand in the garden's development is Clinton M. Odell, chairman of the board of Burma Shave Co. Besides giving financial help, he sometimes has pitched in with the planting and weeding. He visits the garden frequently."

On June 10, 1951 The *Minneapolis Tribune* published an article titled "City Wild Flower Gardener Rescues Plants From Bulldozers." [See 1951] The article included this:

"Clinton Odell, the "motivating spirit" of the garden, whose interest in wild flowers is as faithful as Mrs. Crone's claims she has a special sixth sense for finding hidden flowers."

Clinton Odell was truly the first 'Friend of the Garden.' He felt it imperative there always be a group of citizens who would work for the best interests of the Garden. He was concerned the Garden could

become expendable if the Park Board had to cut costs. In an article written by journalist Dorothy Binder in 1949 (Odell would later recruit her to be a founding Director of the Friends), Binder said Odell worried "...what would happen if a depression came along. With no backing from private citizens... would the Wild Flower Garden be considered an unnecessary luxury and lopped off the budget?"

In her remarks to the Friends Board in 1977, Martha Crone recalled there were some on the Park Board in the late 1940s who definitely wanted to phase out the Garden. Odell felt that an organization of concerned citizens could help.

He wrote an essay about why he founded the Friends and of the importance of the Wildflower Garden. [Following article]

Odell was the founder of the Minnesota Game Protective League. Martha Crone also reported in the July 1957 issue of *The Fringed Gentian*TM that Odell was presented with an honor plaque by the Minnesota Conservation Commission during the spring Sportsman's Show. The plaque read: "*To Clinton Odell, Courageous Crusader for Conservation. From the 1957 Northwest Sportsman's Show.*" He was a man of many interests - a member of the Rotary Club, he served on the State Forestry Board and was a director of the McPhail School of Music.

Founding of the Friends and *The Fringed Gentian*TM.

In 1952, Clinton Odell asked an attorney friend at the Dorsey Law Firm to draw up the papers incorporating the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden. Odell recruited friends, prominent citizens and businessmen to serve as the original Directors. Odell wrote many letters recruiting friends to join the new organization. The Friends started to pay for plants, seeds, and other items for which there was no money in the Park Board budget.

According to Odell's daughter, Moana Beim, Odell came up with the name for the newsletter, *The Fringed Gentian*TM. Odell insisted that each issue of *The Fringed Gentian*TM contain a quote by Henry David Thoreau. (Dorothy Binder wrote that Odell was a proponent of Thoreau and had read all of Thoreau's works.) The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden grew and prospered with new members and more funds to help Martha Crone in the Garden.

Odell served as President of the Friends until his death on June 4, 1958 at age 80. Friends founding member Dorothy Binder wrote the memoriam printed in the 1958 text.



Style image of the Fringed Gentian used for the newsletter logo.



In 1959, a group of his friends placed a stone bench, made of Mankato Dolomite, in the Upland Garden to honor Clinton Odell, Benefactor and First Friend of the Garden. The bench sits on the central hill near a large oak. Martha Crone wrote this Memorial for Clinton Odell. Published in *The Fringed Gentian*TM, Vol. 7 #3, July 1959.

"The citizens of this great metropolis owe a debt of gratitude to the late Mr. Clinton Odell, for his contributions to the growth and development of the



Odell Bench Dedication from a group of his friends

garden. In so many ways he contributed most generously so that the future generations might benefit."

"It was thru his effort that the upland or prairie garden was established in 1944, an addition to the already existing garden. For many years such an addition had been envisioned for a concentration of prairie plants. A large portion of native Minnesota plants grow on the prairie, where the sun shines the entire day."

"We pause to pay tribute to his many deeds of kindness and in recognition of this his friends have placed in this prairie garden, a native stone settee and bronze marker in his memory."

Below: In 1960, a pair of benches of Kasota Limestone were placed in the Woodland Garden in his honor by his daughter, Moana Odell Beim (Mrs. Raymond N. Beim). The benches were located near the Garden Office where it was situated at that time. They replaced a pair of wooden settees. When the office was removed and replaced by the current Martha Crone Shelter, the benches remained where they were installed and are now just off the flat patio area in front of the new shelter. Together with a limestone birdbath dedicated to Amy Odell, Clinton's wife, they form a nice quiet resting place just off the walking path to the shelter.





Above left to right: Allen Odell (eldest son) and spouse Grace; Raymond N. Beim and spouse Moana Odell Beim; Amy and Clinton Odell; Barbara Odell Coleman and spouse James; Betty Odell; Leonard Odell (Photo courtesy Odell Family).

References:

(A). On October 4, 1944, the Park Board, in a letter to Odell from Park Board Secretary Charles Doell, approved Odell's request for the upland addition to the Garden. His initial check to them was for \$1,500 and he would send more of the \$3,000 he pledged as they spent it. Odell wanted the Park Board to clear a number of oak trees from the area but the Board disagreed and in a letter to Odell from Superintendent C. A. Bossen dated Nov. 17, 1944, he stated that such action should be "wait and see" as to what may be needed as Martha Crone proceeded with development of the area.

In 1944 the Board spent \$1,009 on this project; in 1945 the amount was \$1,116 and in 1946 the amount totaled \$1,314. Each year the Park Board sent a summary to Odell and he paid the amount due above his initial \$1,500. In addition to this in 1945 he paid for the wages of a second man to help Martha Crone, a Mr. John Schulte. In 1946 he did likewise but had to dismiss Schulte early for the reason stated as "they did not agree" and he was looking for a replacement. In 1947 he simply sent the Park Board \$1,000 for the purpose of paying for help and in the subsequent years of 1948, through 1951 he sent \$500. Once the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden was formed in 1952, the Friends made that contribution. The hard surfacing of the paths and the building of a summer house as originally proposed was never accomplished.

In 1951 Odell requested toilet facilities and mosquito control. (letter to C. E. Doell dated May 22, 1951). Odell had been to Tucson and visited a garden there that had modern toilet facilities and said if a small city like that could provide facilities certain Minneapolis could "go them one better." These were not provided either. Mosquitoes were always a problem. Martha Crone once replied to Theodore Wirth "I wish to offer my apologies for the ill manners of my mosquitoes, they are rather difficult to train as each one lives only a short time" (letter June 22, 1933). The Park Board was already hesitant of using DDT.

Above from documents in the files of Clinton Odell in the Martha Crone Collection at the Minnesota History Center.

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