

# Annals of the Wild Life Reserve

## The Writings of Eloise Butler



### The Wild Botanic Garden - Early History - 1926

In the early '80s Minneapolis was a place of enchantment – a veritable fairyland. Along the river banks grew in profusion trillium, bloodroot, wild phlox, anemones, Dutchman's breeches, and hepatica; the meadows were glorious with Indian paint brush, both red and yellow, with gentians, purple fringed orchids, and royal clumps of blue violets. In the tamarack swamps of the suburbs might be seen long vistas of our state flower, the showy lady's-slipper, together with the wild calla, and pitcher plants without number. And who could describe the outlying prairies, rioting in colors far exceeding the brilliancy of tropical flora. A long procession beginning with the pasque flower, the "crocus in chinchilla fur," the rosy three-flowered avens, and the equally profuse bird's-foot violet, that gave way in turn to the more gorgeous blooms of midsummer and early autumn, as the purple blazing stars, giant sunflowers, goldenrods, and asters of many species and hues. Various lily-rimmed pools and lakes were teeming with algae, among them microscopic desmids, and diatoms of extraordinary beauty, many of which were new to the world.

What changes have been wrought by the rapid growth of the city and the onward march of "improvements"! The shy woodland plants are fast dying out on our river banks; the tamarack swamps have been drained, and with the drying up of the water have disappeared the wondrous orchids and the strange insectivorous plants. The pools with the desmids and diatoms have been filled in and houses built over them; and the prairies have been platted into building lots. The land has been ruthlessly stripped of the exquisite features that Nature, the greatest landscape gardener, has wrought through the ages, and "all the king's horses and all the king's men" can never make the place the same again. The foreign plants used to replace our native species, and introduced with so much labor and expense, removed from their natural setting, look formal and stiff, and impress one much as impaled butterflies do in a museum case.

Again, it is cleared land that is invaded by unwelcome foreigners like burdock, sand-bur, and Russian thistle; for most of our vegetable tramps, like the human ones, are from the Old World. Inured to keener competition, they multiply rapidly and crowd out our native wildings. Cottagers on the suburban lake shores have fettered ideas of planting that are more appropriate for city grounds, and condemn their neighbors who strive to preserve the wildness, for a lack of neatness in not using a lawnmower and in not pulling down the vine tangles in which birds nest and sing – apparently dissatisfied until the wilderness is reduced to a dead level of monotonous, songless tameness. What does one go into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken by the wind, if you please; but surely not geometric flower beds, nor mounds of the ubiquitous canna and castor bean.



Pasque Flower which begins what Eloise calls "the long procession" of blooming plants. Photo G D Bebeau

Hence, to preserve intact and within easy reach some of our vanishing wild land, to maintain a supply of native plants for educational purposes, to study at firsthand the problems of ecology and forestry, to preserve the indigenous flora and to introduce, if feasible, the flora of all the other regions of botany in Minnesota for the benefit of students of botany and lovers of wild life – the teachers of botany in Minneapolis petitioned the city park commissioners to set aside a tract of land for a wild botanic garden. The site selected by the teachers and generously granted by the commissioners lies in Glenwood Park, the largest and perhaps the most beautiful of all our parks, containing three ponds of fair extent, a diversity of soil and slopes and wooded heights commanding extensive views. In autumn, the scene is of surpassing loveliness with the beautiful groups of trees on the hills, in the valleys, and about the ponds, the vivid reds of the maples and the oaks, and the gold of the poplars set off by the white boles of birch and the dark green foliage of tamaracks.

Below: Tamaracks in the Eloise Butler wetland today. Photo G D Bebeau.

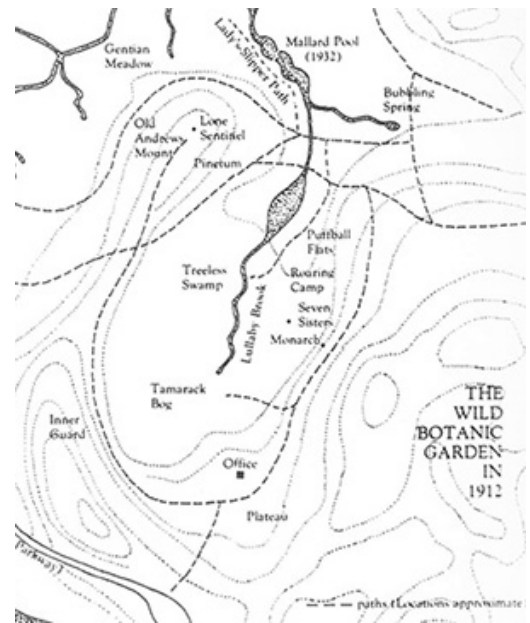


A particular reason for selecting this place was the undrained tamarack swamp, such a swamp being the abode of most of our orchids and insectivorous plants so interesting in habit and structure. Indeed, most lovers of wild plants are bog-trotters and find in the depths of a swamp an earthly paradise. The indigenous flora was found to be captivating. Among the notables were sundew, pitcher plant, Linnaea, Turk's-cap lily, the two species of fringed gentian, showy and yellow lady's-slippers.

In the spring of 1907, the experiment began on a tract of about three acres in extent, comprising the small tamarack bog with meadows on the south and west merging into wooded slopes. Longing eyes were cast upon a marsh overgrown with willows on the eastern side of the bog. This was private property, but before a year had passed it was purchased by the park commission and added to the garden together with the adjacent hillside. Later, meadows on the north and west were also annexed so that the garden now contains about twenty-five acres.

A tiny stream threaded the bog and emerged into a depressed area of slimy ooze flanked by low banks. A dam was constructed that converted the depression into a lovely pool that has become a favorite sketching point for artists. It has proved too shady for aquatics and it is proposed to make a small pond by excavation in the open north meadow where the stream from the bog unites with one that flows from a spring on the eastern boundary. The delicious water of this spring is not one of the least important adjuncts of the garden.

It was planned from the beginning to make the garden a living museum of the flora of Minnesota and to preserve strictly the wild appearance of the place. There were to be no formal beds. Plants were to be allowed to grow according to their own sweet will and not as humans might wish them to grow, and without any restraint except what could be essential for health and mutual well-being. Each plant introduced to the garden is provided with an environment similar to its original one and then left to take care of itself as in the wild open, with only the natural fertilizers such as decaying wood and leaves. No watering is done after the plants are firmly established. Plants growing in excess and pestilent weeds are removed to make room for more desirable newcomers.



The Wild Garden in 1912 showing the location of various features. The dam Eloise mentions would be at the upper (north) end of the pool that is to the left of the words "puffball flats". Map ©Martha Hellander.



Eloise Butler gathering some plants in the Quaking Bog in Glenwood Park in 1911. Photo courtesy Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis

Minnesota has a flora of wide range, with representatives from the forest region of the east, the prairies of the west, the Alpine region of the north, and even a few species from the arid Great Plains.

Plants are obtained for the Reserve by collection, by exchange, and by purchase from nurserymen who deal in native species. As a rule they thrive best from regions of similar climatic conditions. The largest plantings are made in the spring and fall and the late flowering in the spring, although specimens have been successfully transplanted in full flower in midsummer – anything desirable being taken whenever procurable. This is a risky procedure but bog plants can be lifted at any time if not allowed to become dry in transit. Whether fall or spring planting is preferable depends for the most part upon succeeding conditions of weather. With reliable forecasting, all doubts would be settled. Do not plant heavily in the fall when the winter will be open or in the spring when early droughts are expected. The

greater rush of work in the spring is an argument in favor of fall planting.

At the very beginning a garden "log" was installed in which a record of the plantings, period of blossoming, and other data have been faithfully transcribed. A brief history and the location of each species are also preserved in a card catalogue. A species is not indexed until it has wintered, and the necrology is noted by merely withdrawing the name from the catalogue. Only a small percentage refuse to flourish. Sand and lime are imported for species requiring an excess of that diet; tannic acid and ammonium sulphate for greater acidity. Trailing arbutus, *Viola lanceolata* and *V. rotundifolia* are found to be the least persuasive. It is probable that these could be established if they could be raised *situ* from the seed. Some annuals like *Campanula americana* have been raised from self-sowing by being planted when in flower.

It was soon found that the term "Wild Botanic Garden" was misleading to the popular fancy, so the name was changed to "Native Plant Reserve."

"Is this the wild garden?" was a common query accompanied by widely roving eyes.

"Yes."

"Well, where are the flowers?"

"All about you. But many do not grow in masses. They are planted naturally and not in beds, and must be looked for as in any wilderness. Some have been picked by vandals; others are out of blossom, and many of the leafy flowerless stalks, which must have room to grow, will not blossom for weeks to come."

#### NOTES:

1. Parts of Eloise Butler text were incorporated into an article compiled by Mrs. John. Jepson and printed in *The Minnesota Clubwoman* in June 1933 following the death of Eloise.
2. The majority of this article was slightly modified from an earlier text published in the "Bulletin of the Minnesota Academy of Science" Volume 5, No. 1. 1911, and titled *The Wild Botanic Garden in Glenwood Park, Minneapolis*.
3. The photo at the top of the page is a collage of Eloise Butler at 4 stages in her life: A young woman, ca 1890, Garden Curator 1910-20, mid 1920s and age 80 at her birthday party, August 2, 1931. *Photos courtesy Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis Collection, and Minnesota Historical Society*
4. A number of short essays that Eloise Butler wrote while curator of the Garden that after her death were collected in a series titled *Annals of the Wild Life Reserve*. Many were never published. The Wild Botanic Garden in Glenwood Park, became the "Native Plant Reserve" and was then renamed the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden in 1929.