

Annals of the Wild Life Reserve

The Writings of Eloise Butler



Occult Experiences of a Wild Gardener

"What's this, Miss Butler?" asked a pupil, holding up a wilted flower, as she took her seat in the classroom.
"I don't know. It is a cultivated flower, is it not?"
"No, it grows wild on the prairie."
"That doesn't seem possible. I never saw it before. What do you call it?"
"An anemone."
"I have never seen an anemone like that. Bring me the whole plant and I will analyze it."

As I was familiar with the prairie flora of the neighborhood, I continued to think that the plant was an escape from the garden. About a week afterward, the plant was brought in just as recitation was beginning. At one glance, without taking it in my hand, I said, "you are right. It is an anemone. It is the Carolina anemone." Then I was immediately stricken with astonishment at my own words, for I had never seen the Carolina Anemone (ref #1) and could not have described it to save my life. But at the first free moment, I found that the botanics confirmed my rash statement.



Carolina Anemone
(*Anemone caroliniana*). Photo
©Kitty Kohout, Wisconsin
Flora.

Not many days later a group of teachers were talking about violets. One asked another, "How many violets are native to Minnesota?" "I do not know," was the reply. "Can you tell us Miss Butler?" "Seventeen," I flashed, as one would answer to what is twice three, but immediately exclaimed, "Why did I say that? I haven't the slightest idea of the number." However, consulting two authorities, we found that the answer was confirmed.



Leatherwood (*Dirca palustris*).
Photo ©G D Bebeau

Associates in botany have remarked to me, "You always find the plant you look for." I wished to get some Leatherwood for the wild garden. It had died out from the place where I had found it years ago. One day a University student inadvertently asked me, "Do you know Leatherwood?" "Indeed I do. That is just what I wish most to see. Tell me where I can find some and I will get it this very day." Her ideas of its whereabouts were vague. She had seen it two years before near St. Thomas' School, but on what side of the buildings, or the road, she could not tell. With this direction, I scoured all the region about St. Thomas, without success. As it was then past the dinner hour and high time for me to go home, I left the place reluctantly and started for the streetcar. Suddenly, without conscious volition, but obeying a blind, unreasoning impulse, I turned and plunged on a bee-line into the woods. "Eloise Butler," I said to myself, "what are you doing? You are due at home." But on I went and walked directly into a pocket

lined with Leatherwood in full blossom - - a place that I had never visited before. The whole affair seeded uncanny to me.

The following summer, merely out of curiosity, as I have no belief in spiritistic phenomena, I had a "sitting" with an alleged "Medium," who was visiting the family. Among other queer remarks she said, "When you want a plant, you always find it. This is the cause of it: You have two friends, botanists, who are deeply interested in your work. It is as if they put their hands on your shoulders and pushed you toward the right place." Then I laughed, saying, "That explains my experience with Leatherwood." The medium, by the way, knew nothing about my work.

Two or three times since, I have put the matter to a test. When delayed by a railway wreck in Ontario (ref. #2), I wanted to find sweet gale. I walked aimlessly for some distance and came right upon it. Then I tried the other side of the railway in the same way, and successfully, for the yellow round-leaved violet.

At another time I wanted *Gentiana puberula* [Downy Gentian] I had never gathered the plant. I only knew that it grew on the prairie. So I betook myself to the prairie and hunted until I was tired. Then I bethought myself of my ghostly friends and murmured, "Now, I will let 'them' push me." Thereupon, I wandered about, without giving thought to my steps, and was just thinking, "The spell won't work this time," when my feet caught in a gopher hole and I stumbled and fell headlong into a patch of the gentian.

September 20, 1913, I was planting more *Gentiana puberula* in the wild garden. I had just unwrapped the plants to set them in the holes prepared for them, when I was seized with another uncontrollable impulse, and I dropped my hoe, leaving the roots of the gentians exposed to the hot sun, and went quickly to the pond.

[Here the typed text ends and we do not know what happened at the pond. Also, it is not clear what year she wrote this, but it is probably in the mid-teens, as she retired from teaching in 1911, the train wreck occurred in 1908, she first set out the Downy Gentian in 1912 and she mentions above, planting it in 1913.]

Notes:

ref. #1. Carolina anemone, *Anemone caroliniana*, a Minnesota native plant, found in of a number of counties in the central part of the state, including Hennepin.

ref #2. The railway wreck was near Mackey, Ontario in 1908 and Eloise brought back several other plants from that site (including Purple Flowering Raspberry shown at right) and reported, in her Garden log, planting them on Sept. 5th. but she does not list in the log planting the sweet gale [*Myrica gale* L.] or the round-leaved violet [*Viola rotundifolia*].



Downy Gentian (*Gentiana puberula*). Photo ©G D Bebeau



Purple flowering Raspberry (*Rubus odoratus*) - a plant brought back from Mackey Ontario. Photo ©G D Bebeau

Additional Material. In another essay written in 1925: *The Wild Garden in 1925*, Eloise adds another such instance:

“IN August, spent two days at Lake Kabecona, about twenty miles east of Itasca Park. There I saw for the first time in their native haunts the spurred gentian [*Halenia deflexa*] and the northern grass of parnassus [*Parnassia palustris*]. On a creek floated the pretty white water crowfoot in full blossom, and all the land was blue with harebells.

Strange to say, a little earlier, a single specimen of *Halenia* was brought to me from the north to identify. From the venation, I thought it must be an endogen and tried to place it in the lily or orchid families. Over the telephone I got a hint from one who knew, that it must belong to the gentian family, although the name could not be recalled. The small flowers were cream colored and spurred. Then “spurred gentian” flashed through my mind, and also the scientific name, *Halenia deflexa*, although I had no consciousness of previous knowledge. The botanist confirmed the wireless telegram. This is another instance of several experiences that I have had of unconscious registration. We all really know much more than we are aware of . . .

Notes:

In brackets within the text, have been added the necessary common name or scientific name, that she did not use in her article. Nomenclature is based on the latest published information from *Flora of North America*, USDA, and the *Annotated Checklist of the Vascular Flora of Minnesota*.

Photo of Eloise Butler, ca. 1920, at top of page courtesy Minneapolis Public Library. Contemporary photos as credited.

The text of this article is one of 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*, but most were never published.

The Wild Botanic Garden in Wirth Park, became the "Native Plant Reserve" and was then renamed the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden in 1929.