

Annals of the Wild Life Reserve

The Writings of Eloise Butler



In Quest of the Walking Fern - 1909

Camptosorus rhizophyllum [now *Asplenium rhizophyllum*] is popularly known as the walking fern, on account of the runners that develop from the tips of mature leaves and take root to form new plants, which thus “walk” on from year to year.

The fern is local and is said to flourish best in soil of limestone origin. Two founders of the Wild Garden went to Osceola, Wisconsin to obtain some of the fern [occurred in May 1908]. Osceola is a picturesque little village, with high, limestone bluffs overlooking the St. Croix River. It is about two hours by rail from Minneapolis and has two daily trains, one leaving Minneapolis in the morning and the other returning in the early afternoon. Considerable time and labor were spent the day before in transporting and forming a bed of calcareous earth for the reception of the plants in the garden. On arriving at Osceola, as the day proved hot, the collectors obtained permission to hang their wraps in the office of the station, to be free of unnecessary impediments in the toilsome climb before them. The present fashion of pocketless gowns also necessitated that the one having a convenient handbag should carry the valuables of the other.



The Walking Fern (*Asplenium rhizophyllum*). Photo Martha Crone, May 31, 1950

Although the collectors were familiar with the grounds and knew from former visits just where to look for the specimens, a long and patient search failed to reveal them. The place had evidently been despoiled. Keen, indeed, was their disappointment. They finally became separated in their search, and one of them did not appear at the station in time for the journey home. The other [EB] fancying that her companion might, at the last moment, reach the train from the opposite side, snatched the wraps of both in desperate haste and boarded the train, only to discover her error and hence to get off at the first stop to investigate the cause of the apparent accident.

She found herself at the farther end of a very long and high railroad bridge, which must be crossed to get back to Osceola. It was then boiling hot, and she was weighed down with the heavy wraps and all that she could lift of earth and plants. She essayed the bridge with fear and trembling, lest she should be hurled into the depths below by a passing train. The sleepers were far apart, and, looking down to keep her footing, she became dizzy and had to summon all her grit to . . . get across the bridge. “How long is the bridge?” she asked. “half a mile,” was the reply. It seemed to her more than twice that distance. And even then she was nearly five miles from the village, and with no conveyance except a hand-car, which could not leave until the close of the working day. During the long wait, she pictured her friend lying dead, or with broken bones, in some dark ravine.

Under other circumstances, the ride on the hand-car would have been enjoyed as a novel experience. The car was piled high with pickaxes and spades, among which were perilously perched some fifteen Italian laborers. A seat was arranged at the back of the car for the distracted woman, who sat bent forward to avoid the revolving machinery, and with dangling feet, which were drawn up quickly, every now and then, as they struck the sleepers. The rare plants of the railway cutting, so close at hand and easily seen by reason of the slow movement of the car, were passed unheeded.

Reaching Osceola, she could find no trace of the missing one. She hoped against hope that her companion was safe somewhere in the village and would appear in time for the next morning's train, but her heart failed when she thought that she must finally telephone the circumstances to relatives in Minneapolis, perhaps needlessly alarming them and causing them a sleepless night.

It was now nearly dusk. The town marshal was summoned to aid in the search. As she hurriedly climbed the cliff again, shouting at intervals the name of her friend, what did she see in the failing light but a large mass of the walking fern! Up it was torn, or rather, clawed, root and all - the ruling passion strong in death, so to speak -- she, blunting the pricks of conscience by the resolve to throw the plants away if any harm came to her friend. At length it was learned from inquiries at the station, which had been closed through the period of searching, that the lost one was slowly but safely pursuing her homeward way by freight train, carrying with her the purse and return ticket for the other, who was in consequence, obliged to beg from strangers food and lodging and money for the fare to Minneapolis.

The walking fern was planted in the wild garden, where it survived on winter's cold, and where we trust it will continue to commemorate its story.

Notes:

Photo of Eloise Butler, ca. 1920, at top of page courtesy Minneapolis Public Library. Walking Fern photo is a historical photo from the Garden.

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.