



Eloise Butler 1907-1933



Martha Crone 1933-1959



Kenneth Avery 1960-1986



Cary George 1987-2003

Cary George - 4th Guardian of the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden

At the end of 1986, Gardener Ken Avery retired after 27 years as the person in charge of caring for the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden. He had succeeded Martha Crone upon her retirement at the end of 1959 and she had succeeded Eloise Butler upon her death in 1933. Thus Cary George became only the 4th person in the succession of caretakers of the Garden. Significantly, 1987 was also the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Wildflower Garden. Cary was an "ex-officio" board member of The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden during his tenure as Gardener.

Getting the job



Cary George had already spent 10 years working in horticulture with the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, principally growing flowers and plants in the Park System greenhouses - plants that would be used for spring planting in the Minneapolis Parks. He did relate once that one of his first jobs was with the tree planting group and it was a pleasant change to move into the greenhouses. Cary's story of how he came to be the Gardener for Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden was told to me one day when I was volunteering in the Martha Crone Shelter (and many others have heard it also) and it goes like this:

Because of the seniority rules there were three other gardeners that had first dibs to the job. Since the position of gardener at Eloise Butler required you to work alone all day and be responsible for the entire garden, none of the three wanted the job; to Cary, it was his dream job.

He further said that during his first days on the job as Head Gardener, he was excited but also nervous because he felt the weight, the responsibility of tending this special place.

As he was working in the Garden in those first few days, he started talking with a couple who were walking in the Garden. He told them he was the new Gardener, that he was taking over from Ken Avery. He evidently felt comfortable with these visitors because he blurted out, in an expression of his uncertainty, *"I hope I can do this."* They looked at him calmly and replied, *"I wouldn't worry. You look like you belong here."* (Ref 1.)





Ken Avery also felt that Cary George would “belong there”. In Ken’s last letter to the membership of the Friends he wrote:

“Another reason for leaving at this time is that I can now do so with a clear conscience. Until recently there was no one in the Park system who I felt could take over the Garden. Those of you who have met my replacement, Cary George, know that he is an intelligent person who is interested the Garden and who will husband it very well. I have to admit that my one apprehension in leaving is that he will do such a good job, that this spring might be marked as the end of the dark ages for the Garden.” (Ref. 2)

The Trials of a Gardener

Burning the Prairie Garden and Poaching: Ken Avery would return several times to help Cary with burning the Prairie area in the spring - a restorative process that Ken had begun. Cary’s first experience with a burn was on April 14-15, 1988 and Ken Avery was there to help. A permit had been issued for the burn, but even so the Minneapolis Fire Department showed up with fire trucks after a nearby office worker reported a wild fire.



Cary and the Garden were host to a visit by former President Jimmy Carter in June of 1988. Less illustrious and less wanted guests were those who came to the Garden in the springtime to cut succulent herbs - particularly fern fiddle heads, wild asparagus shoots and other native plants that make could salad greens.



Above: Cary George with the Garden sign files. Signs were 2" x 4" and of routed plastic laminate - weatherproof, impressive and unobtrusive. They maintained a Garden tradition that both common and scientific plant

Cary would usually find them early in the morning hours, some had even climbed over the fence to gain entry before the back gate was opened. On certain days he would confiscate large sacks of cuttings. The individuals, usually of Asian ethnicity where such greens are a diet staple, would never acknowledge that they understood anything Cary would try to tell them - that this was a preserve, not a public marketplace, but he felt they understood quite well that they should not be there. Perhaps one could understand their situation but some plantings were being decimated, and it could not be allowed. In recent years this seems to have become less of an issue.

Entire plants being poached from the Garden is an old story. Before the Garden was fenced in 1924, Eloise Butler had terrible problems with vandalism. Both Martha Crone and Ken Avery would always loose plants, sometimes entire groups of plants to thieves. Cary found that the “casual picker” was the most troublesome during his years. He could relate many stories of confronting someone who had secreted a cutting in his pockets. Another thing secreted in pockets were the plant identification signs. Cary was always making new ones to replace those stolen. Those most frequently stolen were "No Picking" and "Bastard Toadflax."

Cary's philosophy on plant signs was that the first good specimen that a visitor would encounter on a Garden walk should be labeled so that the visitor could test their identification skills thereafter. Exceptions to this rule were the popular showy wildflowers - these he would always label as they were the plants naturalists and visitors were constantly asking about.

The Deer Problem: Creatures of the four-legged kind could also prove troublesome to a Gardener - deer in particular. With the explosion of the deer population in the metro area in the last quarter of the 20th century, the large and outlying city parks like Theodore Wirth became havens for the deer population. When they got into the Garden they found a banquet unlike any they could attend in Wirth Park. What usually happened was that a storm would down a large tree limb onto the perimeter fence allowing the deer to jump over. The Gardener could not walk the perimeter every day to check such things, and hardly at all in the winter time. Once deer were in the Garden, getting them out was a process of roundup proportions.



In the fall of 1988 two yearling deer were seen in the Garden. In early winter four were observed. With the help of a number of people the roundup got them out and the fence was repaired. In late winter of 1989 no deer tracks were seen. But - two additional young deer were observed in April and on the 28th, a group of 5 people did another roundup. There was a small fence hole near the back gate that had been missed during the earlier fence repair. Such "deer events" would happen several more times in the coming years.

Birdhouses:

Cary appreciated the birds of the Garden but sometimes the humans were a nuisance to the birds. In early 1989 four bluebird houses were placed in the Upland Prairie Garden. By midsummer they had to be taken down - human visitors were trampling the vegetation to get a closer look at the birds while others criticized them as aesthetic blight, which is interesting as there were always bird houses in the Garden. In Martha Crone's time there were several huge bird houses in the Prairie Garden. (Photo at left shows a large martin house in the Upland Garden in 1950. Kodachrome slide by Martha Crone, 1950, courtesy Minnesota Historical Society, Martha Crone Collection.)

Crime: While the Garden has been a fairly safe place, its seclusion within Wirth Park has sometimes allowed undesirable behavior. The most newsworthy crime occurred on June 1, 2001 when a woman walking her dog on the path next to the Garden found the dismembered body of a woman that had been dumped there during daylight hours and during the time that Cary was at work in the Garden and the Shelter was staffed with a volunteer and a naturalist. Cary was interviewed by a Star Trib reporter.

The Habitat of the Garden

The tree canopy of the Garden performs many functions and changes in the makeup of the canopy causes changes in the understory plants. Ken Avery had to deal with the loss of elms in the Garden from Dutch Elm disease. Cary George dealt with the loss of oaks to Oak Wilt. The red oaks in the Garden were particularly large; Cary estimated the age of several that succumbed in 1994 to be 125 years old. The most visible loss to frequent Garden visitors were those that stood apart from the mass grouping of trees - those specimens that form the edges around the Upland Garden. Replanting of trees in the Garden has been a continuous process since Eloise Butler's tenure and continues to-date. Butternuts were not found in the Garden originally so Eloise Butler began planting them in 1909. They are not a long-lived tree but are a native species. One that Cary estimated to about 100 years old blew down in a storm in June 2003. Was it one that Eloise planted?



Above: Cary with the Heritage White Oak.



Above: Cary with Turk's Cap Lilies



Above: Cary counting tree rings of an old Butternut. He estimated it to be 100 years old. It blew down in a June 2003 storm.

Heritage Trees:

The Garden has long been the residence of a number of specimen trees. During Cary's tenure as Gardener, he recommended a number of trees in the Garden for inclusion in the Minneapolis Heritage Tree Program. The Garden has nine Heritage trees noted for their large size. [Cary's article "The Garden Boasts Nine Heritage Trees"]

Documenting the Garden:

Certain types of plants are particularly fascinating to each gardener. Cary would have his favorites also. He wrote a number of articles that were published in The Friends Newsletter *The Fringed Gentian*TM about these plants, including:

- *Gentian in the Garden;*
- *The Pea Family Thrives in Hot Prairie Sun;*
- *From Tall to Tallest in the Summer Garden;*
- *Native Grasses for your Home Landscape;*
- *Orchids in the Garden.*

These articles with illustrations are found on the website in the Education Archive.



Orchids have been a perpetual favorite of all who have nurtured the Garden. Those orchids native to the State of Minnesota that were not already native to the Garden site in 1907, were brought in over the years, especially during the time of Eloise Butler and Martha Crone. Today only two remain. Changes in habitat, theft, and just the particular problems of transplantation would be the demise of many. Cary would make his attempts to transplant as well.

In 1991 he planted 12 Large Twayblades (*Liparis lilifolia*) by the new front gate. They were gathered from a large patch that had been discovered by Ken Avery near old Highway 12. They did not transplant well and have not survived. In the same year volunteer Judy Jones donated a large clump of Yellow Lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium parviflorum* Salisb. var. *pubescens*) from her mother's garden. Cary divided it and planted it in two places - near the front gate and near the shelter. The plant had been absent from the Garden for years (and had been replanted numerous times by the previous caretakers). One of the plants remains in the Garden today. Photo left: Large Twayblade (*Liparis lilifolia*) Photo ©Merel R. Black, University of Wisconsin, Steven's Point.

In 1998 twelve clumps of Showy Lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium reginae*) were rescued from road construction projects in northern Minnesota and planted in the bog. This plant has been replanted a number of times since Eloise Butler brought in the first ones and this new addition would replace clumps that had been declining in vigor. Cary understood that native populations had developed where they were because of specific and perfect habitat. Moving them was always risky but in the case of the State Flower, worth a try. Cary writes of this flower:

"The wildflower most often asked about by Garden visitors is the Showy Lady's-slipper (Cypripedium reginae). Each spring dozens of inquiries are made about the existence of this wild orchid in the Garden, its cultural requirements, sources of purchase and the legal and ethical ramifications of digging and transporting it. By the time it blooms at the end of May, I must confess, I'm relieved. Yet, when I walk the bog trail each morning to open the back gate, I stop to look at this wild orchid as the morning sun filters through the dewy bog air. Its beauty always amazes me. It must be one of the most magnificent flowers God ever created." (Ref 3.)



Showy Lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium reginae*)

The Prairie Garden Extension:

During Cary's tenure as Gardener the Upland Garden was expanded by one acre with the approval by the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board on Dec. 8, 1992, to transfer one acre of Theodore Wirth Park to the Garden. This was accomplished by the efforts of Cary and Friends member and volunteer Elaine Christenson. Elaine had met with Cary George and his predecessor, Ken Avery and they discussed expanding the Garden boundary - the pros and cons, gradually acceptance and enthusiasm for the project won. The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden paid for the fence work to enclose the additional space. Cost for the new fence line was considerably lessened by the re-use of some old fence that separated the Upland and Woodland Gardens. (Complete Article is on the Friends Website)

In the fall of 1993 the work began to remove sumac and trees. The following spring showed some stumps peaking through the snow and the beginning of a new and different look. Summer healed most wounds, as if all plants joined hands and danced in the new openness. No scars showed. (Photo at left - Cary and Elaine 1993)



The Front Gate to the Garden Quotation



In 1990 The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden provided funding for the Construction of a new front gate. Part of the project was construction of the wooden superstructure over the gate itself, from which is suspended a sign. The Friends debated what wording should be on the sign. Betty Bryan, a Friends' Board member at the time, reported that at a board meeting to decide, there were many suggestions, ranging from a phrase from Betty Bridgman's poetry to simply "Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden", although the Park Board preferred the wording "Wildflower". Cary George had been silent through the debate but in a lull in the conversation he said he would like to offer "*Let Nature be Your Teacher.*" Betty remembers that it was one of Eloise Butler's favored Wordsworth quotations. It was approved and that is what went on the sign. Betty said "*It wears well.*"

Garden Maintenance



Maintaining the pathways:

Cary introduced the use of cedar shavings to mulch the Garden pathways. Eloise Butler did not mulch the paths as they were not as wide in her day, nor did she have large groups walking them. Later, Martha Crone used pea-sized gravel. Her successor, Ken Avery, would speak of the laborious task of hauling the gravel back up the hills after a rain washed it downhill. Cary would report finding pockets of it some 40 years later. Ken would also say that in dry weather the gravel would roll down the hill and be just as dangerous as mud. Ken Avery tried elm chips (which were plentiful in his day when Dutch Elm disease was felling many elms). Its advantage was that it was organic, but the chips were bumpy underfoot and would also float downhill in a modest rain.

Cary found cedar shavings to be the best compromise. The shavings would level out and bind together and match the topography. Cedar was rot resistant, and the trails only had to be replenished every three years. True, a ferocious rain storm would move them about, but they were a good compromise.

Cary wrote "*The cedar shavings on the trail give visitors their first tactile experience when entering the Garden. The softness underfoot and the aroma especially from new shavings, gets an immediate reaction.*" His source was from the shaping of utility poles. When utilities ordered poles of a certain diameter, the bark was removed and then the wood was shaved down to the required size. Cary would get a large truckload of shavings to cover the Garden season. (Ref. #6)

Photo at right: The working pile of cedar shavings delivered from New Brighton Cedar Shavings Co.



Photo below: Cary George cutting out Buckthorn.



Fallen trees and Buckthorn: The removal of fallen trees that block paths must usually be done immediately. Other tree removal can wait for winter when the ground is firmer. Invasive trees like Common Buckthorn need to be removed when they can easily be spotted - and that is when they still have leaves. Buckthorn removal has been a constant job during Cary's tenure as Gardener. It has only been since 2008-2009 that almost all has been removed from the Garden. However, the nature of the plant is such that, new seedlings will always reappear and constant attention must be given to removing them - but the large ones that produced copious seed crops have all been removed.

What does a Gardener do when winter sets in and the late fall cleanup chores are done?

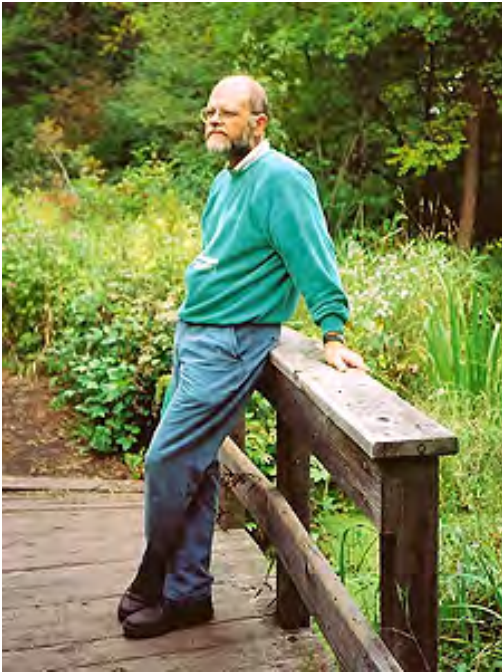
First, there is always work in the Garden that is best done after the ground freezes, such as tree removal or any work that requires equipment that would otherwise damage the plants in soft ground. Once the heavy snow sets in the Gardener goes off to other tasks. One of Cary's "off-season" duties was maintaining wood duck boxes throughout the Park System. He

and gardener Tom Vogen monitored wood duck houses from 1987 onwards. By 2001 they were maintaining 85 throughout the city and were adding 10 to 15 annually. Cary also worked at the Parks-maintained ice rinks in later years.



What should be the “State of the Garden”?

This question is one about philosophy, not day-to-day conditions. Cary explains it best:



Above: Cary on the bridge at Mallard Pool.
Below: Cary with a Twinleaf.



"In itself the phrase “State of the Garden” has a somewhat foreboding tone. The implication is, I think, to somehow describe the Garden as either better or worse than in the past. A plant census would be one way to accomplish this. Are there more species of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants extant in the Garden than there were during the Eloise Butler, Martha Crone or Ken Avery tenures? An evaluation of physical improvements - visitor amenities, landscape enhancements - could give us another look at where we’ve been and where we’re headed. Visitor counts, staffing, and Park Board budget commitments would be a “bean counter” approach. All of these methods, while valid and necessary at times, seem to me to miss the broader philosophical mission of the Garden.

Eloise Butler’s intention was to have visitors experience plant communities similar to those of pre-settlement times. As a teacher and scientist, she chose to establish the original three-acre Garden on a site that contained ecosystems usually found only on much larger parcels of land. Was her selection of this small bog happenstance? A convenient teaching tool? Or something much more?

As a pantheist, Eloise Butler looked to nature for spiritual truths. She was instinctively drawn to Wirth Park and the site that would become her spiritual core.

So, I think, the true “State of the Garden” should be examined not by plant surveys, programming, and architectural adornments, but by asking the question, “Is the primary purpose of the Garden - to comprehend the grace of nature - still valid?” My contention is that more so than ever, a sanctuary that protects all life, both human and non-human, should be a touchstone for living our daily lives, not just a quaint natural history lesson.

The Garden is more than a remnant of what Wirth Park used to be. It is different geographically. It also has a transcendental spirit. Has Wirth Park been lost to invasive plants and a labyrinth of eroded trails made by kids and young adults on expensive mountain bikes? Maybe, but I trust the Garden. Yes, it’s being squeezed by a consumer-oriented world, but in the end there will always be the Garden. The Garden is non-materialistic. It is a humble, modest place, unaffected by affluence.

Much like the Japanese philosophy of Wabi-Sabi, the beauty of the Wildflower Garden is found in the imperfect, incomplete, and impermanent. Indeed, it is just this discovery of truth in the

inconspicuous that comforts us with the calculus of nature that surpasses mathematics and man. At a time when “Open Space” means tot lots, paved bike trails, crushed aggregate softball fields and beach parking lots, when wetland restoration is a filtering system for urban runoff, let us begin again at the Garden.” (Ref. 4)

Career summation.

Cary would, of course, attend to the daily tasks of being the Gardener. He would keep the records of plant bloom dates begun by Ken Avery, he would talk to visiting school groups, but he would always share his philosophy, by his writings and by his commentary at meetings with The Friends.

The best summation of his career at Eloise Butler is best expressed by Cary himself. Here is his final article for *The Fringed Gentian*TM.



"As many of you already know, this is my last season as Gardener at Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden. After 29 years as a gardener for the Minneapolis Park Board the time has come for a change. Retirement is a word that has a pejorative, almost funereal tone, yet one of the many gifts the Garden has given me is a realization that new things always emerge from the ephemeral. I have confidence that the Environmental Department will choose a successor who will husband the Garden well; someone who understands the legacy begun by Eloise Butler and nurtured through the stewardship of those that followed.

I will be back next year to assist the new gardener. Much information can only be accurately transferred orally: Where wildflowers are planted, topographical changes, archeological remnants, and an introduction the cast of characters both human and non-human to whom the Garden belongs. This seems like a perfect transition. As we all know, a garden is never done. This incompleteness, this imperfection is really the secret to the Wildflower Garden's beauty.

Hopefully, most will agree that the state of the Garden has improved during my tenure: Buckthorn, while not eliminated, is under control; the plant communities are healthy' the list of species extant has grown; both the climax and understory trees are thriving, and the philosophy of the naturalists' programming is in keeping with the restorative maintenance agenda of the Garden.

As I see it, the threats to the Garden come from the outside: Future development in and around Wirth Park; an explosion of the deer population due to continued climate change; a general degradation of habitat outside our 15-acre fenced oasis; and the pernicious onslaught of exotic plants - - especially garlic mustard. While the Garden is not in peril, future personnel will have to maintain vigilant and industrious attention to these problems.

As I clean out my desk on these last days, I find pictures of long-ago naturalists and volunteers, project plans yet to complete, keys of unknown origin, a thank you note from a woman who buried her beloved cat in the Garden, an obituary notice for Ken Avery, birthday and Father's Day cards from my loving wife and children, a letter from an old pal-- all reminders of the poetry of an ordinary man's life who was fortunate enough to have a job no one deserves, yet everyone should have. Soon I will take my last bittersweet walk in the Garden. As I close the Garden Gate, I will thank Eloise and all the gentle souls who have make me realize the beauty of simple things" (Ref 5.)



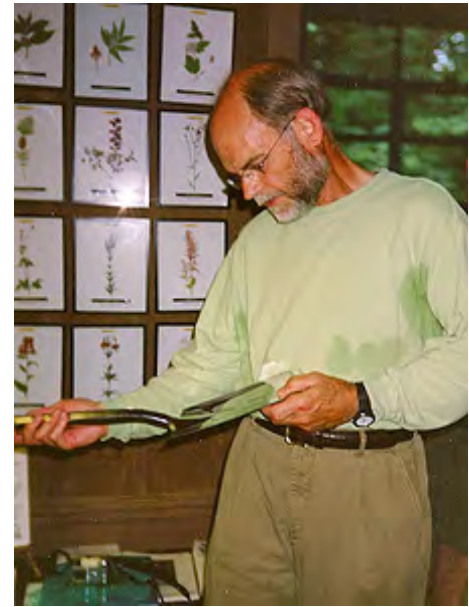
Note: Susan Wilkins, Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board Naturalist, was selected to replace Cary George. Susan was quite familiar with the Garden, having served there often as Naturalist; she contributed articles to *The Fringed Gentian*TM and has a deep appreciation for the historic and current cultural significance of the Garden.

Retirement Celebration:



On the evening of Tuesday, June 29, 2004 members of the Friends and Garden Park Staff met at the Martha Crone Shelter for a farewell-retirement celebration for Cary George. To remind him of his gardening career he was presented with an inscribed "golden" shovel and trowel. All who could be there gave profound thanks for the care of the Garden that had been entrusted to him over the years and wished he and wife Janet great and happy days in their retirement.

Photos left: and right Cary receiving "gardener" retirement gifts. Below: Cary and Janet George.



Cary George Wetland Bridge

As a tribute to Cary George, the Friends of the Wild Flower began raising funds in 2011 to restore critical footpath structures in the Garden's wetland habitat. These trail segments, including the wooden bridge next to Mallard Pool and the three wooden walkways south on Lady's Slipper Lane, were popular among visitors and were very much in need of replacement. It was true for Cary, as it was for Eloise Butler, that the wetland is the heart of the Garden. This project in honor of the fourth Gardener is a testimonial to his service as well as to the Founder and her vision.

The boardwalk was installed in July of 2015. On Sunday Sept. 20, 2015 at 3 PM, Friends, Garden and MPRB Staff, and invited guests gathered in the Garden to dedicate the new boardwalk and specifically to dedicate the new bridge in honor of Cary George. Brief comments were made by Friends President Pam Weiner, Garden Curator Susan Wilkins, MPRB Commissioner Anita Tabb and then Cary George.



The Dedication Ceremony on the new bridge. The 3 persons on the far right are (l to r) Garden Curator Susan Wilkins, Cary George, Friends President Pam Weiner. [photo by Christi Bystedt]



Above: Left - (l to r) Friends Board member and Historian Phoebe Waugh, Cary George, Boardwalk design architect Jim Robin. Above Right- at left, Friends member Ann Godfrey talking to Garden Curator Susan Wilkins. [photos - Christi Bystedt and G D Bebeau]



Below: The completed bridge with its first visitors on July 24 2015



References:

- #1. *The Fringed Gentian*TM, Vol. 51 No. 4
- #2. *The Fringed Gentian*TM, Vol. 37 No. 3
- #3. *The Fringed Gentian*TM, Vol. 48 No. 2
- #4. *The Fringed Gentian*TM, Vol. 49 No. 3
- #5. *The Fringed Gentian*TM, Vol. 51 No. 4
- #6. *The Fringed Gentian*TM, Vol. 48 No. 4

*The Fringed Gentian*TM, newsletter of The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden, Inc. PDF copies are found in the newsletter archive.

Minutes of Meetings of The Board of Directors of The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden, Inc. and other Friends documents.

Historical Records of Eloise Butler and Martha Crone, Minnesota Historical Society.

All Photos are the property of The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden unless otherwise credited.

©2013 Friends of the Wild Flower Garden. "www.friendsofthewildflowergarden.org". Text and documentation by Friends member Gary Bebeau. Opinions expressed are solely his. 092315