

# Annals of the Wild Life Reserve

## The Writings of Eloise Butler



### Experiences in Collecting - 1911

The willow herb, or Fireweed, [*Epilobium angustifolium* L.] is . . . plant with a history. I thought that this showy flower would have a fine effect massed in the meadow against the background of tamaracks. The fireweed is scarce in the immediate vicinity of Minneapolis, but I knew where a full acre of it grew in Massachusetts. Whence a large quantity of what was supposedly fireweed was dug up, transported, and planted in the garden [in 1907], only to learn at blossoming time that it was not fireweed at all but another insignificant species of the genus already established in the garden and, if anything, too abundant in the place.



The next season, at the close of the summer's vacation, after having enjoyed for a week or more huge bouquets of fireweed, I went confidently to the place again for specimens to take to Minneapolis, when not a blade of the plant was to be seen. The ground had been burned over, ploughed and harrowed, and seeded down with another crop. I looked for it at another station, a mile distant, but there a cow had been tethered, and had left not a wrack behind in her foraging.

For some other plants I had scoured in vain wild land in Massachusetts, although I was assured that they were common and might be found anywhere. My friends said consolingly, "Perhaps you can get them on the way back to Minneapolis." But I said, "Impossible. Everything at a railway station is cleared away, and there is nothing but a desolate sandy waste, or else a spick-and-span garden of geraniums, castor bean and canna, with unclimbable barbed wire fencing off the wilderness."

The prophecy, however, was fulfilled. My train was wrecked (fortunately without loss of life) in the wilds of Ontario; and there, on either side of the track, were growing the elusive fireweed, the other long-looked for plants, with rarities besides – and nothing to dig them up with but a broken penknife! In the enforced delay, lasting from morning till night, this small difficulty was overcome. Going farther afield in every direction, although false alarms and the fear of missing the train were the cause of briar-rent gown and headlong tumbles in the frantic rushes back to the track, I found, it seemed instinctively, just what I most desired; and my suitcase, regardless of the rights of clothing, was crammed with the spoils of accident.

But shortly after my return, such is the contrariety of Fate, I came across a quantity of fireweed in several happy hunting grounds beyond White Bear Lake, so we are no longer dependent on a foreign land for a supply of it.

Who of the participants in the adventure can ever forget about the acquisition of squirrel corn [*Dicentra canadensis*]. Much to their delight, the teachers of botany learned of a station for squirrel corn on one of the large islands of Lake Minnetonka. This plant is local and is found abundantly in a few favored places, unlike its relative, the Dutchman's Breeches, which grows all



about us in rich woodlands. The squirrel corn has a similar foliage, but the flowers are white and larger, and heart-shaped, like another of the same genus – the cultivated bleeding heart – and are delightfully fragrant. The name comes from the small, subterranean tubers – round and yellow, like kernels of Indian corn.

After a long journey by water and pathless woodlands, the teachers came to the designated place, where they stood aghast before a recently constructed fence, some nine feet high, of strong, large meshed chicken wire, attached to stout poles, with a row of barbed wire close to the ground, three more rows of barbed wire at the top, surmounted by three horizontal rows of the same sort.

Experienced as they were in getting over barriers of all sorts, they thought this, at first, unsurmountable. Nevertheless, one of the party seized a trowel and began to dig in desperation a passage-way under the fence. How long a task this would have been is an undetermined question. Another collected long poles, which she wove in and out over the top wires. These were draped by a thick waterproof recklessly sacrificed to the cause, and then the fence was scaled and the plants gathered in deathly silence, from fear of arrest for trespass.

[The teachers] were then informed by a loyal neighbor of the owner of the property, who had deemed the fence beyond their powers, of a hole on the other side of the enclosure, where a sewer was being dug, thorough which, by dint of flattening themselves to the ground they wriggled and crawled like rats – dusty and triumphant!

Photo of Eloise Butler, ca. 1920, at top of first page courtesy Minneapolis Public Library. The Photo of Squirrel Corn is ©Elizabeth Parnas, Wisconsin Flora. Fireweed photo ©G D Bebeau

The train wreck was in the spring of 1908. The Squirrel Corn story is of 1909 as that was the year Eloise first planted the species in the Garden and she listed Big Island as the source.

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 were not 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. Some plant names have been added within [ ] for clarity.