

The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden



Clinton Odell

Clinton M. Odell and Burma-Shave. The Story of the 'First Friend'



The story of the Friends is about the influence a teacher had on one of her students. It is also about Burma-Shave.

Clinton M. Odell: Eloise Butler taught science in Minneapolis high schools from about 1874 to 1911. One of the students in her botany class at Central High School in the mid-1890s was Clinton Odell. Butler was known for taking her students on field trips to the woods, swamps, and bogs at the edge of Minneapolis. (At the time, woods and swamps stretched from near Cedar Lake to Lake Minnetonka.) These botanizing expeditions made a lasting impression on Odell. Years later, in an article that appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1949, Odell recalled how Eloise Butler and a few other teachers used an area in Glenwood

Park (now Wirth Park) for their own special wild garden. *"They used to go out there in their spare time and collect plant specimens. I just got interested in going out there in the spring to see what came up."* The spot frequented by Eloise Butler and her fellow teacher-botanizers would become the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden. The interest in nature Butler sparked in Clinton Odell would lead to Odell becoming a benefactor of the Garden, and to his founding the Friends of the Garden in 1952. (1949 article follows text)

Now for the Burma-Shave part of our story.

Clinton Odell's father was a lawyer and a tinkerer. He had a side business, the Burma-Vita Company, selling a liniment product. Clinton also practiced law for six years, then formed an insurance agency, White and Odell, an agency of Northwestern National Life, but his doctor advised him to find a less stressful line of work. In 1924 he joined the Burma-Vita Company and With the help of a chemist friend, Odell developed the family liniment recipe into a formula for a brushless shaving cream, a product popular in England at the time. Thus, Burma-Shave was born. But the product was hardly an overnight success.

Odell's two sons, Allan and Leonard, sold the product door to door and to pharmacies in the upper Midwest. As the story goes, when Allan was on a sales trip in rural Illinois in 1925, he saw a series of roadside signs advertising a gas station. Each sign pitched a single product, culminating in a sign

Burma-Shave signs

Listen birds
these signs cost money
so roost awhile
but don't get funny
Burma-Shave

Don't take a curve
at 60 per
we hate to lose
a customer
Burma-Shave

The wolf
is shaved
so neat and trim
Red Riding Hood
is chasing him
Burma-Shave

Round the corner
lickety split
beautiful car
wasn't it
Burma-Shave

pointing toward the gas station itself. Allan thought it could work to sell Burma-Shave. He convinced his skeptical father to spend \$200 to try the idea. Allan cut and painted boards, wrote a simple three-phrase jingle, and erected the first Burma-Shave signs on Highway 35 between Minneapolis and Albert Lea. After the Odell's had put up a dozen sets of signs, orders started pouring in.

In April 1926 the Company, of which Clinton Odell was now president, leased 17,000 sq. ft. of new space at 2019 East Lake Street, moving from 2533 Hennepin Ave. They had so much business over the



Offices and plant of the Burma-vita Company. The building was constructed in 1940. Bassett's Creek flows in front with a rail line (now abandoned) between the creek and the building. The building still exists in the same form, but with a wood exterior. Photo from 1941 by Norton and Peel

years that in 1940 they built a new factory at 2318 Chestnut Avenue West, just west of Penn Avenue, in the Bryn Mawr neighborhood of south Minneapolis, abandoning the old quarters at 2019 East Lake Street. [More details are in the article from the 1946 *Minneapolis Tribune* which follows text].

Martha Crone.

Meanwhile at the Garden, Martha Crone became a regular volunteer assistant to Eloise Butler. When Eloise Butler died in 1933, Martha Crone took over sole responsibility for maintaining the Garden. After 1940 Odell's Burma-Shave plant was a short walk from the Garden at 2318 Chestnut Avenue West. As he stated in a letter, he found his "*interest in the Wild Flower Garden revived.*" Odell became a regular hands-on volunteer, helping Crone pull weeds, transplant flowers, and manage the Garden. He became a familiar sight to visitors, digging in the dirt while dressed in suit and tie. [See 1949 article attached].

One of Martha Crone's recollections of Odell was that in early



Clinton Odell in the Garden. Photo from *Minneapolis Tribune* May 12, 1949.

evening would take a chair into the lower garden and sit there and test various mosquito repellants that his company was developing. In a damp year she said, we can all appreciate what an excellent testing ground this would have been.

Clinton Odell became the Garden's benefactor, paying for materials and labor out of his own pocket. In June 1944, Odell wrote to the Minneapolis Park Board superintendent, proposing to donate \$3,000 to cover the cost of clearing an upland garden, fencing in the new area, surfacing the paths, and constructing a small summer house. The Park Board gratefully accepted his offer but with reservations about what should be done, but at least the upland garden was partitioned off from the rest of Wirth Park and added to the Garden. [There is more detail in a separate article - The Upland Garden Addition].

Odell made two \$1,500 deposits and made annual contributions thereafter when the amounts exceeded the initial \$3,000 eventually paying \$4,000 more than his initial pledge. (details Ref. 1 below).

He was mentioned in several newspaper articles on the Garden. On May 21, 1950, the *Minneapolis Tribune* ran a double page spread in their Picture Magazine about the Garden and said this about Odell:

Another who has had a big hand in the garden's development is Clinton M. Odell, chairman of the board of Burma Shave Co. Besides giving financial help, he sometimes has pitched in with the planting and weeding. He visits the garden frequently.

On June 10, 1951 The *Minneapolis Tribune* published an article titled "City Wild Flower Gardener Rescues Plants From Bulldozers." The article included this:

Clinton Odell, the "motivating spirit" of the garden, whose interest in wild flowers is as faithful as Mrs. Crone's claims she has a special sixth sense for finding hidden flowers.



Clinton Odell created this sketch of the old office at the Garden and titled it "Early Spring in the Garden." Undated but circa late 1940s - early 1950s. Image courtesy of the Martha Crone Collection, MHS.

Clinton Odell was truly the first "Friend of the Garden." He felt it imperative there always be a group of citizens who would work for the best interests of the Garden. He was concerned the Garden could become expendable if the Park Board had to cut costs. In an article written by journalist Dorothy Binder in 1949 (Odell would later recruit her to be a founding Director of the Friends), Binder said Odell worried "...*what would happen if a depression came along. With no backing from private citizens...would the Wild Flower Garden be considered an unnecessary luxury and lopped off the budget?*"

In her remarks to the Friends Board in 1977, Martha Crone recalled there were some on the Park Board in the late 1940s who definitely wanted to phase out the Garden.(2) Odell felt that an organization of

concerned citizens could help. He wrote an essay about why he founded the Friends and of the importance of the Wild Flower Garden.

Odell was the founder of the Minnesota Game Protective League. Martha Crone also reported in the July 1957 issue of *The Fringed Gentian*[™] that Odell was awarded an honor plaque, for his many years service in conservation. It was presented by Mr. Cox, Past State Forester, in behalf of the Minnesota Conservation Commission during the 1957 Northwest Sportsman's Show. (Odell had been on the State Board of Forestry.) The plaque read: "*To Clinton Odell, Courageous Crusader for Conservation. From the 1957 Northwest Sportsman's Show.*" He was a man of many interests - a member of the Rotary Club, he served on the State Forestry Board and was a director of the McPhail School of Music.

Founding of the Friends and *The Fringed Gentian*[™].

In 1952, Clinton Odell asked an attorney friend (Joseph Colman) at the Dorsey Law Firm to draw up the papers incorporating the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden. Odell recruited friends, prominent citizens and businessmen to serve as the original Directors. Odell wrote many letters recruiting friends to join the new organization. The Friends started to pay for plants, seeds, and other items for which there was no money in the Park Board budget.

According to Odell's daughter, Moana Beim, Odell came up with the name for the newsletter, *The Fringed Gentian*[™]. Odell insisted that each issue of *The Fringed Gentian*[™] contain a quote by Henry David Thoreau. (Dorothy Binder wrote that Odell was a proponent of Thoreau and had read all of Thoreau's works.) The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden grew and prospered with new members and more funds to help Martha Crone in the Garden.



Odell served as president of the Friends until his death on June 4, 1958 at age 80. Friends founding member Dorothy Binder wrote this memorial.

With the death of Mr. Clinton M. Odell June 4th at the age of 80, the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden have lost their founder, their president and their most devoted and enthusiastic member.

All his life Mr. Odell had been concerned with conservation. He was awarded the plaque of the Minnesota Conservation Commission April 1957 in recognition of his many contributions. His interest in the Wild Flower Garden began in his high school days for Eloise Butler was his botany teacher.

For many years Mr. Odell contributed privately to the Park Board's limited funds for maintenance of the garden. He was responsible for development of the Upper Garden, for the fence surrounding this garden and for the employment of extra manpower. Often Mr. Odell could be found in the Wild Flower Garden in his spare time digging weeds and helping Mrs. Crone the Curator with new plantings. He preferred this to playing golf with his friends.

With the future of the garden in mind Mr. Odell was instrumental in organizing the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden in the summer of 1952. He was its president until his death. It was his dearest wish that the Friends would guarantee the continuance of the garden in the event of his

death. Membership fees and donations would supplement the allocations of the Park Board and would continue the unique contribution the Wild Flower Garden makes to Minneapolis.

The future of the Wild Flower Garden now lies with the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden. The memorial which would mean most to the man who gave so much of this time, his devotion and his money to the development of the Wild Flower Garden as a sanctuary and an educational project for Minneapolis is its continuance. Two or three years of neglect because of insufficient maintenance and the garden would be an overgrown mass of weeds, its significance lost, the labor of year destroyed. The challenge now lies with us.

In 1959, a group of his friends placed a stone bench, made of Mankato Dolomite, in the Upland Garden to honor Clinton Odell, Benefactor and First Friend of the Garden. The bench sits on the central hill near a large oak.



Odell bench dedication from a group of his friends.

Contributors to the Odell Bench were: Elizabeth Carpenter, John T. Magaw, Ebba Tolg, Dorothy Binder, Wm. H. Hale, Mr. & Mrs. R. Leuthold, Mrs. C. S. Hoyt, George Luxton, Earle Brown, Mr. R. E. Cole, Mr. S. W. Dwinnell, Martha Crone

Martha Crone wrote this Memorial for Clinton Odell. Published in *The Fringed Gentian*™, Vol. 7 #3, July 1959.

The citizens of this great metropolis owe a debt of gratitude to the late Mr. Clinton Odell, for his contributions to the growth and development of the garden. In so many ways he contributed most generously so that the future generations might benefit.

It was thru his effort that the upland or prairie garden was established in 1944, an addition to the already existing garden. For many years such an addition had been envisioned for a concentration of prairie plants. A large portion of native Minnesota plants grow on the prairie, where the sun shines the entire day.



We pause to pay tribute to his many deeds of kindness and in recognition of this his friends have placed in this prairie garden, a native stone settee and bronze marker in his memory.



On their 50th Wedding Anniversary Amy and Clinton Odell pose for a family photo, ca 1950s:
L to r: Allen Odell (eldest son), Grace Odell, his spouse; Raymond N. Beim and spouse Moana Odell Beim;
parents Amy Hamley Odell and Clinton MacDougall Odell; Barbara Odell Coleman and spouse James
Coleman; Betty Odell; Leonard Odell. (Photo courtesy Odell Family)

In 1960, a pair of benches of Kasota Limestone were placed in the Woodland Garden in his honor by his daughter, Moana Odell Beim (Mrs. Raymond N. Beim). The benches were located near the Garden Office where it was situated at that time. They replaced a pair of wooden settees. When the office was removed and replaced by the current Martha Crone Shelter, the benches remained where they were installed and are now just off the flat patio area in front of the new shelter. Together with a limestone birdbath dedicated to Amy Odell, Clinton's wife, they form a nice quiet resting place just off the walking path to the shelter.

References:

(1). On October 4, 1944, the Park Board, in a letter to Odell from Park Board Secretary Charles Doell, approved Odell's request for the upland addition to the Garden. His initial check to them was for \$1,500 and he would send more of the \$3,000 he pledged as they spent it. Odell wanted the Park Board to clear a number of oak trees from the area but the Board disagreed and in a letter to Odell from Superintendent C. A. Bossen dated Nov. 17, 1944, he stated that such action should be "wait and see" as

to what may be needed as Martha Crone proceeded with development of the area.

In 1944 the Board spent \$1,009 on this project; in 1945 the amount was \$1,116 and in 1946 the amount totaled \$1,314. Each year the Park Board sent a summary to Odell. He paid for the wages of a second man to help Martha Crone, a Mr. John Schulte. In 1946 he did likewise but had to dismiss Schulte early for the reason stated as "they did not agree" and he was looking for a replacement. In 1947 he simply sent the Park Board \$1,000 for the purpose of paying for help and in the subsequent years of 1948, through 1951 he sent \$500. Once the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden was formed in 1952, the Friends made that contribution. The hard surfacing of the paths and the building of a summer house as originally proposed was never accomplished. Many of his annual donations were reported in the Minneapolis newspapers. Full details of the addition plan are in the "Upland Garden" article.

In 1951 Odell requested toilet facilities and mosquito control. (letter to C. E. Doell dated May 22, 1951). Odell had been to Tucson and visited a garden there that had modern toilet facilities and said if a small city like that could provide facilities certain Minneapolis could "go them one better." These were not provided either. Mosquitoes were always a problem. Martha Crone once replied to Theodore Wirth "I wish to offer my apologies for the ill manners of my mosquitoes, they are rather difficult to train as each one lives only a short time" (letter June 22, 1933). The Park Board was already hesitant of using DDT.

Above from documents in the files of Clinton Odell in the Martha Crone Collection at the Minnesota History Center.

(2) Minutes - Annual Meeting of the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden, June 4, 1977

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THANKS TO ODELL INSPIRATION

Burma Tickles All the Nation

By GEORGE HELLICKSON
Minneapolis Tribune Business Editor

Burma-Vita Co., 2318 Chestnut avenue, which jingled its way into the nation's conscience, is up to its old tricks again. Motorists, returning to the open highway in increasing numbers, are finding the company's rhyming signs there ahead of them.

Forty thousand of the signs line the nation's major highways today.

Near railroad crossings they read:

"Remember This If You'd Be Spared; Trains Don't Whistle Because They're Scared—Burma Shave."

Approaching a rural school, motorists are advised:

"Past Schoolhouses Take It Slow; Let the Little Shavers Grow."

On hills they're warned:

"Hardly a Driver Is Now Alive Who Passes On Hills at 75."

The company takes its safety jingles seriously.

But it doesn't take itself seriously and never has since its first signs went up near Albert Lea in 1926. The first signs didn't rhyme. They read:

"Cheer up, Face, The War Is Over."

Clinton Odell, president of the company, admits he and his two sons, Allan and Leonard, vice presidents, were so naive about advertising they didn't know it couldn't be done that way. Being novices, they learned, sometimes at their advantage.

The elder Odell was a sick insurance man whose physician advised him to get into some other line. Allan and Leonard were just out of college. Associated with them was a chemist befriended by Odell because he, too, was sick.

IT WOULDN'T SHAVE

They didn't even know what fast competitive company they were choosing in getting into the shaving cream business.

It was in 1925 that the chemist, Carl Noren, now a company director, whipped up the first batch

of shaving cream. It was the first of some 2,000 experimental batches and, says Odell, "a nice cream that wouldn't shave."

"No. 153" among the experiments became the present Burma-Shave—with only slight changes—when its qualities were discovered by the elder Odell on a trip to Iowa.

He'd forgotten to take shaving cream with him. His traveling companion, Carl Von Rohr, secretary-treasurer of the company until his death in 1933, happened to have "153" with him. Enough for one last shave remained in the jar.

Odell used it and recognized in it the future Burma-Shave. The two returned to Minneapolis immediately and went into production.

The product's name, Burma-Shave, was an adaption of the name of a liniment, Burma-Vita, which the firm had made previously; "Burma" for the country from which several ingredients of the product came, and "vita," Latin for life or vigor.

SON HITS THE ROAD

It was still just another shaving cream, however, until Allan Odell prevailed upon his father to give him \$200 to try out the signs.

He bought second-hand lumber, wrote the "cheer up face" line and drove out in a pick-up truck to set up the signs. Then he went into Albert Lea and proceeded to sell the druggists there a bill of goods.

"We knew we had it when the repeat orders started coming in from Albert Lea," Clinton Odell recounted.

But the firm's bank didn't know the firm had "it." Odell had to look around for new financing. Friends were skeptical. Experienced advertising men said the roadside signs couldn't possibly succeed.

How wrong their advice was is



'RHYME AND REASON' SELL SHAVING CREAM—The Odells' business philosophy is that if "you've read the rhyme you'll try the reason: Burma-Shave." Left to right, shown studying new contributions for the rhyming road signs, are Leonard, sales manager; Clinton, president, and Allan, advertising manager. For 20 jingles selected annually out of thousands of poets' contributions they pay \$100 each.

shown in a wholesale volume of business this year totaling \$1,200,000. Only shortages of fats and oils prevent the figure from being much higher.

COMEDIANS HELP

The rhyming signs backed up by a good product did it, the Odells are convinced. First year sales were \$25,000. They jumped to \$165,000 in 1927, when Allan Odell organized the initial advertising campaign. With the signs

came a lot of free advertising as the jingles caught on with comedians and publications.

During the war expansion of the use of signs was held to a minimum but those that were placed carried timely messages.

For instance:

Buying War Bonds Means Money Lent, So They Don't Cost You One Red Cent."

One of them was prophetic:

"Let's Make Hitler And Hirohito Look As Sick As Old Benito—Buy War Bonds."

"Let's Make Hitler And Hirohito Look As Sick As Old Benito—Buy War Bonds."

It was put up some months before Mussolini's fall.

"We don't take ourselves seriously here," said Clinton Odell. "We never ask anyone to buy. We joke and make friends. There is more to being in business than making money and that's having fun doing it."

Although the company has had numerous offers to sell to eastern interests, Odell insists "Our reply is 'not for sale.' This is a family outfit and a Minneapolis outfit and it is going to stay right here."

The Odells believe the company had three "lucky breaks:" the first, when Clinton Odell discovered "153" was "it;" the second, when Allan Odell conceived and executed the rhyming sign idea; and the third, when the company went ahead with plans for its new home in 1940. It formerly was housed in a building it had outgrown at 2019 E. Lake street.

It is a lucky manufacturer who has a site as pleasant and practical as Burma-Vita Co. The president's office looks out over Bassett's creek.

SITE PROVES LUCKY

Purchased in 1932, the site was exempted when the city subsequently took the land along the creek for a park. A good job of landscaping and long, low styling of the building make it fit into its surroundings. Outside of the industrial zone, it nevertheless has railroad trackage at its back door. The dust-free neighborhood is ideal for cosmetics manufacturing.

NO BRUSH, NO LATHER—

---But Lots of Flowers in His Garden

From the Christian Science Monitor

THE WELL-DRESSED MAN whom visitors to the Eloise Butler Wild Flower garden in Minneapolis see pulling weeds every week-end except in the dead of winter is not the superintendent of parks. Five days a week he is the chairman of the board of the shaving cream company (Burma Shave) which adorns the roadside with jingles designed to discourage traffic accidents and encourage shavers to remove their whiskers with his products.

Clinton Odell, disciple of Thoreau (he's read twice all 20 volumes of Thoreau's works), finds the development of a public wild flower garden far more satisfying than playing golf. While fellow businessmen are out digging holes in the turf on their favorite links, Odell is digging holes to plant some choice specimen just received from a distant part of the country. Thanks to his digging in his pockets as well as in the ground, the Eloise Butler Wild Flower garden is considered by many the most remarkable in any public park and one of the most unusual in the country.

Odell traces his interest in wild flowers back to his school days. "Forty-odd years ago Eloise Butler was my high school natural science teacher," he tells us. "She used to take groups of us out to what is now called Theodore Wirth park, for experiments on mosquitoes. She and a few other teachers had received permission from the park board to use a portion of the park for botanizing. They used to go out there in their spare time and collect and plant specimens for their own observation. I just got interested in going out there in the spring to see what came up.

"In those days it was the popular idea that wild flowers didn't need to be cultivated like tame ones. Most people thought that the wilder the setting, the better the plants like it. Miss Butler thought so, too. When she retired from teaching and was given a park board assignment of developing a wild flower garden which would represent all Minnesota wild plants. She felt that weeds should be represented, too.

"But the barbarian weeds soon took over and destroyed the choicer plants. Botanists have now learned that many wild flowers are displaced plants growing in sandy soil because they've been pushed out of their natural habitat by weeds or grasses. They need protection, proper soil, and cultivation even more than their tame relatives."

After Miss Butler died in 1933, the garden was named for her. Mrs. W. H. Crone, who had been helping Miss Butler for many years as a hobby, took charge of the garden.

When Odell found Mrs. Crone waging a losing battle on the 20-acre front against the encroaching weeds, he contributed the services of two sturdy men and worked with them to make his former teacher's dream come true.

He added a fence to the garden in order to preserve the flowers from picnickers who didn't un-

derstand or marauders who didn't care. He helped make a watering and drainage system possible so that the flowers need not suffer from either too much or too little rain.

Odell's face lights up as he discusses his hobby in his office while vats of shaving cream churned in the adjacent factory. "We've got a perfect spot for a wild flower garden," he explains, "because every variety of terrain is represented, from the swamp and three artificial lakes to wooded hill-sides and open upland fields. Even the soil has the right amount of acidity. We've enlarged the original plan of keeping it a purely Minnesota gar-



CLINTON ODELL

The garden of his dreams

den and are experimenting with plants from other parts of the country.

"Every northern wild flower can grow here except mountain flowers, and we are trying out some of them. We've established contacts all over the nation for exchange of seeds and plants.

"New specimens are planted in beds so they won't be crowded out by the grass and so we can cover them in winter. And we've built fire lanes to prevent a spreading forest fire."

Last year 18,000 visitors passed through the gate to this outdoor museum, many of them children with their teachers. From April 1, when the snow trillium push out from beneath the moist blankets of last year's leaves to Oct. 15 when the golden-rod and wild asters flaunt their gay colors from the uplands, the garden is a procession of bright displays.