

Annals of the Wild Life Reserve

The Writings of Eloise Butler



An Autobiographical Sketch - 1911

Having a reticent nature, I must confess to shivering on the brink before taking the plunge into self-revelations. I was born not long after the middle of the nineteenth century in the little village of Appleton, on the St. George River, about twelve miles from the seashore, Knox County, Maine. Here I lived until I was about fifteen, attending district and private schools, my chief amusement being then what it still is – roaming the woods. An aunt who lived with us taught my sister and me to know the plants of the neighborhood. My mother said I was abnormally good when I was a baby, but got bravely over it when I grew up.

Indeed, some of the neighbors thought I must be idiotic because I lay quietly in the cradle, making no demands for attention. They said, too, that I hadn't any nose - only two little holes in my face where my nose ought to be. Accordingly, everyone was pinching my face in order to make the organ grow. Who can tell how much my lack of good looks is due to that practice?



My father was a farmer. Before marriage my father and mother had both been teachers, and at that time and place no other career than teaching was thought of for a studious girl. So, after completing the courses at high school, Lynn, Massachusetts, and normal school, Castine, Maine, I began the work that I am still engaged in. (In my next incarnation I shall not be a teacher.) My father sold his farm and moved to a small town in northern Indiana, on Lake Michigan, just as I left the normal school. I taught for a few months in Indiana. I have a keen recollection of a ludicrous experience. We New Englanders slur the sound of r. In northern Indiana, settled largely by Germans, the r is exaggerated and the speech bristles with bur-r-s. My pupils could not understand what I said, and a child where I boarded, who had learned my language, had to act as interpreter. The report went abroad that the new teacher was tongue-tied. With what circumlocutions I tried to avoid words with r's! The result of my efforts to acquire the new tongue had the following sequel: I

remained West seven years before visiting East. Then my relatives threw up their hands in astonishment, exclaiming, "Good heavens! Where did you get that brogue!"

Not finding a situation to my liking in Indiana, I secured a place in the Minneapolis schools and here I have lived since 1874. The monotony of my life has been broken during the long summer vacations. I have taken courses of study at Harvard, at Woods Hole and our State University and have enjoyed particularly the instruction of Dr. J. C. Arthur and Dr. Charles Bessey, the latter the greatest and most enthusiastic teacher I have ever met. The summer of 1896 I spent abroad, reveling with the old masters in art – my greatest hobby after plants. And I collected chiefly algae and ferns for three seasons in Jamaica, West Indies. Those were memorable occasions, to which I must add a most enjoyable sojourn at the seaside station of the University of Minnesota, on Vancouver Island, a camp sixty miles from civilization.



As you will know, I chiefly live and move and have my being in and for the Wild Botanic Garden. I haven't had a photograph taken for twenty years. . . . is a "snapshot" fired this summer as I was crossing a stream surrounding a quaking tamarack bog.

The photo at the right is the one she writes about her crossing a stream in the Quaking Bog (just west of the Garden location). The photo was dated 1911. *Photo courtesy Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis Collection.* Photos of Appleton and Castine Maine courtesy of Martha Hellander.

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