

The Friends of the Wild Flower Garden



Alvin R. Witt



Alvin Witt was first elected to the Friends Board of Directors in 1963. He was elected Vice-president in 1966 and held that position until May of 1970. He retired from the board in May of 1973 at which point he was appointed an honorary director in recognition of his services when he was treasurer of the Building Committee that was formed by the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden for the construction of the Martha Crone Shelter in 1968-1970.

It was at the first meeting of the building committee that Alvin Witt suggested that the Garden name be changed to add "and Bird Sanctuary" changing the name to "Eloise Butler Wild Flower and Bird Sanctuary." The suggestion was to be presented to the Board of Park Commissioners. At a meeting on March 25, 1969 in the office of Superintendent Robert Ruhe, Mr. Ruhe said the Park Board was agreeable to the suggestion of changing the name as requested. However, when put into use the name came out with "wildflower" as one word substituted for "wild flower" and that caused the official name of the Friends to now differ from that of the Garden. Details of the all that is in a separate document of the "Garden name".

In 1978 Friends newsletter co-editor Pat Deweese interviewed Martha Crone and the editor wrote: "Two trees she remembers fondly are an elm just outside the Garden that was fenced in back in the days when Theodore Wirth and Alvin Witt considered it 'their' tree." This is the largest elm remaining in the Park and with treatments by the Friends [see 1976 history] has so far survived the elm disease. (to that date.)

The Witt family was important in the grocery business in Minneapolis from the 1890s until the 1980s when large supermarkets became the norm for grocery shopping. Alvin was one of three brothers that operated Witt's Market with several twin city locations but with the main store at 705 Hennepin Avenue in Minneapolis. He was treasurer of the company for many years and was active in the National Association of Retail Grocers.

The family considered Witt's to be the first grocery store in the nation to use shopping carts, beginning in 1924 and to become completely self-service by 1949. They had their own poultry operation, called "Med-O-Sweet Poultry," in Osseo MN where they raised and processed poultry for their stores.

One event in the business that made the newspapers was a sale of buffalo meat in 1945 while meat was still on war-time rationing. They had contracted for 100 head but only 40 arrived and all the meat sold out the first day of the sale. Alvin said in 1963 during their 75th anniversary that "That was a mighty lucky thing too. If we had gotten all of them we would still be selling buffalo meat." War-time rationing of meat had ended the day after their sale. (1) Photo next page.



Alvin Witt and nephew Bill Witt in October 1963.



Another war-time event was when *Minneapolis Star* columnist Jimmy Robinson posted an appeal for pheasant skins that the military wanted in Hawaii. Alvin Witt had already sent 150 skins but when the column broke the Star office was deluged with skins and at that point Witt volunteered to be the clearing house for pheasant skins. (2)

In his spare time Alvin was a noted collector of autographs and stamps. In the 1950s he was secretary / treasurer of the Collectors Club in Minneapolis. He and his wife, Bernice, took things one step further and when they traveled they took photos of paintings in museums and landscape subjects that had been depicted on postage stamps and married the two for presentation. Unfortunately in 1967 their home in Golden Valley was burglarized and the entire collection, at that time valued at \$19,000, was stolen.

Among other activities, both Alvin and Bernice were active members of the University Club, Alvin was treasurer in 1937. Bernice was active with the Red Cross Volunteer Nurses Aide Committee, in the Minneapolis League of Women Voters, the Wells College Club, the Mother's Club of St. Mary's Hall and the Christmas Seal Campaigns. The extended Witt family of brothers and relatives maintained a Summer retreat in the country they called "Witt's End."

Bernice Witt passed away in June 1970 and memorial funds allowed the Friends to pay for the fountain located on the patio area in front of the Martha Crone Visitor's Shelter in the Woodland Garden. It as installed in 1971.

Alvin passed away in October 1973.

Reference: Minutes of The Board of Directors and other documents of the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden, Inc. Text by G D Bebeau.

Newspaper photos from *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

Note 1: *Minneapolis Star-Trib*, Oct. 22, 1973

Note 2: *Minneapolis Star*, Nov. 12, 1942



Witt Fountain in memory of Bernice Healy Witt. Installed in 1971. Photo G D Bebeau