

Ridges Naturalist learned lessons from 'Miss Emma'

A tall, deeply-tanned, white haired, graceful-moving lady clad in a sunny yellow skirt and white blouse with ruffles on the front walked down the aisle of the Baileys Harbor Town Hall prior to a Ridges Sanctuary nature program in the summer of 1956. There was a noticeable lull in the conversation of the audience until the imposing lady sat down with her friends to wait for the movie being given by Murl Deusing to begin. It was my first glimpse of Miss Emma Toft.

The brilliant color of her skirt could very well have reflected that of the countless yellow Lady's slipper orchids in bloom during that month. These and other wildflowers had lured me to this part of the county and I was soon to learn that Miss Emma, Olivia Traven, John and Nina Brann and other staunch conversationalists not only knew the plants of this region extremely well but were also tough "in-fighters" for their protection.

The natural unspoiled beauty of the Baileys Harbor area lured me back many times during the next several years until finally I began working as the summer naturalist for the Ridges Sanctuary in 1964. Lucky for me Miss Emma liberally shared her great knowledge of the natural history. Her many years of experiences along the shores and in the woods here, coupled with her constant study and hard physical work had molded her into a highly respected outdoor Person. I remember some advice she offered while accompanying me with one of my first school tours into the Ridges. She emphasized the importance of constantly challenging the group, keeping the boys and girls "on their toes," and not allowing one bit of "fooling around," as she put it to enter the scene. The saying she applied to the situation was, "One boy 's a boy, two boys 's half a boy. three boys 's no boy at all"

Perhaps it was my inexperience in working with groups in the out-of-doors which prompted me to occasionally raise doubts to Emma about the effectiveness of some of my tours, to which Emma replied, "Don't shake hands with the devil 'til you meet him." I soon learned that she was not one who expected disappointment and trouble or even wanted to talk about the possibility.

She had a gentle on-going love affair with the birds for as long as I knew her and it was she who taught me the art of luring the black-capped chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches to the hand for food. It was a crowning event when the bluebirds nested in one of the handsome weathered birdhouses along the high garden fence at the Point. Two birds, the eastern kingbird and belted kingfisher, were summer favorites as they frequently perched on a thin wooden post near the shore as Emma quietly watched them from where she sat on the front porch swing.

Two other choice birds in her life both reflected the independence and solitude so evident in Emma's ways, the Pileated woodpecker and the loon. The smile and twinkle in her eyes were just marvelous when she'd suggest that we go down to the shore at the rocks to see if the loons were passing through yet this spring or fall, and the day she called to the loon in her high tremulous voice and was promptly answered by the bird of the wilderness was one of the greatest moments in my life. Through the years I learned that it was one of many ways in which she communed with the wild, the eagle, deer, grouse, and whistling swan.

The day came when I began building my first bridge in the Sanctuary and needed a post maul. Emma gave me the head of one of the old stone sledge-hammers used at the Point years ago and said that, with a new handle, it should do the job quite well. To my surprise the finished tool weighed well over 20 pounds, more than I could handle in repeatedly lifting it high over one's head to drive the cedar posts into the swale.

Somewhat embarrassed, I returned to Miss Emma and told her that the sledge was a little more than I could handle, to which she replied with a faint trace of a smile on her face. "Yes Roy, there were really men in the old days at the Point!" what a treat. It was to sit by her kitchen table at the point near the warm glow radiating from the wonderful old cast iron stove, the Mayflower, and browse through one of her favorite books. "Wildflowers.. by Homer D. House. It was and still is an outstanding book, but what made Emma's so extremely valuable were her numerous handwritten notes, plant lists, and blossoming dates written into the margins. Like daily journals these anecdotal records would be taken on increasing importance from year to year we spent many hours in that most pleasant sunny room discussing her records and the plants of the area.

You were looking at a very determined woman when it came to protecting wild plants, and one of the most long-lasting lessons she constantly taught by example was how to walk through the woods without having to trample the wild plants. Oh, she was gentle in that respect. To this day, thanks to Emma. I have little respect for people; no matter how learned they claim to be, who appear to have no knowledge of nor care where their feet are landing as they walk in the woods.



One of my favorite stories from Miss Emma is about the man from California who had parked his Cadillac along Ridges Drive and was picking a bouquet of fringed gentians one September day. Emma sternly approached him and said, "Sir, we love the wildflowers here and protect them." The man didn't look up and kept right on picking the blue flowers. Emma braced herself and, with a louder voice, said, "Sir, if you pick all these flowers there'll be none for others to enjoy." Still no response. Now Miss Emma practically shouted, "We DON'T pick the fringed gentians here!" to which he replied, "well, we do in California."

Finally, like an exploding thunderbolt, she fired back at him, "You're nothing but a damn hog!" The man looked up in shocked disbelief, set the flowers down, hopped into his big car and sped away,

Another time I had just led my tour group onto Ridges Drive about a half mile east of the lower light to find Emma, her little blue station wagon parked on the side of the road, delivering a very stern lecture to some disrespectful nature photographers. Seconds later I was shocked as I looked to my left to see a family, father, mother, and little girl of about 10, come out of the edge of the woods about 100 yards away carrying bunches of wood lilies, get into their car and drive right past us into the village.

I shouted to Emma asking if I could use her car. "By all means," she replied. The other car was out of sight by the time I arrived at Highway 57. Instinct told me to turn toward the village, and there they were, parked in front of the town hall. I eased Emma's car in front of theirs so they couldn't leave, mustered up all the courage I had, and bunched into the most fired-up lecture I've ever given. "Do you realize that those lilies are protected by law? Did you have any idea who owned the land on which they were picked, and that it was a wildflower sanctuary? Do you want your little daughter to grow up to be a violator too?"

All this time the little girl sitting in the back seat holding about 20 wood lilies began to cry louder and louder. Both parents apologized with great sincerity and promised they would never do such a terrible thing again as long as they lived. Knees shaking I returned to the group where Emma had similar success with the photographers with the large heavy feet.

Meals with Emma were ambrosiously memorable, especially her broiled whitefish (broiled on a white oak platter), obelskievers, black walnut molasses cookies, and steamed cherry pudding with creamy sauce. We always joked about the latter having only 50 calories — per spoonful!

Her vegetable and flower gardens were second to none and I distinctly remember the great faith she had in the old Seed Company of Madison, WI. Hundreds of friends enjoyed her beautiful Madonna lilies, lupines, and attractive bouquets of sweet peas, one of her favorites. Many were the times I'd open my kitchen door in summer early in the morning to find either a little bunch or sweet peas or a paper sack of fresh vegetables there with no note attached, but I always knew they were from Emma.

What a treat it was to eat her homemade bread topped with her thimbleberry jam. She referred to that delicate jam as "the jam with the pine woods flavor." when picking the thimbleberries by herself way back in the woods on the Point she would tie her red bandanna on the tallest berry cane she could find next to the trail and then simply keep that in sight as she picked. That way she could always find her way back to the trail which frequently had to be located by feel with her feet because the large thimbleberry leaves hid the path from view. How we cherish Emma's recipe for genuine thimbleberry jam, the finest in the world!

Jens Jensen and Emma were close friends and came to be recognized as leading conservationists in the constant fight to preserve the remaining wilderness. I often admired an oil painting, done by Jensen that hung on the living room wall where Emma lived in winter. It showed two struggling trees battling the elements along the rocky shore at Toft Point. Emma said that Jensen referred to the two trees in the painting as Emma and Jens, side by side, fighting for the wild creatures.

Miss Emma told of going to visit Jens Jensen a few days before he died. His eyes and face were expressionless as she entered the room carrying a little picnic basket covered with a bright towel. She placed the basket by his side and he managed to pull the towel off the small container. Out jumped a tiny baby skunk onto Jens' chest. A broad beaming smile broke out on Jensen's face, a smile that Emma said she dearly loved and had hoped to see at least one more time — and she did!



Emma Toft

— Lukes

The white pine towered at the top of her list of favorite trees and it was a happy day when Carl Scholz, his wife Ruth, and Emma invited me to accompany them on a drive to Newald, in north-central Wisconsin, to see what at that time was the world's largest living white pine, the famous McArthur Pine. The cold winter did not laze us as we trudged through the deep snow to admire the great giant our tape measure showed the tree to be 19 feet 10 inches in circumference. Emma was very eager to have her picture taken as she stood next to the grand old pine I was somewhat taken by surprise because numerous experiences had taught me that Miss Emma strongly resented having her picture taken. Another picture she asked to have taken was of her standing next to her favorite sign at the Ridges, a sign made by her friend, Bill Beckstrom. A memorable experience centered around that sign, occurred on my first trip through the Ridges with a school group. Emma had come along to help and teach me as well. We had all passed the sign when Emma said, "I'll give a dollar to each child in this class who can repeat, word for word the message on the sign we just passed" Absolute silence followed, and so once again it was Emma who repeated, 'Flowers — Flowers are loveliest where they grow. Love them, enjoy them, but leave them so.' Later she told me that, In all the years she had tried that, not once did she have to spend a dollar!"

Oh, how she revered the American Indian, everything about them, their ways, the beauty of their stone tools, and their lives in the wilderness. She emphasized this point shortly after the time came when members of the Toft family, including Emma, decided to sell Tofts Point to the Wisconsin Chapter of Nature Conservancy. The deed was then given by the Conservancy to the University of Wisconsin to be managed by the Green Bay campus

I was invited to meet on a Saturday with Emma and a group of about 15 UW professors from the various fields and campuses. The discussion centered around the different ways the Point might be used in educating people in future years one of the gentlemen, interested in Indian culture, said, Miss Toft, what do you think about some archeological excavating here at the Point?" Silence followed the question and finally Emma, with a stony look on her face, said slowly and emphatically, "I DON'T WANT ANY DIGGING!! PLEASE! Let the Indians rest in PEACE!" That portion of the discussion came to an abrupt ending.

Carl Scholz, one of Emma's closest and most trusted friends, was chosen to receive an award, to be presented by Governor Lucey in Madison, for his work with the Door County Natural Beauty Council. I stood in the receiving line next to Emma and several other friends of Carl as the governor entered the room and proceeded to introduce himself to each individual, requesting that they tell their name and where they were from when he stopped in front of Emma she said, "I'm Emma Toft; I'm from Mud Bay, and (shaking her finger just inches from his face) please Mr. Governor, DON'T Let them straighten that beautiful winding road to Northport at the tip of Door county!"

Broad grins appeared on everyone's face including the governor's who didn't quite know what to say. Finally he said something like, "Miss Toft, I've heard a lot about you and I'm very pleased that you could be here today." Happily the lovely winding road is still winding!

I was a member of many nature study groups visiting the Point and invariably someone would ask, "Miss Toft, how much land do you have here?" to which Emma would answer, "when the lake is up we have less, when the lake is down we have more." And that was that! Later she would whisper to me, "Roy, that's none of their business!"

with Emma's passing last week and the Point being decorated with deep snow we Just had to strap on our snowshoes and make several trips out to Toft Point along the Old Road clear down to the rocks in view of Fishhead Point. I frequently snowshoed with Miss Emma, to beyond her 80th birthday, out to the Point to help her put out food for the birds and other animals. whether she was doing the right or wrong thing, in the eyes of the trained wildlife experts, was not nearly as important as was the continuously strengthening bond between Emma, the wild creatures, and the land. She was truly a lady of the wilderness content to place animals and nature first and people second.

She was a tireless worker and teacher who taught more by her actions and accomplishments than by words, touching the lives of many. The principles of wilderness preservation, hard physical work, and simple healthful living which guided her life would. it followed and practiced by many others, help to make this a better world in which to live.

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