

## Emma Toft given Bronze Medal for conservation



Miss Emma Toft, Baileys Harbor, long known for her outstanding work at The Ridges Sanctuary and with conservation, received the Bronze Medal Award Tuesday, Sept. 15, 1964 from the Wisconsin Federation of Garden clubs.

Miss Toft had just returned by plane from a vacation in Alaska and upon receiving her award at the Coach House Motor Inn at Milwaukee was given an standing ovation by those present. This is the highest award that can be given to a non-member by the Wisconsin Federation of Garden clubs and was in recognition of her long years of unselfish and devoted work in conservation. This was also the first time that such an award had been given to a resident of Door County.

Also attending from the county were Mrs. Percy Newman, 3rd state vice president; Mrs. Thorval Toft, president of the local garden club; Mrs. Vernon Olson, Mrs. Alden Brabazon and Mrs. Cyril Lauscher.

Following is the text of the recommendation that was sent to the nominating committee by the Sturgeon Bay Garden club and written by Mrs. Cyril Lauscher.

*"Touch as much as you wish with your eyes, but do not see with your fingers."*

This sign may greet the visitor from early spring to late fall at the family home of one of the most avid conservationists of our time—Miss Emma Toft of Toft's Point, Baileys Harbor, WI.

Also near this pleasant Lake Michigan village is The Ridges Sanctuary, a wild flower habitat of considerable note for over 25 years. Part of our story is the birth of this sanctuary - the birth which Emma Toft helped to make possible.

Edwin Way Teale, a literary naturalist and photographer, in his book "Journey Into Summer," page 100, describes her as follows:

"Later that afternoon we were joined by Emma Tort, a remarkable woman who had lived all her life among the wildflowers, the birds and the animals of an area left relatively unchanged, the pioneer homestead where she was born, Toft's Point, just north of Baileys Harbor. A long time ago an Eastern botanist had come to the Door County Peninsula to collect plants. He had boarded with her family. Thus as a small child she had become fascinated by the study of wildflowers. It was an interest that never waned, an interest that had played its part in the preservation of the orchid gardens of The Ridges."

Just prior to 1937 the Door County Park Board decided to have this area leveled off and used as a trailer park. A meeting sponsored by the Sturgeon Bay Woman's Club, where state, as well as local Baileys Harbor people were present, informed the public as to the value of this property for conservation purposes. But it was Emma Toft and Frank Oldenberg who headed a delegation of Baileys Harbor people and who met the bulldozer come to tear this precious woodland apart, and it was she who said "If you go any further you will have to scoop us up too."

So the Ridges Sanctuary came into being, a corporation whose sole purpose is to preserve the habitat of plants. Miss Toft has been its president and has served on its Board of Directions for 27 years. The Articles of Incorporation were signed by Jens Jensen and Mertha Fulkerson of Ellison Bay, Emma Toft, Frank Oldenburg, Mrs. James J. McArdle, William E. Sieker and Mrs. W. C. Sieker, A. B. Gochenaur, and Olivia Traven, all listed at Baileys Harbor at that time, and John Matter of Ephraim.

However, the actual preservation of The Ridges was only a beginning of the work of Emma Toft for that particular area. She has labored in its upkeep, as well as giving acreage for its protection. Clearing brush is an example of her labors, and was illustrated in one of several fine articles done about her by the Milwaukee Journal.

One such article, dated June 15, 1955, on the women's Page, shows Miss Toft and others at this work. In fact, many photographers have been guided and instructed by her. Not just well known photographers but many, many others who have helped to find choice subjects for their picture memories. One of the favorite pictures is that of the calypso orchid.

What type of groups has she guided through The Ridges just for the satisfaction of introducing nature to them? Miss Toft says various ones, but perhaps the most important one is the school children. Year after year the school children come and learn from her, as she walks with them along the Ridges, about the grasses, the flowers, trees, the "bumps" on the trees called burls, the "old man's beard" the parasitic growth, the animal, the eagles on the bluff. She was the moving spirit behind nature essay contests sponsored by the Ridges among the Door county school children.

Some of the others who have visited over the years, and have benefited by Miss Toft's soft voice explaining the wonders of her native land are garden club groups; Girl Scouts; Wisconsin Chapter, Nature Conservancy; Conservation groups of young men from the Stevens Point State College for many summers; Milwaukee Nature club; Green Bay Bird club; Illinois and Wisconsin chapters of "Friends of our Native Landscape"; Botanists; and just people...lovers of the great outdoors.

Another "pal" of Miss Toft's is the game warden, who finds his way to her door with stray babies, such as the raccoon, fox, birds, fawns and even a baby skunk. Come one, come all and have been cared for, petted, named, but

eventually turned over to the Wildlife Refuge. "Journey Into Summer" by Teale, page 100, pictures one of the one of the fawns she raised.

George Pedlow, a Rockford Park district landscape engineer has at various times spread the seeds of wildflowers around the countryside. He asked Miss Toft if it would be possible for her to get him some seeds of the fringed gentian. To ask is to do for Miss Toft, so one fall from "The Little Bayou" at her home she gathered the seeds for him. The next time you see a fringed gentian it may be the grandchild of this very seed. Mr. Pedlow has been honored for his work and he has graciously acknowledged publicly the labors of Emma Toft in his project.

May 21, 1959, the Sturgeon Bay Woman's Club presented her name for the Certificate of Merit award in Conservation given by the Wisconsin Women's Club Federation. She was chosen from the entries, and on May 21, 1959 the Conservation Committee of the Federation presented this award.

Dec. 7, 1951 Miss Toft received the Milwaukee County Conservation Alliance award for her teachings about wildlife, wildflowers and ornithology.

In June, 1960 she was elected to the Board of Trustees of the Wisconsin Chapter of Nature Conservancy, a group dedicated to preserving the natural areas as living museums. This she had to refuse because of its frequent meetings and travel difficulties.

The Home Radio service of Madison made a recording on the Ridges with Emma Toft, Virginia Eifert, of the Illinois State Museum, Springfield, Ill., Mrs. Beckstrom, Fish Creek, and Mrs. Baumann, head of the woman's Division of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau. Purpose: to tell about the Ridges Sanctuary for the Farm Bureau radio programs.

Virginia Eifert, a naturalist. Illustrator and author of the book "Journeys in Green Places" (among other writings) has dedicated this book as follows: "This book is affectionately dedicated to Mertha Fulkerson and Emma Toft, and the Ridges Assn. Guardians of that ancient haunt of boreal plants, 'The Ridges'."

The Sturgeon Bay Home and Garden Club has placed Miss Toft's slide of the showy lady slipper in the world Gardening collection of the Wisconsin Garden Club Federation.

Miss Toft is a member of the Wisconsin Ornithological Society and has assisted in both winter and spring counts of the Door county birds.

Christmas we had a card again, telling when the whistling swans went by, the trials of the deer-hunting season when she guards her land from trespass, the coming of the snows, news of the yearlings which come to her door for corn, and other news from "woodland friends and Emma."

Emma Toft is well known in upper Door County as a friend of Jens Jensen, and as a strong, picturesque woman of much character. She was one of those who saved The Ridges from destruction and is a member of the corporation which cares for and supports it now. A good deal of her work is with young people. Several times she has been president of the Ridges Association.

Most of all Emma loves her own family acreage of virgin pine on this wind-swept rocky, northern point, which her determination, industry and sacrifice have thus far preserved. An article about her with a large handsome picture in color was printed in the Milwaukee Journal a few years ago. She is "good copy."

"A naturalist, a good storyteller, a fighter and a lady," it begins, and goes on to tell how Toft keeps watch almost alone over her domain. Today you follow this serene, white-haired woman through the forest and you see her long legs and bright scarf flashing silent far ahead of you. She is without fear of animals, solitude, legislation or mankind. "I've never been lonely; she says "How can you be lonely in your own home?"

I like to remember Miss Emma the first time she guided us through the Ridges. She swung her long form in the ubiquitous blue Jeans to the top of a table at the entrance. The sunlight fell on her white hair thickly knotted at her neck and her blue eyes smiled shyly at us as she pulled a slip of paper from her pocket and read her credo in her soft voice:

“A sanctuary is a place where wildlife both plant and animal is permitted to live unmolested by man, A God-given shrine of vast importance in the cultural life of man, not a museum or an arboretum” - Jens Jensen.

Eccentric? Perhaps, if instilling in the heart of a child the love of every living thing: if fighting, verbally, physically and spiritually all her life for the welfare of mankind in the preservation of those natural assets which bring beauty and peace to his soul.

Mertha Fulkerson, manager now at the Clearing and for many years secretary to Jens Jensen, had this to say about her long time friend.

“Emma Toft, an intimate friend with nature in all of its aspects, a practicing conservationist, a friend of the birds and all of the small creatures in her woods, a friend of the deer which stalks her woods, and which listens for her voice and watches for her, daily sharing with them of her bounties, a friend of the virgin pines which she, against all odds and all temptations put forth by lumbermen's fabulous offers, has been able during her lifetime to preserve a bit of the majesty that was Door County in preserving the area of virgin pines silhouetted against an intimate bay on the shores of Lake Michigan. And I feel she has been able to preserve this very living example of the Door County that was, for future generations; as those to whom she has shown wonders will find a way of saving all this so those of the tomorrow may have the same chance to learn from others what Emma so nobly exemplified to everyone coming her way on this bit of rugged shoreline.

“When Emma was a young woman a day of decision had come. She had been trained as a nurse and was ready to start out in her profession. But then her mother became ill and passed away, then her father, and her first job was nursing her parents through their last days. In the intimate days, when her father was lying bed stricken, Emma became aware that her father's wish was that these majestic trees could be saved so future generations might see the grandeur of Door County's inheritance. And she began to dream of how she might not only save the trees but how she could also give to the world the lesson in nature's ways so vividly seen in these woodlands and on this rugged shore. She conceived the idea of a little family hotel on that rocky shore, where the footsteps of the pioneer would remain an obvious part of the setting and where she would not only feed her guests' bodies, but also their souls with the wonders that were lying all about them. She not only lavished her table with the good things she had grown and personally prepared but she then spurred them on to seek out beyond the easy chair and follow her to the most intimate secrets of these woodlands. Here would come naturalists, scientists, teachers, ministers, doctors, to sit at her table and to eagerly follow her to the farthest corner of these woodlands to learn firsthand the secrets and laws which govern all life, including man.

“These ridges had been an intimate part of their childhood. It was here their parents had taken them by the hand for a Sunday afternoon walk to find the first flowers of the season, or to see the carpets of dwarf iris in early spring, they would later take trips to see the lady slippers, the pitcher plants, the white fringed orchids, the grass of pernanis, the fringed gentians, and in the fall to look for wild cranberries. To destroy all, of this was to them sacrilegious. They stood their ground and the one man Board gave in by saying he would let the county decide. The good people of Baileys Harbor won the jurisdiction over the area: they formed a corporation, and under the watchful eye of Emma Toft and her guiding hand, they now have close to 900 acres.

“Emma's whole life has been dedicated to teaching a respect and a love for the world given to us as our great heritage, a world far more marvelous than anything man can ever envision. Wherever a true cause of conservation comes to her attention, you will find her in there doing things. Emma's one philosophy, as I have watched her throughout the years, has been if anything is worthwhile, then do something about it. She never put much stock in words unless there was also action.”

Many other prominent persons also had words of the highest praise for Miss Toft and her lifetime of conservation and nature work.

Rutherford Plait, lecturer and botanist from New York said, "Emma Toft is a great and gentle soul, truly the spirit of the beautiful forest and shore property which she loves and cherishes and where she loves every flower and wild creature."

Virginia Eifert, writer, lecturer and conductor of nature classes at The Clearing for many years wrote thus of Miss Toft, to whom she dedicated "Journeys in June."

"Emma Toft as a life-time resident of Door County has been very much a part of it in fighting for protection of wildlife. She guards her wonderful virgin-pine forest, and has been militant in preventing vandalism and destruction in the rare flowers and habitat of the Ridges. She is the kind of person who can talk to the deer and birds; her low, sweet voice is one they know and trust. She snowshoes out from Baileys Harbor to her woods several times a week in winter when the cold and snow are deep, to bring food to her wild friends. Yet she can take her rifle and threaten trespassers and evildoers who are shooting birds or animals in her forest or the Ridges, or who may be pulling up gentians or orchids.

"Emma Toft is part of the heritage and tradition of Door County. Her background reaches far into the past: she has seen the drama of events on the lake and on those rocky shores. She and the big trees withstood destruction, like heritage itself. What many of us wonder however, with growing worry, is what will happen to her forest and wild shores when Miss Emma is no longer there to guard them. The area should be added to the Ridges Sanctuary, or be made a separate preserve which is a visual record of the great forests which were part of Wisconsin, and which are now gone."

Other prominent nature lovers who have added their praises of Emma Toft are: Allen M Fuller, assistant director of the Milwaukee Public Museum; Edwin Way Teale, author literary naturalist; William Carrick, Door County game warden; and Murl Deusing, photographer lecture.

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