

'Wisconsin's First Lady of Conservation'

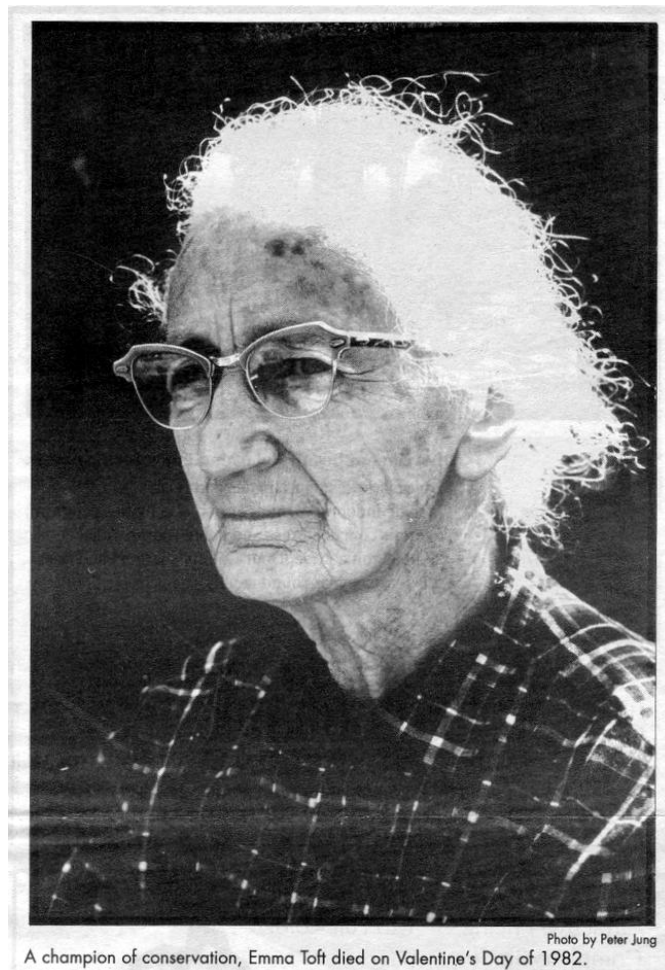
Guardian of the forest area that bore family name became beloved naturalist

By Roy Lukes

Advocate Correspondent

A girl was born on Feb. 9, 1891, to Julia Anne and Thomas Toft who was destined to become Wisconsin's first lady of conservation.

Emma Toft was brought into the world in her parents' little board-and-batten home nestled along the edge of their majestic old-growth white pine forest at Mud Bay, now known as Moonlight Bay, the first bay to the north of Baileys Harbor. Through the years, the tireless efforts of "Miss Emma" would influence people throughout the state, as well as visitors from other states and foreign countries.



A champion of conservation, Emma Toft died on Valentine's Day of 1982.

The inscription describing Toft in the 1913 yearbook of the Oshkosh State Normal School, from which she graduated with a two-year degree in high school English teaching, couldn't have been more accurate. It read: "Content to do her duty and find, in duty done, a full reward."

Unknowingly, Toft was being schooled in her lifelong duty—understanding and protecting that old-growth forest and everything that existed there—from the first day she began hiking as a small girl in the woods at Toft Point with her father and two older brothers, William and Samuel. She watched, listened and learned a great deal from them, always with the understanding that she could accompany them only if she promised never to complain of being tired and wanting to go home. As Toft said later in life, she leaned to “stretch it on.”

It was the death of her father in 1919 that forced Toft, her mother, and her other six brothers and sisters to start a rustic summer resort at the Point. Gradually through the next 50 years, guests from all over the country came to enjoy the primeval splendor, rustic conditions and exceptionally wonderful food at the Toft Point Resort.

Typical of the summer guests was Harriet Sweetland, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee English professor. She never learned to drive a car, but she loved the secluded hiking trails at the Point, and especially the quiet beauty as well as the primitive living conditions—no running water or flush toilets. Sweetland took great pride in being welcomed back year after year because, as she indicated, there were those who were allowed to come, and there were fewer allowed to return. The old-timers knew how to work, to pitch in and help. Dr. Sweetland’s wide learning from Emma surely was passed on in many ways to her college students through her teaching.

A widely-quoted story about Emma Toft, “Virgin Forest Is Sanctuary to Woman Keeping Watch,” appeared in the Nov. 1, 1953, Milwaukee Journal. Writer Jane Mary Farley depicted Toft as a naturalist of great skill, an excellent and colorful storyteller, a hard fighter for what she believed in, and a lady deeply in love with her family, the Point, and all it contained. Who else but Toft would refer to the shadblow as “the magnolia of the North”? The shadblow, or serviceberry, and the white pine remained two of her most favorite trees throughout her lifetime.

One of Toft’s most cherished friends and visitors to the Point was Estella Leopold, wife of world-famous conservation writer Aldo Leopold. In a letter to Toft dated Oct. 20, 1971, Estella Leopold said, “what a lovely weekend we had with you...and such a treat to be with you! ...You are always such good company, and I admire your courage staying out at your beautiful place alone! ...Affectionately, Estella.”

Many people, including trespassing hunters, viewed Toft as absolutely fearless; she was thought to be without fear of animals, solitude, legislators or mankind. Her reply to those who pitied her for living at the Point alone was, “Some people think I should get lonesome, but I'm never lonely. I don't see how you can be lonely in your own home.” All the things around her along the shores and in the forest she knew well, she said, “because they're my friends.”

Her awards were many:

- The Wisconsin Women’s Federation presented its certificate of Merit Award in Conservation to Toft in 1959.
- In September 1964, she had to fly back from an Alaskan vacation with friends to receive the Bronze Medal Award from the Wisconsin Federation of Garden Clubs.
- Students at Sevastopol School in Door County took great pride in honoring Toft on Arbor Day, April 28, 1970, by planting a shadblow tree on the school grounds in recognition of her work. It was an award she cherished.
- The Wisconsin Natural Beauty Council presented a governor's citation to Toft in May 1972, recognizing her more than 35 years of effort to protect the beauty of Wisconsin.
- UW-Green Bay presented her with an award in May 1972 describing her as “Wisconsin’s First Lady of Conservation.”

- In May 1975, the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology gave Toft a special award: a carving of a pileated woodpecker feeding its young. Toft said, "It is the symbol of all that is beautiful, wild and natural." She dearly loved the pileated woodpecker that made its home at Toft Point.
- Toft was honored with another citation, this one from the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, for her work in preservation and communication.

Several famous authors were eager to include Toft and her accomplishments in their books. Two of the places featured in "Journey Into Summer," a book by world-renowned nature writer Edwin Way Teale published in 1960, were Toft Point and the Ridges Sanctuary. After the book was published, Toft received an autographed copy from the Teales, the inscription reading: "To Emma Toft, with happy recollections of our visit to the Ridges and Toft Point."

A few months later, Teale sent Toft a note informing her that, "Your fawn (Rocky) is the picture that, apparently, the reviewers have picked most often to illustrate the reviews of the book." The photograph of Rocky appears on page 140 of "Journey into Summer."

Jens Jensen autographed his book "The Clearing" for Toft, saying, "To a very dear friend of our mutual friends, the deer." One of Toft's favorite teachers at the Clearing, a school set in a wooded area of Ellison Bay, was the widely read natural history writer Rutherford Platt. Toft's copy of his book "This Green World" is autographed: "To Emma—My Queen of the wilderness, September 1959."

Virginia S. Eifert taught nature classes at the Clearing during the 1950s and early 1960s, and People came from all over the country to be her students. Eifert and Toft developed a mutual admiration. Eifert's book "Journeys in Green Places" was written in 1963 about the shores and woods of Wisconsin's Door Peninsula and dedicated: "To (one-time Clearing manager) Mertha Fulkerson, Emma Toft and the Ridges Association, guardians of that ancient haunt of boreal plants, The Ridges."

In commenting about Toft, Eifert wrote, "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 the shores. She and the big trees in her forest have thus far withstood destruction, like that 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 once were part of Wisconsin, and which are now gone."

Eventually, in 1967, the Toft estate sold Toft Point to the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, which then turned the deed over to the University of Wisconsin System. UW Green Bay is now responsible for its management and care of the area.

Emma Toft died on Valentine's Day of 1982. She had given her heart to the care and preservation of Toft Point during her lifetime and, in doing so, had influenced people from throughout the country to be better stewards of the land.



File photo

Door County Advocate – March 13, 1998 – reproduced by permission of the Door County Advocate