

Miss Emma leaves legacy for generations to come

By Keta Steeb

She was known as “Miss Emma”, an affectionate title of respect bestowed by admirers many years ago, and although she died Sunday at the age of 91, Miss Emma Toft leaves a legacy few can emulate.



A lifelong Door county conservationist, naturalist, botanist and lover of all wild things, Miss Toft left her beloved Baileys Harbor home to become a resident of the Dorchester Nursing Center in October, 1977. She died there Valentine's Day just a few days after her 91st birthday.

Miss Emma was born to a Danish immigrant named Thomas Toft and his wife Julia (who came from English stock) in Baileys Harbor on Feb. 1, 1891. Her father had been a lumberman who came to Door County to work in a limestone quarry at the tip of the Door Peninsula.

This quarry, located in Mud Bay (now Moonlight Bay) in the town of Baileys Harbor, was surrounded by a virgin pine forest. As the quarry was being worked, the Tofts bought the 275-acre property and it was here that Miss Emma and her six brothers and sisters grew up. It was here that she was taught the priceless value of her family's homestead.

Thomas Toft was unique in the respect that he refused to cut a single tree. His children, particularly Miss Emma, were imbued with the desire to preserve this primeval forest for future generations. It was this desire, combined with Miss Emma's strong will that has kept Door County's last bastion of unblemished wilderness in its natural state.

Known as Toft's Point, this tract is now the property of the University of Wisconsin. Miss Emma sold the land (adjacent to the famed Ridges Sanctuary which she helped found) to the university in 1968. She reserved the right, however, to live there until her death.

During the 1930s, Miss Emma fought off a move to turn the Ridges into a trailer park—a move that would have meant leveling the ancient shorelines layered with irreplaceable flora and obliterating most, if not all, of the wildlife.

She and a band of equally determined friends opposed the Door County Park Commission (proponents of the project) so skillfully, they were able to stop work before any harm was done. Stories are still being told of how Miss Emma lashed herself to a tree (or lay down in front of a bulldozer) to block "progress" but these stories are untrue.

She and her influential friends fought the trailer park concept with words not histrionics and the resulting adverse publicity, not dramatic deeds, proved successful. Besides, Miss Emma had too much style to engage in such attention-getting tactics.

Although an unassuming woman fond of solitude, Miss Emma made an impact on everyone she met. Referred to as "The Queen of the Peninsula" by University of Chicago Professor George Anastapolo in a 1972 speech, Anastapolo went on to describe her as "a woman regally attired in her soft white hair, her musical voice and her worn blue jeans."

Blue jeans and a colorful bandanna was Miss Emma's trademark. A former schoolteacher who taught small children reading, writing and arithmetic decades ago, Miss Emma went on to teach their descendants valuable lessons in conservation.

She and her good friends, the late Jens Jensen and Mertha Fulkerson, formed the nucleus of a small but active coterie of naturalists devoted to the preservation of the northern tip of the peninsula. Whenever one thinks of the Clearing in Ellison Bay, Toft's Point or the Ridges Sanctuary, one must credit these three strong individuals with their existence.

Miss Emma received many honors in her long lifetime, one of which took place at a banquet of the North Central Audubon Council in 1966. The reporter covering the occasion wrote, "Miss Toft looked lovely in a black dress with pink carnation, but did not want her picture taken." This is understandable. Miss Emma was more at home in her boots, windbreakers, jeans and bandanna and of all the pictures taken of her throughout the years, none in her voluminous Advocate file shows her in a dress. She hated dresses.

Two years before being cited by the Audubon Council, Miss Emma received the coveted Bronze Medal Award from the Wisconsin Federation of Garden Clubs. Presented at a meeting held Sept. 15, 1964, Miss Toft had just returned from a plane trip to Alaska. Her adventures on this Alaskan journey and a subsequent trip made in an International truck (with the late DNR warden William Carrick, his wife and three children) were the subjects of various feature stories.

During the 1950s, Miss Emma received the "Certificate of Merit" by the Wisconsin Woman's Club Federation and the Milwaukee County Conservation Alliance Award for her wildflower and ornithology teachings. She was also elected to the Board of Trustees of the Wisconsin Chapter of Natural Conservancy but had to decline because of "travel difficulties." Miss Emma never did like cities and the board met in Madison.

"I've never been lonely," Miss Emma once told a reporter who asked her how she fared in her family's isolated homestead. "How can you be lonely in your own home?"

Miss Emma's many achievements can best be summed up by the friends she leaves, Roy Lukes, caretaker of her beloved Ridges, fellow conservationist Carl Scholz, and a host of friends (not necessarily conservationists) who loved her for being the woman she was. "A naturalist, a good story teller, a fighter and a lady."

One reporter wrote. "You follow this serene, white haired woman through the forest and you see her long legs flashing, her bright scarf weaving and you know this is a woman without fear of animals, solitude, legislators or mankind."

Such was Miss Emma, a woman who will be remembered long after the rest of us are gone.

Door County Advocate - February, 1982 – reproduced by permission of Door County Advocate