

Helen Harris

By Eileen Ford

Helen was a "naturalist" from the moment she was born. By the time she started school, she had produced a little notebook with drawings and pressings of the plants around her home.



It was a natural step for Helen to become a recognized "naturalist" by joining the Alberta Natural History Society at an early age.

As with many organizations there are tough times to weather and these times came to a head in the 1960's. To survive, the Alberta Natural History Society had to attract more members and refocus its mandate. Here is where Helen's tact and diplomacy, her generosity and her genuine belief in the natural world came to the fore.

She was named President of a small group of naturalists, including Herb, and they reworked the bylaws and changed the focus from an organization that looked mainly at the agricultural aspect, to the modern day focus where the knowledge, love and respect of nature in its entirety – the plants and the animals, the air and the water - were understood to be an interconnected whole.

Countless hours went into this re-organization with Helen assuming responsibility for her greatest love – the native plants. She would lead the Wednesday evening flower walks, a gentle teacher, naming the plants, describing their uses, highlighting the habitat each one required in order to thrive. This knowledge had been acquired over the years by walking the pastures and ditches and hiking and packing into the mountains observing what was around her. She didn't just go walking; she looked and saw what was underfoot.

As an ardent photographer, Helen captured what she saw on slides and used these slides as teaching tools. RDRN is the grateful beneficiary of these slides today. She also studied the recognized floras of the time including an old English flora. Her books are well thumbed, attesting to her years of quiet study. And Latin came into her vocabulary.

When I first met Helen she invited me to come and see her garden. Soon we were in the woods surrounding the garden and into the ditches where survivors of cultivation still grew. My interest was aroused. I spent a few years, one step behind Helen, notebook and pencil in hand. I had to write down the name of each plant we saw, both its common name and its Latin name. From time to time Helen would question herself on the Latin name, and then I'd have to consult the flora. Not once did she err. But she was humble enough to question herself. It was during these walks that my eyes were opened to the vast array of native plants we have on our

doorstep, and I began to understand how each plant was connected to the earth, to the air, the water, to other plants, and to the birds and the mammals.

When John Donne said, "No man is an island..." surely he was talking about more than a mere human being, but about the universal interrelationships of all things. And so it is with Helen. She has gone from our membership list but her gentle influence continues to make a big difference.

It was Helen who helped develop programs for the Kerry Wood Nature Centre and accompany the groups, sharing her extensive knowledge about the natural world. It was Helen who identified the Innisfail Natural Area as native land worth preserving. It was Helen who would phone Red Deer County about the yellow lady slippers, grotesquely overgrown, in a ditch that had been chemically sprayed. It was Helen who identified a late fall gentian in her own pasture as a rare Alberta plant. And another gentian, this time a tiny little spring species at Grassy Lake, as something to be protected. This little early spring gentian is found on the soupy, boggy knobs along the edges of seepage streams and when you allow your shadow to cover it, it will close its lovely blue petals and disappear into the grass. Helen could see these treasures. So today we know they are there and hopefully we will respect their place in the scheme of life and not just trample them. RDRN awarded Helen its first OWL award - an award that recognizes someone who does so much in such a humble way. Every RDRN member and everyone here today honours Helen Harris and thanks her for helping us to see and understand this great Garden of Eden around us.

I believe that she is walking in that other land, listening to the birds and smelling the flowers.