

Nature's tonic effects cure for 'peaked' Emily Fletcher

By Gordon B. Seavey

Dr. Benjamin Osgood, local practitioner of more than a century ago, deemed that a young daughter of Sherman D and Augusta Fletcher was a bit peaked and needed to be outdoors much more to improve her health.

Osgood (no relation to the long line of Westford Osgoods) lived in the Center near the fire house and said he would continue to watch over the young lady.

This was done — and she lived to be 78.

The girl, a graduate of Westford Academy in 1859, was Emily Frances Fletcher. All her life, unfortunately, she wore the tab of "old maid." Like so many other young ladies of her period, the opportunities were few to mingle with persons of her own age, and she never married.

Miss Emily, however, left two legacies.

The first: during her long life in her native Westford, she was intensely interested in the town, the First Parish Church and other community affairs. Her home was over the Wright & Fletcher store at the Center. During the winter, she heated a few rooms with coal stoves; the plumbing was old-fashioned.

I remember Miss Fletcher well. As a boy of 10 or 12, it was my duty after attending classes at the Frost School to feed those old coal stoves. The coal had been delivered by J.A. Healy (the firm still is in business) to a bin on the ground floor. It was my chore to fill an assortment of tin berry buckets and small hods with the dusty fuel and lug them up a winding stairway to the second floor. It wasn't easy.

In addition, Miss Emily insisted on tying a length of gauze around my head to cover my mouth and nose as protection against the coal dust. That was embarrassing enough, but jovial Fred Hartford, who clerked in the store, kept informing the store customers that I had "taken the veil."

Close to nature

Miss Fletcher's parents had urged her to take the old doc's advice and to get out and roam the fields and woods. Here she became knowledgeable with the birds, flowers and trees.

This interest in nature was developed as she grew older and stronger. She became an authority on local flora and fauna.

Miss Emily was especially fond of trees and worked for roadside plantings and natural beauty in public places, long before Ladybird Johnson.

She was a very proper lady. One time she showed me the newly-minted five-cent piece, called the "buffalo nickel" because the head of a bison was on one side and obtuse was the sculpture of an Indian chief of the Sioux tribe.

She explained that the Indians weren't too pleased with the design. Innocently I asked, "What were they kicking about?" She fired back, "You must never use that slang word!"

I remembered.

On painful occasions, she would insist that I take a nature walk with her. Not wanting to lose the coal-carrying job I had, along I went. But today I must admit it was those early lessons that whetted by interest in nature and conservation.

While browsing in the fields of the Fletcher Cold Spring farm, she showed me several varieties of plants and flowers common in Australia. Their seeds had come along with wool for the Abbot Mills, and the scourings were used to fertilize the land.

Lecture legacy

Her second legacy was money. A gift of \$2,000 was to be used for lectures on natural history, travel and forestry. This was a sizable amount in those days.

Over the years these lectures were popular. There was a great need for this type of education, especially when radio was in its infancy and television had not been introduced.

One of the best attended was a lecture by the eminent explorer, Dr. Bernard Hubbard,

entitled "Oomlak Adventures in Arctic Alaska". This was given in 1940 before schoolchildren in the afternoon and their elders in the evening.

Principal William C. Roudenbush of the Academy, a trustee of the fund, reported enthusiastic audiences of 500 and 300 respectively. The speaker's fee was \$250.

Miss Emily prepared most of the local species of birds and flowers for exhibit in glass cases, which were for many years in a separate room in the Fletcher Library. The exhibits deteriorated and the study cases are now used by the Westford Museum for other exhibits.

Miss Fletcher died April 13, 1923 and is buried in the family lot in Fairview Cemetery. With the death later of two unmarried nieces, this line of the Fletcher family in Westford ended.

Noted family

Miss Fletcher's brother was Sherman H. Fletcher, a partner in the local grocery business, and a "town father" in numerous ways. He was selectman for 25 years; postmaster for 20; Academy trustee for 42 years; manager of the Westford Water Co.; state legislator; active in Masonic circles and captain of Troop F, Spalding Light Cavalry for 11 years; also chairman of the library building committee.

The third member of the trio was Cornelia, married to George T. Day, who lived almost next door. Mrs. Day also was active in town affairs. At the request of the Academy trustees, she compiled a general catalogue of the trustees, teachers and students from Aug. 6, 1792 to 1895. It was a monumental task for which she received no compensation and her assistant (at times) was paid 15 cents an hour.

Containing a biographical sketch of the teachers, the trustees and the students, this catalogue has provided a valuable historical record for a period of more than a century.

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