

Raleigh's Forgotten History: The Story Behind the Edna Metz Wells Park

By Erica Winston, Raleigh Garden Club Historian

Photos from the NC State Archives and the Raleigh Garden Club papers, unless otherwise noted.

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First off, let me introduce the characters :

Susan Iden is the founder of the Raleigh Garden Club (RGC), and a major evangelist of gardening for Raleigh's civic beautification.



Dr. Bertram W. Wells was the head of the Dept. of Botany and a first-generation ecologist at NC State University (then called State College of Agriculture ??). He was a regular speaker and major influence on the early RGC.



Edna Metz Wells was BW's wife, a member of the Raleigh Garden Club, and a high school science teacher. A Broughton Memorial described her as "A Scientist, Teacher, Counselor, and Friend."



Charlotte Hilton Green was another Raleigh Garden Club member, and also the wife of an NC State University professor. She herself was author and pioneer wildlife habitat gardener.



Mrs. H. C. Evans, Raleigh Garden Club president 1927-29 ??? and chair of civic improvement committee next 2 years, in charge of Flora Park. She got it started during her term as president and was so passionate about it she continued on as chair.

None known.

I introduced these people to tell you a good story from these days.... Susan Iden was an evangelist for wildflower gardening. And she in turn was inspired by BW Wells to think like an ecologist. She got the idea of creating a wildflower and native plants arboretum in Raleigh around 1927. The goal was "An arboretum of native plants and a civic center of real, natural beauty."

Susan inspired Mrs. Evans, and she made it a project of the Club to find a location. Eventually a small 2-acre piece of unkempt land along Clark Street was located. By 1929, Mrs. Evans got the OK from City Park Commission to turn over this land, with a steep ravine and stream, to RGC for development into an arboretum. The Raleigh Times headline of April 18, 1930 read: **Garden Club Develops Park As Arboretum of Native Plants And Big Raleigh Civic Project.** Under Direction of Mrs. H. C. Evans, Chairman of Garden Club, Civic Improvement Committee, Cameron Park Ravine Along Park Drive Is Being Developed Into Park That Will Be Real Asset To City.

In the RGC Archives, they called it "Flora Park" though it was also known as the Cameron Arboretum.

An unbelievable amount of work has been done in improving the park, laying out trails, erecting bridges, setting out shrubbery and preparing beds and special corners for a variety of native plants in just a year.

The garden club members did have some help. City Parks Superintendent Howell provided labor for making trails and laying stepping stones.

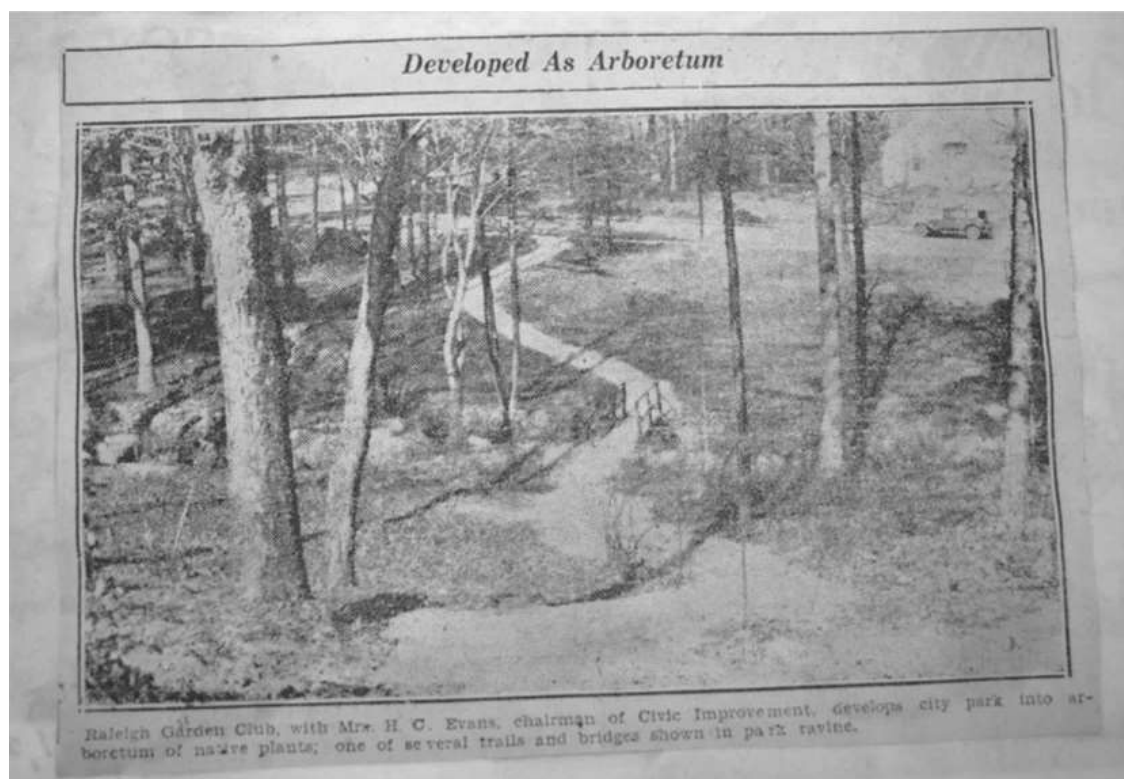
By April 1930, trails were winding through the woods, rock stepping stones were laid in an easy descent down the steep banks, little rustic bridges arched across the streams, and seats had been erected through the park to tempt one to rest and enjoy its beauty.

A rock garden was laid down, with hundreds of little rock plants tucked along their edges.

In all, around 115 shrubs, with several hundred additional azalea plants, and 70 trees had been donated and planted. No count of the little plants like hepatica, violets, bloodroot and native iris could be made.

Dr. B W Wells, botanist of state College, provided labels for trees with common and botanical names

The Dept of Public Works made a contour map, from which a landscape plan has been made Mayor expressed appreciation for what Club is doing for city.



From Raleigh Times, April 23, 1930.

The Club won a state prize for largest civic project and it was a library of gardening books. This prize began the RGC library, which for many decades was a resource shelved in the Olivia Raney Library and available to members and the public alike.

RGC continued to improve and expand on the plantings. In April of 1931, the Club held the first Wildflower show. Again, the idea originated with Susan. She got BW Wells to help chair the show, and it was designed to be educational rather than a competitive event. Hundreds of visitors and over 50 varieties of wild plants were shown. Most of them were dug up with roots and after the show were planted in what they were calling the Cameron Arboretum or Flora Park.

Future plans for the park included a bog garden to be made, and fern and Iris beds. Various club members took charge of these specific beds for development. Mrs. Samuel Lawrence (Elizabeth's mother) was in charge of the iris bed.

The next year, 1932-3, the Club continued planting. They added 47 native azaleas, 7 red bud, 25 dogwood, 4 weeping willows, 47 Eleagnus, 5 sourwood, 2 beech, 1 holly, 4 mimosa, 17 elders, 5 wild cherries, 10 Rhododendron.

In the 1934-5 club year (Sept to June), they were still working and admitted the park needed a good deal of work. The next year more wildflowers and native plants were added.

In 1937 Charlotte got the Science Club of Needham Broughton High School to create a "nature trail" in the park. Edna was the head of the Science Club. She often took her students there to study botany and native plants.

According to our RGC board minutes, Charlotte suggested that the park be renamed the Edna Metz Wells Park when Edna died suddenly in 1938 of complications from surgery after cancer. The Wells' home overlooked the park, and she had been so engaged in it.

And Charlotte also recommended we return management of the whole park to the city with the renaming. In the official request to the city council, it is Edna's students who request the city rename the park – no mention of the Club. The request was approved and the park took on the new name. But the official dedication ceremony never took place until 40 years later when one of her former students, Willam Craven, prompted the formalization the ceremony May 27, 1978.

In the park today, on the bulletin board, is the story of the dedication in 1978. In it, Edna's former student says he and several other members of the Needham Broughton High School Science Club of 1938 had asked the commissioners "to name the park after our beloved biology teacher (Edna Wells). One of the other original students who asked for the dedication, Dr. Susan Mellette, attended and said, "I got into medicine due to Mrs. Green (Charlotte) and Mrs. Wells (Edna)."

So here is an example of our forgotten history. The park is a lost footprint of the Raleigh Garden Club.

History is a curious thing... what gets remembered and what forgotten. If you go to the park, the sign describing the dedication makes no mention of RGC, or our work in creating and planting the park. But Edna herself is clearly remembered well.

Years later, in 1972-3 the Club planted twelve ornamental trees in the park. But it's not only the Dept. of Parks and Raleigh-ites who forget. If our members knew they were planting in one of our Club footprints, they didn't acknowledge it in the 1973 meeting minutes. I believe we didn't even realize by that time that we had a prior connection to this park. We had lost our own history.

Our member Laurie M. discovered this footprint! The park is relatively ignored ... today it is overrun with invasive English ivy. But the bridge over the creek remains, and who knows, perhaps some of the native plants will show up in the springtime on the bluffs.







William Cronin speaks of rededication of park to his former teacher Saturday

Photo photo by South Star

Teacher honored after 40 years

By RACHEL BROWN
Staff Writer

William Cronin's vision became a reality Saturday as he commemorated 40 years ago he said that a park be named for one of his high school teachers.

He and several other members of the Friends of Braintree High School in 1982 had asked the commissioners "to name this area after our beloved biology teacher (Gladie Wells)." In 1988, the commissioners, acting as a city council, approved the request. But for some reason the park was never dedicated.

In February, in a ceremony drawing more than 100 people, the Gladie Wells Park, located about a block from Braintree High on Clark Avenue, was finally dedicated.

"It's a happy occasion for me," Cronin said in the address.

Mrs. Wells, who died of cancer in 1938 and her husband, Dr. H. W. Wells, lived in a house overlooking the site of the new park.

The area changed considerably in the years following Mrs. Wells' death, said Borough Mayor Joseph W. Cannon.

It has now again become a residential area," said Mrs. Cannon, who was a guest speaker at the ceremony.

According to Charles "Doc" Hayes, superintendent of the Braintree garbage system, the people in the area wanted no lights or playground equipment placed in the park.

"I think most of the people who live in the neighborhood are very happy with it," he said.

Harry W. Rowerton, assistant parks superintendent, said work was begun about two years ago to prepare the park for its formal dedication. "We had to eliminate some existing areas,"

he said.

Margaret O'Brien Traylor, a former Braintree student, recalled using paper as walkways to cross the stream in the park on her way to school.

Mrs. Traylor noted that some bridges have replaced the paper.

One of the students who originally asked the commissioners for the dedication made a brief trip to Raleigh from her Richmond, Va., home especially for the ceremony Saturday.

"I got into mischief due to Mrs. Cronin (her little Hilda Cronin, who once wrote an editorial column in The News and Observer) and Mrs. Wells," Dr. Susan Mellette told a reporter.

The park dedication opened various activities for Braintree's class of 1982. Other events Saturday included a mother hour with the journalism class at the high school and a special program and program in the evening.