

High Beam Engagement By Marilyn Moore

Kay Boydston kept irregular hours, and they say she gardened into the evening and well past dark by the glow of her car headlights. I bring this up because members of my garden club spend a lot of time in southwest Michigan, and some may be planning to visit the Fernwood Botanic Garden in Niles, which Kay and Walter Boydston founded.

Walking the woodland trails, as it is my habit to do, you'll find beech, oak, maple, tulip, poplar, and pine trees. You'll see numerous fern species. And you will appreciate Kay's foresight; which is why you'll need to keep in mind that you are not walking through a natural forest. You are walking through Kay's woodland garden, naturalized now, that she planted with her car running and her high beams on.

There is little if any old growth forest in southwest Michigan. The area was logged extensively beginning in 1830 and ending when all the trees were gone. Because of this logging, we now enjoy a diverse landscape of forests, beaches, farms, orchards, vineyards, and prairies; urban, suburban, and rural communities; and at least one botanic garden. I'm just saying.

Nothing at Fernwood is as nature intended, frankly, unless you mean human nature. In that case, think a woman in a skirt and blouse and sensible shoes in the spring garden as the fern tips poke out of the ground; or a woman out for a winter hike in wool pants, a twin set, boots, and a barn coat; a woman in a shirt dress with a basket cutting flowers in midsummer, her hair pulled back with a head scarf; a woman in corduroys and a tasteful blouse open at the neck, maybe a blazer, and Wellingtons, planting 5000 hardy spring bulbs on a cool fall night and humming "On a Slow Boat to China."

Not that Kay Boydston didn't work during the day, although it is doubtful she ever called what she did at Fernwood "work." She probably said "gardening" or "planting" or "keeping busy." Maybe she said, "Spent time outside today." It is just speculation, but she was probably so engaged by Fernwood that she didn't distinguish what she was doing from life itself. She just took to the place, and it became her: the brush, the ground, the cuttings, and the seeds, familiar and recognizable, like looking in a mirror or at a face you love seated across the dinner table.

According to the excellently named Molly Moon, who wrote a two-part series about Fernwood for the *Fernwood Notes* in 1994, Kay and Walter "discovered" Fernwood in 1938 while hiking along the St. Joseph River. There were summer cottages on the land, owned by the Postlewaite and Bomberger families. New trees and wildflowers had begun to fill in the river valley somewhat. I wouldn't call it love at first sight. It was more deliberate than that—a courtship, really—exquisite, mildly anxious, very satisfying, and then certain. Ms. Moon quotes Kay Boydston on this time:

For nearly three years, we saw it (Fernwood—then called Janeida) at every opportunity—as a fairyland in snow, in the heat of midsummer, at the time of

autumn color and with its million blossoms in spring. On one such spring visit, we heard the liquid call of two wood thrushes in the woods as well as the wild sweet song of a water thrush as we crossed the bridge by the little falls. “This does it,” we both said.

They bought the land a few months later:

No longer able to resist our growing attachment for these hills and woods and water, first steps were taken toward a possible purchase. On a never to be forgotten Saturday—July 5, 1941—after stopping in Hammond to give Mr. Bomberger a check for earnest money . . . on the road near the east end of the present rock garden we met the realtor, Mr. McOmber, with three prospective buyers, cash in pocket, expecting to drive on to Hammond and close a deal that day that would turn Janeida into a Girl Scout Camp! After 33 months of waiting, watching, hoping, and planning, we had first possession by just one hour! Do you wonder that we felt we were truly meant to live here? Then, for 23 very full, short years, we were the ‘keepers.’

Kay Boydston was already a noteworthy amateur pteridologist—a fern specialist—when she began designing what would become Fernwood. Eight years before, in 1933, she participated in The Garden and Flower Show at A Century of Progress, The World’s Fair, in Chicago, and the ultimate in horticulture. Her special features exhibit, “Ferns of the United States,” was in booth 5 in the Horticultural Building Scenic Diorama Settings.

It is a significant achievement to know ferns. Ferns were early adapters, dating from nearly the beginning of time. Fern fossils exist from 360 million years ago. The bulk of fern families arrived with the rest of the world’s diverse flora some 145 million years ago, during the Cretaceous period, with the advent of the bee. Ferns are excessively numerous. The botanical group Pteridophyta comprises 15 orders, some 53 families, 310 genera and roughly 12,000 species, including 400+ hybrids.

The diversity of the fern group is an interesting story. It dates from the Victorian era, as so many interesting stories do. They lived large. When the Victorians liked something, they were at once indulgent, thrifty, decorous, extravagant, emotional, and industrious. They liked ferns. In his 1855 book, *Glaucus*, Charles Kingsley coined the term “Pteridomania,” that is, fern madness.

Around the late 1830s the English began to take an interest in all things botanical. As the values of the Victorian era emerged, an attendant drive for discovery and naming rights by botanical enthusiasts emerged with it: ferns were sitting ducks for these enthusiasts. For one thing, ferns were abundant. As Peter Boyd points out in his web article *Pteridomania—The Victorian Passion for Ferns*—ferns grew readily “in the wilder, wetter, western and northern parts of Britain.” For another, ferns were only sparsely catalogued. Finally, due to the construction of roads and railroads during the 1840s and 1850s, ferns were easily accessible to the day tripping amateur naturalist.

The Victorians named, collected, and classified ferns uninhibitedly. They pressed fern leaves between the pages of books. They built cottage industries around decorative objects stamping fern motifs into pottery, glass, and cast iron. They published papers and guidebooks. They formed societies, organized expeditions, established nurseries, and built dealerships. They created new China patterns. They advanced science. They innovated potting techniques and developed a special cabinet, the Wardian Case, to foster the fern as a houseplant. They added fern rooms onto their houses and “ferneries” to their gardens.

It might have continued except the Victorians nearly depleted the fern population by 1870. To make a long story short, some ferns may have been named and classified more than once. Some we aren't sure exist anymore. Communication wasn't that fast or accurate in the middle of the nineteenth century. We're still sorting it out.

Kay Boydston seems to have understood Pteridomania and may even have had a slight case of it. Anyone can get a little carried away. She burned brightly because of it, but more to illuminate—spark, even—than to extinguish. She left a legacy: Boydston's spleenwort, *Asplenium boydstoniae*, still grows on the property. Kay crossbred it from *Asplenium tutwilerae* (a hybrid of ebony spleenwort and American walking fern) and *Asplenium rhizophyllum* (American walking fern) to create a triploid hybrid. And Fernwood. Kay and Walter's original 12.5-acre purchase grew to 16 acres by 1964. By then, the Boydston's no longer felt able to care for the estate privately, however. Lawrence and Mary Plym, local philanthropists, worked with the Boydstons to incorporate Fernwood into a public garden. Today the Fernwood Botanic Garden extends to 105 acres.

I take the same long walk every time I visit Fernwood. From the Visitors Center I walk the South Vista to study the wetlands. Then I make my way to the Nature Center, where I bird watch while listening to the low tones of the beehive. From the Nature Center I take a meandering path past the Ravine Garden, the Winter House, the Fern Garden, The Water Wheel, and the Summer House, where the Streamside Trail heads over to The River Trail along the St. Joseph. From there I pick up the Ecology Trail, go around the Big Pond, and head back to the Visitor's Center.

The last time I walked I noticed a pear espalier growing along an outside wall of the Visitor's Center. There were frogs in the wetland gardens and pink hibiscus flowers the size of hubcaps. The Creeping Jenny was bright yellow. The Mountain Mint was heavy with bees. On the trail the sun shone dappled onto the under story. The ground was damp. The air nearly still, the breeze staying above in the canopy. The birds called to each other. Insects flew around me. Ferns were everywhere evident, many just where Kay planted them, literally, by her own lights.