

## **A Conservation Activist of the 1930s – Mrs. Wilhelmine LaBudde**

*By Christine L. Thomas*

*College of Natural Resources, U.W. Stevens Point*

“We may continue indefinitely to spend huge sums for reforestation, fish hatcheries, game refuges and deputies, but unless the masses are taught the reasons for these expenditures and the need for conserving and perpetuating our resources, both from a material and spiritual standpoint, the rank and file will go merrily on, blind to the need of beauty in their lives and dead to the love of nature that surrounds them on all sides.”

These words were written in 1929 to Governor Kohler. The writer was Wilhelmine LaBudde, an environmental activist of the 1930s. She was advocating the establishment of a special educator position at the Conservation Department, that she hoped would be staffed by a woman, whose job would be to work with the schools to educate children about conservation.

She was born Wilhelmine Diefenthaeler on October 1, 1880, at Elkhart Lake, WI. She was the daughter of Margaret and George Diefenthaeler. As a child, Minnie, as she was called by those close to her, enjoyed wild flowers and birds with her father. Her love affair with Pine Point on Elkhart Lake was to last a lifetime.

As a child, Minnie developed a friendship with her neighbor, Edward LaBudde. As they reached adulthood, Minnie went to college in Fond du Lac, where she graduated from Grafton Hall. She had a magnetic personality and many friends, including gentlemen friends. However, her old childhood sweetheart prevailed. According to his sister, Edward never had another sweetheart. If he picked flowers, he might bring them home to show, but he always took them next door to give to Minnie. Eventually they married. The LaBuddes, who owned a feed and grain business, lived in Milwaukee but Minnie spent every summer at Elkhart Lake.

In the early days of married life, Mrs. LaBudde was busy with raising her three children, George, Margaret and Alice (eventually George became a collector of logging tools, which he donated to the Milwaukee Public Museum). As the two oldest children went off to college, Mrs. LaBudde started to put her efforts toward the Conservation Movement. By the 1930s, her conservation activities occupied nearly all of her spare time. Her initial involvement was through the Women's Fortnightly Club. This led to activity through the Federated Women's Clubs, at both the state and federal levels. Women in the 1930s were involved in social reform and they often worked at it through their clubs. These women were allies whose political strength Wilhelmine was able to harness for a variety of conservation activities. Her list of accomplishments is impressive. She was a political ally to Louis “Curley” Radke and the Izaak Walton League in the fight to save the Horicon Marsh. Eventually an Izaak Walton League chapter was named after her. Early in the Horicon Marsh effort, in 1928, she wrote these words in a letter to an opponent of the marsh project:

“We need this particular swamp as a swamp, with all its potential natural beauties

left intact. Mere man cannot improve God's handiwork. There are none so blind as those who will not see and I am afraid that you are one of them. However, I haven't given up hope of making a convert of you yet." She signed the letter, "Your friendly enemy."

That was the secret of her success. She never gave up. She has fourteen boxes of correspondence on file at the Wisconsin State Historical Society. She was involved in virtually every imaginable conservation issue between 1925 and 1955. The first time that she spoke in front of the legislature, the legislators laughed at her. Women were not supposed to speak out on issues in such a public forum. Eventually, they stopped laughing. She rallied the political support of the club women and in addition to them, many conservation minded men, including Owen Gromme and Aldo Leopold, were often in the fray on her side.

She had a way of charming her opponents. It wasn't just flattery, but common sense. She was good at "casting oil on troubled waters," but did not back down from her ideals. She did not let the political battles become personal, rather she made an effort to maintain friendly personal relationships with her political opponents. Her techniques paid off. The following are a few of her accomplishments.

She successfully worked for legislation that required environmental education in the public schools. This was the first law in the evolution of legislation that recently resulted in the establishment of a state Environmental Education Center at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, College of Natural Resources.

While Charles Broughton is credited with saving the Sheboygan Marsh and in fact, it is named after him, Mrs. LaBudde may have planted the seeds that resulted in his efforts. In a letter to him, in 1927, she wrote:

"This marsh is so beautiful that it should be set aside for all time as a sanctuary for wildlife in all its various phases. I am hoping that you will investigate a bit; then give the matter a little publicity in your paper."

And he did!

She was on the first board of directors of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation. She was not an angler or hunter, but she had no particular quarrel with these activities, at least publicly. However, she had no patience for what she viewed as wanton destruction of species such as hawks and Great Blue Herons. She also worked for soil conservation and highway beautification. Probably one of the most telling tributes to her tenacious attitude and political power was her election in 1937 to the Conservation Congress.

Mrs. LaBudde had many accomplishments that were directly related to forestry. The State Historical Society records show that Mrs. LaBudde was involved in forestry-related issues as early as 1930. That year, she was conservation chair of the Milwaukee County Federation of Women's Clubs. She organized and promoted the Arbor and Bird Day activities in Milwaukee, which included bird house contests, tree planting and many other activities.

She was involved in the establishment of the school forest system in Wisconsin. Today, this wonderful resource is the center of environmental education activities in many school districts around the state.

She served as U.S. Forest Service liaison to the women's clubs and was a major force in raising the money to plant the 640 acre George Washington Bicentennial Forest in what was the Argonne National Forest near Eagle River. In those days, it cost \$2.50/acre to plant pine. During the Depression, it took quite a bit of effort to raise that kind of money. The donations ranged from \$1.00 to \$100.00. Mrs. Joshua Hodgins of Marinette, daughter of a pioneer lumberman, made a \$100.00 donation toward the project.

On May 21, 1932, when the day of the dedication arrived, Mrs. LaBudde was sick in bed and could not attend the ceremony. In her honor, her friend Margaret March-Mount had an additional acre of trees planted. Ms. March-Mount, a remarkable conservationist in her own right, was a Public Information Officer in the Forest Service. She was dedicated to both forestry and the Service.

As a result of her many forestry-related efforts, Mrs. LaBudde was named Vice President of the American Forestry Association and as such was a major force in the political fight to keep the Forest Service from being shifted from the Department of Agriculture to the Interior Department. As part of her effort to educate the women of Wisconsin, she organized numerous forest tours in the northern part of the state.

Another of Mrs. LaBudde's forestry-related projects was a plan to reduce the waste of forest resources by having federal foresters select trees for thinning which could then be used for Christmas trees. Club women were urged to buy only trees that had special tags that designated them as selected by government foresters. The first year of the program, Mrs. LaBudde received as a gift from the club women, one of the trees that was cut by a CCC crew under the supervision of Arthur Emmerling at Eagle River. The project was not totally successful, as the trees selected for thinning were not always prime Christmas tree stock and the public was not impressed with the quality.

During World War II, Mrs. LaBudde became involved in a movement that resulted in the preservation of virgin hemlock stands near Ontonagon, Michigan. Through the years, she was not always on the same side of forestry issues as the forest industry, but she and industry leaders had a friendly respect for each other.

Another project that occupied the energies of this multi-talented woman was an attempt to get a symphony that had been written by Wisconsin composer, Karl Eppert, played by a major orchestra at the Milwaukee Symphony. The piece, called "Timber," was a chronicle of forest history in America. With her usual zeal, LaBudde rallied all of the political support that she could. When the director of the Chicago Symphony tried to locate Mrs. LaBudde's season seat at the Milwaukee Symphony, to discuss the matter, he discovered that she was not even a symphony patron. She was embarrassed but told the gentleman that she was first and foremost, a conservationist and that was where she put her energy.

She was truly, first and foremost a conservationist. The creed that she wrote for the Women's Clubs is applicable today:

*We know that providence showered this continent with an overabundance of all things necessary for a rich and full life.*

*Therefore, we pledge ourselves to express our gratitude to the Creator,*

*the source of all good, by doing everything we can to help conserve and perpetuate His handiwork.*

*We know that in the past, and up to the present day, ruthless exploitation and waste have devastated and in some instances annihilated certain valuable natural resources.*

*Therefore, we will raise our voices in protest whenever danger threatens so these remaining treasures may be used with care and discretion, because upon their perpetuation depends the Life of a free untrampled America.*

*We know that we owe certain obligations to posterity and to those who will come after us.*

*Therefore, we will consistently preach the Gospel of Conservation. We will hold aloft the Torch of Good Precepts and finally hand it down to the next generation with the admonition that the Light must never be allowed to fail in order that each succeeding generation – even those that live in the far off, dim and distant future – may be assured of some of the blessings which we of this generation are enjoying now.*

Mrs. LaBudde passed away on November 28, 1955, but her accomplishments live on. On April 28, 1990, Mrs. Conservation, as she was called, was the first woman to be inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.



*Mrs. Wilhelmine LaBudde*