

## PRENTICE BLOEDEL, A PERSONAL REFLECTION

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*“Man is not set apart from the rest of nature—he is just a member of that incredibly diverse population of the universe, a member nature can do without but who cannot do without nature.”*

*Prentice Bloedel, 1980*

In 1980, I entered a downtown Seattle building to attend my first Arbor Fund Board meeting and to meet the eighty year old author of these words. All I knew that day about Prentice Bloedel was that ten years earlier in 1970, he and his wife, Virginia, had given their home and garden on Bainbridge Island to the University of Washington. University President Bill Gerberding had just appointed me, the first woman chair of the Landscape Architecture Department, to serve as a University representative on the Arbor Fund, the nonprofit foundation created to assure perpetual maintenance for the Bloedel Reserve. As a newly hired faculty member and a recent transplant from the other Washington, my knowledge of the Bloedels came mainly from seeing their name on campus buildings and scholarships. I knew also that the Bloedel Conservatory, a popular, public urban green space in Vancouver, B.C., was the result of their generosity. I wasn't surprised to learn of their gift to the University.

The directory listed my destination, the offices of Merrill & Ring, on the fourth floor. My homework told me that this privately-held timber company had been founded more than a century ago by Mrs. Bloedel's father, R. D. Merrill. I also knew Mr. Bloedel was retired from MacMillan Bloedel, the giant Canadian timber enterprise that began at the turn of the century as a family business found by his father and later became Weyhauser. If the Bloedels lived on the East coast where bragging is excessive and newspapers gossip-filled, their 1927

marriage and lives would have been forever scrutinized by the tabloids as a timber dynasty. Later, I came to understand and appreciate that while the Bloedels were active and generous in the arts and education, they were very private individuals.

I pressed the button and as the elevator climbed, I envisioned the group I would join. All men for sure, I thought, as most often in those years, I was the only woman in professional settings. One or both of Bloedels would surely be a devoted gardener. Based on my experiences with wealthy East Coast developers and businessmen, I expected the man who had been President of a gigantic timber company to exude a command and control presence. As I entered the dark wood paneled offices of Merrill & Ring, vintage money and decorum surrounded me. Staff led me to the board room. What I envisioned on the elevator was strikingly different from what I found. Two women came into the meeting right after me. The first, greeted the white haired man at the head of the table as “Daddy.” We introduced ourselves, Virginia Bloedel Wright said, “Call me Jinny.” Alison Andrews, a smiling, elegant woman who followed Jinny into the room, called the man, who rose from his chair when we three women entered, “Bing,” as did Bagley Wright, Jinny’s husband. “Bing!” Gosh, I thought what a silly nickname for one of the most influential men in the Pacific Northwest. What’s the story behind that? I never found out, later, even Jinny told me she didn’t know why her father’s nickname was Bing.

Mr. Bloedel shook my hand and welcomed me. He spoke softly and looked directly into my eyes. It may seem trivial now, but years ago, the businessmen I met most often still had little experience with women in professional settings. Most shook my hand while looking at their shoes. I was transformed to another time and place—meeting the patriarch of a wealthy South Carolina family who had hired the landscape architectural firm where I worked. The Carolinian’s voice was softened by his southern accent, he too looked directly

into my eyes, but I remembered his were cold and steely. Bloedel's eyes were moist and tender. I don't remember what transpired at that first meeting, but I do know from that first moment, I came to think of Prentice Bloedel as an old school, gallant gentleman. He was always chivalrous, and his subsequent decisions on Reserve matters never changed my first impression.

At that first meeting I thought my only involvement would be advising the direction of a wealthy family's gift of their private garden. This was a landscape situation I understood. Historically, prominent American families created large, sweeping gardens to compliment their spacious homes and to show-off their social status. A New York Times article in 1995, described The Bloedel Reserve as "one of this country's most original and ambitious gardens." But I soon came to realize the Bloedels weren't ambitious to display horticultural specimens, their wealth or examples of European garden designs. If the couple wanted to show off wealth, they wouldn't create a skunk cabbage bog, wildlife ponds, or meadows. Prentice Bloedel refused to label plants because he didn't want the Reserve to be a horticultural display. European gardens are often a series of decorative spaces and visiting them can be akin to viewing paintings in a museum. The Reserve is much more than a mere series of visuals. It is a set of designed niches, each multi-sensory experiences. If the Bloedels wanted to establish a sweeping garden legacy they would not have left more than half of the Reserve's 150 acres untouched as second growth forest. In my mind, they did not intend to create a conventional estate garden at all. The Reserve is one of the first, if not the first, private garden in the U.S. created mainly as a place for people to gain wellness.

Several landscape architects have designed parts of the Reserve, some have won awards, but the overall vision and indeed, many of the details, came from Prentice Bloedel himself. He listened carefully to all design ideas, then quietly went about fashioning the

Reserve according to his own internal quest. This private and modest man did not share his motives as he created this unique place over three decades, but we can surmise them from his early schooling, his own health, the financial support he gave to scholars and his unquenchable quest to understand the human-nature connections.

The Times writer noted that he had a “mystical reverence” for the land. A likely source for Bloedel’s deep feelings about the natural landscape emerged from his prep school experiences in the innovative curriculum of the Thacher School in Ojai, California. Bloedel graduated in 1917. Then and now Thacher uses camping, horses, and hiking to connect each student with the natural landscape. For many, this becomes a life-long bond. As a young man, Bloedel contracted polio. In the 16 years I knew him until his death, he limped and needed a wooden staff on the Reserve paths. During the early years as he roamed the site, walking stick in hand, locating places to uncover and shape into nature experiences, he felt both contentment and excitement. For him it became a sort of healthy refuge.

Howard Frumkin, MD, Emory University says, “Nature is therapeutic.” Many healing gardens and other special landscape places to enhance wellness have been created.

*Therapeutic landscapes* is now an all-inclusive term used to describe such places, and currently, more than 200 sites are listed. (<http://www.healinglandscapes.org/>). Thirty years ago, no one used the term *therapeutic landscapes* and neither did Bloedel. But I am convinced he felt wellness in the Reserve landscape from the time he and his wife moved there in the 1950’s. Twenty years later, the couple gave the property to the University for scholars to investigate the connection between humans and landscape, basically for Bloedel to better understand what he felt in the Reserve.

A few uninformed people might dismiss the couple’s gift to the University as a tax advantage. But Bloedel’s quest to understand how people are connected to nature was

remarkable. He wrote that people *cannot do without nature* and he truly wanted to understand that relationship. After giving the Reserve to the University in 1970, he created a “People-Plant Relationship Committee” within the Arbor Fund, and doggedly explored creating a new People-Plant curriculum at the University. Unfortunately, his thinking was years ahead of the University’s leadership. In 1977, Dean Philip Cartwright responded to Bloedel’s urging saying that “no such group of scholars existed on campus and there was little likelihood that it ever will.”

Undaunted Bloedel looked beyond the PNW and turned to leading thinkers in environmental psychology and the emerging disciplines of horticultural therapy and landscape theory. For decades he had a close personal friendship with Charles A. Lewis, now acknowledged as the “father of horticultural therapy.” Bloedel financially supported Lewis’s book, *Green Nature, Human Nature*. He also funded research by University of Michigan environmental psychologists Drs. Rachel and Stephen Kaplan. By the 1980’s, the Kaplans had already amassed 20 years of research on human perceptions of the landscape. In 1985, Roger Ulrich, Ph.D., a former Kaplan graduate student, was the first to demonstrate how surgical patients healed faster if they had a view of nature. Prof. Jay Appleton of University of Hull in England was the first to propose the now accepted theory that humans have common evolutionary responses to the landscape. Appleton founded the Landscape Research Group composed of scholars studying these responses. He gave a U/W Danz lecture on campus and the University of Washington Press published his second book, *Symbolism of Habitat*. Prentice Bloedel was Appleton’s major benefactor. Appleton, Lewis and the Kaplans made several visits to the Reserve and the U/W’s Department of Landscape Architecture in the 1980’s. My own special memory is a lunch at the Reserve with Bloedel

and the Kaplans. Looking back now and remembering the stimulating conversation, I know I was in the presence of three pioneers.

I've spent most of my life in the academy and am familiar with the quest of scholars. Bloedel had much more than a simple intellectual curiosity about the "plant-people" relationship as he called it. He had a zeal to truly understand. But by nature, he was cautious, and in many ways shy. A man, who would not put forth a theory or much less expounded on his relationship with plants and nature. In letter after letter, Charles Lewis, urged Bloedel to put in writing what he thought was the value of the Reserve. Toward the end of his life he did respond to Lewis's specific request to amplify the word, "enjoy" in the 1976 *Statement of Nature and Purpose of the Bloedel Reserve*. Bloedel wrote, "The omission of the words emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual in the Statement is unfortunate." If he was alive today, Prentice Bloedel would be an enthusiastic student and supporter of the healing gardens and therapeutic landscape movement. He and his wife, Virginia, are buried in the Reserve near the Reflecting Pool, a space that speaks to those who enter--"be still and feel," the quintessential message of the Reserve.