Olivia Traven nomination depicts a life of service

Following is from a nomination of the late Olivia Traven for the Women of Northeast Wisconsin Project of the American Association of University Women Green Bay Branch.

Women had not yet won the right to vote when Olivia Rottman was born into the narrowest of worlds in the smallest (pop. 200) of small Wisconsin towns. One of the deepest and widely shared pleasures among the women of Baileys Harbor were their walks along the ridges of the Baileys Harbor Bog in the fragrant sunshine of the first warm days of spring. Sharing her mother’s delight in the millions of rare and colorful wildflowers that carpeted the Bog awakened young Olivia’s interest in the natural world, and proved to be the foundation of Olivia’s later dedication to preserve the Bog from development and destruction.

Olivia’s father was a mariner on the Great Lakes. The young family made their home in Milwaukee, but each summer, when the school year ended, they returned to Baileys Harbor to spend the warm months on the shore of Lake Michigan.

Olivia’s formal education ended when she graduated from Milwaukee High School in 1883, in the midst of the Depression. Olivia returned to Baileys Harbor with her husband, Fred Traven, and their four-year-old son, Lee.

Fred volunteered for the first of his 26 years as Scoutmaster of the local Boy Scout troop, and Olivia immediately joined the Baileys Harbor Woman’s Club.

She was vice president of the Woman’s Club in 1937 when Albert Fuller, curator of the Milwaukee Public Museum, appealed to the women to support his efforts to preserve the Bog and the rare plants in it. Local business interests hoped to develop the area as a trailer park. Because the small town desperately needed the jobs and investment represented, Fuller’s conservation proposal was highly controversial.

Olivia attended the first organizing meeting of the conservationists, and was appointed their secretary. When their efforts to preserve the land as a nature sanctuary finally proved successful, the group incorporated in 1937 as The Ridges Sanctuary. Olivia was elected Secretary, and held that office until 1963. When tourists who had read about The Ridges began to ring her doorbell and ask for tours, Olivia became one of The Ridges’ first Naturalists. It never occurred to Olivia to refuse to guide the curious through The Ridges and besides, it presented an opportunity to gain new members.

Shortly after World War II, Door and Kewaunee counties were selected to take part in a demonstration of rural-urban library service. Olivia was appointed to the Door-Kewaunee Regional Library Board. When Kewaunee withdrew after three years, Door County formed its own library system. During the Regional Library era, the Baileys Harbor librarian resigned, and Olivia was appointed to the position she served until her retirement in 1973. She participated in the drive to raise money to build a new county library building in Sturgeon Bay and later served as President of the Friends of Door County Libraries.

Shortly after serving as President of the Door County Federation of Women’s Clubs in 1959, Olivia was elected to serve on the Baileys Harbor School Board. The post-war period was difficult for the rural population of Baileys Harbor. Small town people hate change, and the era of the one-room school was rapidly coming to an end. As nearby schools closed one by one, Olivia found herself involved in a bitter struggle to consolidate the schools into one system. The rising costs of maintaining the small schools, and finding good teachers became formidable obstacles for small districts. Olivia persisted in standing up for the things she felt would benefit the children, and by the end of her tenure, the Baileys Harbor schools were consolidated with the Gibraltar system in Fish Creek.

She did not regard her position on the school board as confined to local affairs, and traveled to Madison to lobby for educational reform. She continues to be active in all local educationally related organizations including membership and participation in The Clearing, a folk school founded by Jens Jensen; Bjorklund, a summer seminar series sponsored by Lawrence University at an estate in Baileys Harbor; Friends of Gibraltar, a community support group that funds arts and cultural activities in the schools; and is a staunch backer of the Door County Auditorium, a new performing arts building on the school campus.

Although her formal education was limited to high school, Olivia never stopped reading, learning, and staying abreast of current events. She continues to suggest and urge new works on members of the local Book Club, Woman’s Club (in which she has held office and maintained membership for more than 50 years). Bridge Club and elsewhere.

When a study was made to evaluate the needs of the elderly in Door County, Olivia was at the forefront of the drive to fund build, and staff an extensive nursing home and retirement complex in nearby Sister Bay.

Olivia Traven’s life shows that it is possible for one woman to stand up and speak out on matters of principle, to take up local challenges, and to act in ways that have a beneficial effect on the lives of ordinary people for generations to come.
The Column

By HAROLD GRUTZMACHER

Someone who knew her well will, I hope, write a portrait/tribute to Olivia Traven who died last week at 83. My contacts with her over the past 15 years were occasional and none of them lengthy. But it was easy to see that she was a remarkable human being. She was the last surviving member of the founding group of The Ridges, the last link with that beginning of a project/dream that not only goes on but thrives. In my mind she will be always coupled with Emma Toft, another woman of fierce individuality, integrity and vision. The tribute to her that should be produced could be modeled on Norb Blei’s fine essay on Emma Toft in Door Way.

I doubt that she was ready to go. She probably had her eye on another plot of land that could be purchased and added to The Ridges. She probably was still stewing over finances of that non-profit preserve and calculating how to recruit more young people for the membership. For more details about Olivia Traven and The Ridges, take a look at The Ridges by Roy Lukes et al. As a remembrance of her and an acknowledgement of her contribution to the quality of our lives, send a few dollars or more to The Ridges, 5288 Hwy. Q. Baileys Harbor, WI 54202.

On a somewhat happier note, this commentary will appear on election day. How much happier the note is is debatable for many of us. A good many voters are unhappy enough with elected officials to have traded “Throw the rascals out,” for “Let’s get a new set of rascals.” Most of us, I think, would rather not be cynical, but everywhere we turn we run into another scandal or another debacle. There is a tide of frustration that makes us wish that “none of the above” were a line on the ballot.

One thing should not happen, however: we should not let our disgust turn into distrust of the elective process. That scalawags and blunderers win elections (and, too often, re-elections) has nothing to do with the essential process. Representative democracy is still a solid system. Perhaps it is true that we get the government we deserve. It is probably equally true that when a great number of charlatans and fools are elected we have not found a way to make the system work better.

On a much happier note, albeit a personal one, two days after this appears I’ll be in Chicago anticipating Friday’s opening day at Wrigley Field. Three days of baseball, barring rain or snow or sub-freezing temperatures. Death, elections, and the House of Representatives will be supplanted temporarily by who the Cubs will bat at lead-off now that Jerome Walton is on the disabled list.

Each of you has a pleasant distraction/passion or two, just as mine is the Chicago Cubs. I hope you have a chance soon to get out of the often unpleasant realities, if only for a little while, and into your “ball park.” Meanwhile, “Play ball!”
Olivia Traven rites planned for Sunday

Olivia Traven, 83, Baileys Harbor, died March 30 at St. Joseph Community Hospital, West Bend. She is survived by her son Lee, Baileys Harbor, and her sister Jeanne Hansen, West Bend. Nieces also survive.

She was born Aug. 6, 1908 in Baileys Harbor, the daughter of Hannah and Guy Rottman. She was raised and attended school in Milwaukee but each summer she and her three sisters with their mother came to stay in Baileys Harbor, while her father, a marine engineer, was sailing on the Great Lakes.

Olivia was proud to be the great-granddaughter of Moses Kilgore. He had come to Baileys Harbor from Maine in 1886, was an enterprising businessman and had served in the state legislature.

She was wed to Fred Traven in Milwaukee Oct. 27, 1929. They and their son Lee moved to Baileys Harbor in 1933. From the beginning she was active in community affairs. Mrs. Traven was most proud of her accomplishments with the Ridges Sanctuary. In 1937 she was one of the ten founding members and had served as an officer and board member ever since. In 1987, the 50th anniversary year, she was the Ridges president.

Since 1936 she had also been a member and former president of the Baileys Harbor Women’s Club and had served two terms as president of the Door County Federation of Women’s Clubs.

Other accomplishments included her fundraising efforts for the new county library, former Friends of the Door County Libraries president and a term on the Door-Kewaunee Regional library board.

Mrs. Traven was a librarian with the McArthur library, Baileys Harbor, for 25 years and had also been on the Baileys Harbor School Board for 20 years. She served for six years on the board of the Scandia Village Retirement Center.

In a letter left for her son, Olivia wrote: “I hope I have lived my life and given to my family and my community so that I have earned my place on this earth and that I have given at least as much as I have received.”

She was a member of Hope United Church of Christ from which a memorial service will be conducted by the Rev. Phillips Sweet Sunday, April 5 at 2 p.m. There will be no visitation.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Ridges Sanctuary Endowment Fund, Hope United Church of Christ, Sunday School Facility Fund, Scandia Village Retirement Center Endowment Fund or the Door County Memorial Hospital Foundation.
Ridges will honor Traven

A Ridges Memorial Hike honoring founding board member Olivia Traven is scheduled for Saturday, May 9 at 9:30 a.m. It will begin at The Ridges Nature Center and will feature a pilgrimage to find blooming Trailing Arbutus, a favorite flower of Mrs. Olivia Traven. The hike, open to the public, will be conducted by Paul Regnier, Administrator/Chief Naturalist for The Ridges. Roy Lukes, retired Ridges Naturalist, will also be involved.

Mrs. Traven, Baileys Harbor resident and long-time Ridges friend, died March 31. She had been influential in forming The Ridges Sanctuary in 1937. At that time a proposal to build a trailer park threatened to destroy the unique area. Today over 500 plants find refuge in the Sanctuary, including several threatened and endangered species. Beautiful orchids also bloom in The Ridges. For 55 years Mrs. Traven was an active Ridges member who worked diligently to protect the orchids and other plants.
Olivia Traven

Last March, Olivia Traven passed away. She will be sorely missed by all her friends who had to come to appreciate her tireless dedication and perceptive honesty. Following are excerpts from a biographical sketch written by Bev Njaa and Claire Braun for a booklet, "Outstanding Women in Northeastern Wisconsin."

Women had not won the right to vote when Olivia Rotman was born into the narrowest of worlds in the smallest (pop. 200) of small Wisconsin towns. One of the deepest and widely shared pleasures among the women of Bailey's Harbor were their walks along the ridges of the Bailey's Harbor Bog in the fragile sunshine of the first warm days of spring. Sharing her mother's delight in the millions of rare and colorful wildflowers that carpeted the Bog awakened young Olivia's interest in the natural world, and proved to be the foundation of Olivia's later dedication to preserve the Bog from development and destruction.

Olivia's father was a mariner on the Great Lakes. The young family made their home in Milwaukee, but each summer, when the school year ended, they returned to Bailey's Harbor to spend the warm months on the shore of Lake Michigan. Her formal education ended when she graduated from Milwaukee's Washington High School. In 1935, in the midst of the Depression, Olivia returned to Bailey's Harbor with her husband, Fred Traven, and their four-year-old son, Lee.

Olivia was vice president of the Bailey's Harbor Woman's Club in 1937 when Albert Fuller, curator of the Milwaukee Public Museum, appealed to the women to support his efforts to preserve the Bog and the rare plants in it. Local business interests hoped to develop the area as a trailer park. Because the small town desperately needed the jobs and income the development represented, Fuller's conservation proposal was highly controversial.

Olivia attended the first organization meeting of the conservationists. When their efforts to preserve the land as a nature sanctuary finally proved successful, the group incorporated in 1937 as the Bailey's Harbor Sanctuary. Olivia was elected secretary, and held that office until 1953. When tourists, who had read about the Bog, began ringing the doorbell and asking for tours, Olivia became one of the Bog's first guides. It never occurred to Olivia to refuse to guide the curious through The Bog, and besides, it presented an opportunity to gain new members.

This kind of far-sighted and tenacious daily commitment eventually built The Bog into a world-renowned sanctuary. In its 50th anniversary year, Olivia Traven was elected president. Far from assuming the position was an honorary one, she crafted the membership into effective committees who organized concerts, celebrations, created a nature store, and expanded the educational mission of Bailey's Harbor and its membership by exponential leaps that continued today. It is not surprising that Olivia should have had such success in organizing the "troops" because so much of her own life had been spent in "the trenches."

Olivia's activities weren't limited to Bailey's Harbor. Shortly after WWII, she was appointed to the position of Bailey's Harbor Librarian, where she served until her retirement in 1973. As librarian, Olivia developed a deep and abiding concern for the quality of the children's education. Olivia also served as President of the Door County Federation of Women's Clubs in 1930. She was then elected to serve on the Bailey's Harbor School Board. The post-war period was difficult for the rural population of Bailey's Harbor for the era of the one-room school was rapidly coming to an end. Olivia persisted in standing up for the things she felt would benefit the children, and by the end of her tenure the Bailey's Harbor schools were consolidated with the Gibraltar system in Fish Creek.

Until her death last March, she continued to be active in all the local educationally related organizations. Olivia never stopped reading, learning, and staying abreast of current events. Her life shows that is possible for one woman to stand up and speak out on matters of principle, to take up local challenges, and to act in ways that have a beneficial effect on the lives of ordinary people for generations to come.

The wind sends old trees crashing,
A bare sky greets the dawn.
I think of friends who've fought my fight,
They tumbled, now they're gone.

Now who will love the land, who will help us understand?
Who will hold the sky up now the big trees are down?
Now the big trees are down, now the big trees are down.
We will hold the sky up now the big trees are down.

Wise old voices tell me the sky holds up the sky.
And old trees turn to leaf mold
And grow flowers when they die.
But we must guard those places where young flowers lift their faces.

We must guard the green space now the big trees are down.
Now the big trees are down, now the big trees are down.
We must guard the green space now the big trees are down.

- Douglas Wood
Mother’s Day an appropriate time to find sanctuary in The Ridges

By COGGIN HEERINGA

Long ago, there was no sign by the side of the road near the Rangelights of Baileys Harbor. But in May, children knew to go to a place they called The Ridges to find spring wildflowers.

Olivia Traven wrote, “My earliest memory of The Ridges is hearing my mother tell us that, when she was a youngster, the first spring walk for her and her friends was to The Ridges to pick Arbutus.”

I suppose that mother took Olivia to The Ridges in May, just as my own mother took me to The Ridges the first time I visited Door County. The love of beauty, the gift of wildflowers has always been a legacy from mother to child.

After Olivia grew to womanhood and was herself a mother, she often returned to walk the foot paths of The Ridges in search of flowers. One of her walks changed history. Most Door County residents have heard the story many times.

The property between the Lower and Upper Rangelights had been given to the Door County Parks Commission. It seemed to them a good place to build a campground and a work crew on loan from Peninsula State Park had begun the work of building roads and filling the wetlands.

Had Olivia and her friend Mrs. James Mc Ardle not taken a walk to investigate the construction noises, I suppose the sign by the side of the road would have read: Lighthouse County Campground or something of the sort.

But the women alerted Dr. Albert Fuller of the Milwaukee Public Museum, and to make a long and familiar story short, the community rallied to save The Ridges as a nature sanctuary.

Ten men and women signed the Articles of Incorporation forming The Ridges Sanctuary, Inc. in 1937.

The property now exceeds the original thousand acre goal and millions of people have found wildflowers and something much more while walking the narrow foot paths and crossing the quaint wooden bridges.

Every May, mothers can still bring their children to see the trailing arbutus and dwarf lake irises and wild orchids because of the stewardship of The Ridges Board and the dedicated members of the sanctuary.

When I moved to Door County, Olivia Traven was President of The Ridges Board and the sole surviving charter member. To me and many others who became members and volunteers at The Ridges, Olivia seemed to be a mother figure. Sometimes (like any mother) she nagged, but always with love. She taught us and we learned. We learned to respect the land and we learned to respect Olivia.

Most stories end “and she lived happily ever after,” but nobody lives forever. After serving The Ridges for 55 years, Olivia Traven died on the last day of March.

So this Saturday, May 9 at 9 36 friends of Olivia and of The Ridges are meeting to walk among the arbutus. It’s not so much a farewell as it is an affirmation.

Yes, Olivia, we will try to carry out the mission you and the others started back in 1937. Yes, we want our children and our children’s children to find sanctuary in The Ridges.

Mother’s Day weekend seems the appropriate time to pay tribute to the memory of Olivia Traven. Because of this woman and her many friends, there is a sign by the side of the road which says The Ridges Sanctuary.