

ELIZABETH COOPER TERWILLIGER 1909-2006

RENOWNED NATURALIST TEACHER

Long before "ecology" became a household word, Elizabeth Terwilliger, pioneered environmental education in Marin County, California. A legend in her time, she actively led school trips for children until she was 87. On Monday, November 27, 2006, she succumbed at age 97. She lived in the Redwoods in Mill Valley where she and her husband, Dr. Calvin Terwilliger, moved from their Mill Valley home in 1987. They were married 50 years, before he preceded her in death in 1990.

Marin County has been blessed with many environmentalists and conservationists. But Elizabeth Terwilliger was the most visible of all, leading canoe, bicycling and field trips for all ages for more than 50 years. She was a familiar sight in her straw hat with a trail of eager children following her like the "Pied Piper". She ran briskly from one discovery to another, calling "Something Special!" Day after day, her enthusiasm for all of nature was fresh, as though for the first time. Her dedication and passion for teaching never diminished.

Her "bird-in-the-hand" teaching techniques have been applauded worldwide. Fondly called "Mrs. T" by children and adults, she led three generations of Bay Area children on field trips and taught them a special awareness and appreciation of Nature and the out-of-doors. She left an indelible stamp on the lives of hundreds of thousands of children. Her legacy is their love and respect for nature. For others it is bike paths, boat harbors, nature preserves and wildlife habitat that are here because of her efforts.

Her father was a physician on the Aiea sugar plantation in Hawaii where she was born, September 13, 1909. As children, she and her two brothers commuted by bus and train into Honolulu for their schooling. She graduated from Punahou and the University of Hawaii. She received her M.A. from Columbia University in nutrition, and her R.N. from Stanford University School of Nursing, where she met her husband-to-be, Dr. Calvin Terwilliger, an orthopedic surgeon. After the war, they settled in Sausalito where, as they began their family, Elizabeth began crusading for playgrounds.

They moved to Strawberry and then to Mill Valley. As their children, John and Lynn Ellen, were growing up, she led field trips for their schools, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts. Soon other school groups flocked to Marin for hands-on experiences with "Mother Nature." By the late 60's, she led trips five days a week - - all volunteer - - for a growing number of teachers and environmental and wildlife organizations from all over the Bay Area. Her trademark "V for vulture!" with her arms stretched high overhead in the V shape delighted and taught children to observe and imitate flight patterns of birds overhead. Multi-sensory, interactive participation was a teaching technique she pioneered with the use of taxidermied birds and mammals.

She inspired others to join her volunteer efforts. In collaboration with Caroline Livermore, successful projects included the creation of the Pixie Playground in Ross, and the preservation of both Angel Island and Audubon Richardson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary in Tiburon. Elizabeth was also instrumental in the creation of county-wide bike paths (including opening the west sidewalk of the Golden Gate Bridge), placing bike racks at schools, installing small boat docks, establishing the Butterfly Grove at Muir Beach, building a bridge at Muir Woods, and preserving wetlands, county parks and open space.

She often told mothers, "Spend the day at home and you'll never remember it. Spend the day outdoors with me, and you'll never forget it!" Inspired by a desire to spread Mrs. T's teaching techniques, volunteer, Joan Linn Bekins, founded the Terwilliger Nature Guides in 1970, the Elizabeth Terwilliger Nature Education Foundation in 1975, (later merged with the California Center for Wildlife to become WildCare) and the Terwilliger Guild in 1986. She fundraised to keep three Nature Vans on the road that took nature to children in nine Bay Area counties. Bekins also produced five award-winning "Tripping with Terwilliger" educational films that have been seen by over 100 million children in their classrooms. They are now distributed free by the Terwilliger Nature Education Legacy to qualifying schools, libraries, children's museums, universities and on YouTube and the Terwilliger Legacy website.