

'A garden in the woods'

Preserving Senator George Aiken's pioneering wildflower heritage

Anthony Marro

By the time George D. Aiken retired from the U.S. Senate in 1975 after serving seven terms, he was 83 years old, widely respected, and considered an expert on foreign affairs and energy policy as well as agriculture. In Vermont he was so popular that he spent only \$17.09 on his last re-election campaign, most of it for postage. He ran unopposed. He was praised by many for reportedly having said at the height of the Vietnam war that the United States should “just declare victory and bring the troops home.” In fact, he never said that in precisely those words – what he said was more nuanced * – but neither did he claim to have been misquoted when the statement was repeated in numerous news stories. He also liked to say that he was the last member of the Senate who knew how to milk a cow, although he admitted privately that milking cows was one of the few things about farming he didn't enjoy.

As state legislator, lieutenant governor, and two-term governor from 1937 through 1941, Aiken was a leader of the Vermont Republican Party's progressive wing. His father had embraced the ideals of Teddy Roosevelt's “Bull Moose” Progressive Party, and the young Aiken had followed his lead. He advocated regulation of electrical utilities, banks, and railroads, all of which were popular positions with farmers at the time. The farmers distrusted bankers as a matter of course; were bitter about the refusal of the utilities to string power lines into rural areas, leaving many farms lighted by kerosene lamps; and they grumbled about the fact that the railroads generally charged more for short-haul cargo, such as milk and other farm products, than for long-haul cargo, such as marble and granite. Aiken also was an advocate of organizing rural electrical cooperatives



Students in the Ideals Program at Mount Anthony Union High School have done volunteer work on the Aiken trail for several years. Navigating the wheelbarrow here is Brett Vlach.

to bring power to the farms, which the private utilities opposed, and an opponent of attempts by the private utilities to dam Vermont rivers for their own use in the name of “flood control.”

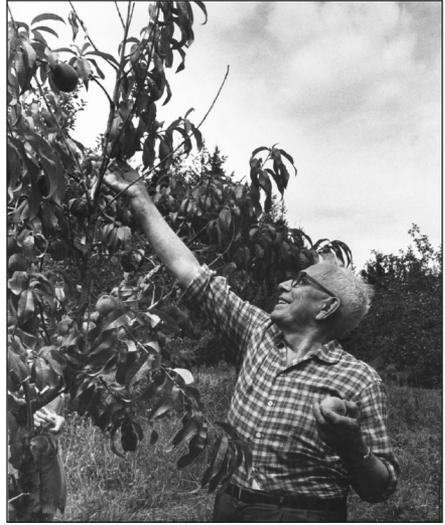
In his 1938 book *Speaking From Vermont*, Aiken wrote that a flood-control plan would give the utilities too much power over the destiny of the state by controlling much of its water, and that the proposal was killed by his legislative committee. “Of the two evils, occasional floods seemed preferable,” he wrote.

In later years he liked to say: “When I first went to Montpelier they put me on the Conservation

Committee. They did that because they knew I liked wildflowers. But that was the committee that also handled the power bills.” And here he would pause briefly for emphasis before adding “And that’s where they made their mistake.”

Nearly everything written about Aiken has focused on his accomplishments in government and his political legacy. But a project now under way in the Hadwen Woods – the six-acre stand of towering pines adjacent to the Bennington Museum – is intended to restore Aiken’s reputation as a pioneer in the conservation and propagation of wildflowers. The roadmap for the project is *Pioneering With Wildflowers*, a book he wrote in 1933 that went through five printings. The wildflower effort, now entering its fifth year, is expected to be a work in progress for many years to come. It involves the creation of a lively woodland garden called “The George D. Aiken Wildflower Trail in the Hadwen Woods.” Eventually it will consist of many of the 318 species of native wildflowers (Turtlehead, Merrybells, Bleeding-heart, Bloodroot, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, Cardinalflower, Blue Phlox, Virginia Bluebell, Starflower, Columbine, Blueflag Iris and Anemone among them) and 44 species of native ferns that Aiken loved, propagated, described in his book, and urged others to grow.

The work, which has been done mainly by volunteers, has involved expanding, widening, and mulching the trails through the woodlot; installing drainage pipes in culverts; cutting up fallen trees and branches to form trail



Senator George D. Aiken grew peaches at his home in Putney. This photo was taken in 1966 by Tyler Resch



Bennington Boy Scout Troop 353 and their parents pose for a photograph in front of a kiosk that features information about the trail. David Malinowski, second from right, front row, earned his Eagle Scout rank in part from his work on the kiosk.

borders; removing thousands of invasive plants, such as burdock, bitter-sweet, briars, buckthorn, garlic mustard, barberry, thistles, and burning bush; and planting a great many native flowers, ferns, and flowering trees. A low stone wall donated in memory of Jack and Helen Cleary of Woodford has been built as an entrance feature, and a bronze plaque about Aiken set on a large granite boulder in memory of Bettenell Miller, an early volunteer backer of the project, has been placed on the trail. The intent is to create a place where people can hike, picnic, attend outdoor classes about environmental subjects, and enjoy native plants.

The idea for the project came from the first issue of the *Walloomsack Review*, which reprinted an article Aiken had written in 1917 about a thriving business in the area around Woodford Mountain that harvested and shipped fancy and Christmas ferns all over the country. The great bulk of the ferns were sold to florists, but ferns also were used by grocers to display fish and meats on beds of ice in days before refrigeration. Back then, about 20,000 ferns were picked daily in the mountains of southwestern Vermont during September and October.

The article caught the attention of Jackie Marro, who had been given a copy of *Pioneering With Wildflowers* by Aiken back in 1967, when her husband (the author of this article) was an intern in Aiken's Washington office. She had become increasingly interested in native plants after trips to the "Garden in the Woods" in Framingham, Massachusetts, the premier wildflower garden in New England. She wrote to Stephen Perkins, then the museum director, asking if he would be interested in having her try to put together a group of volunteers to create a wildflower garden in the museum's Hadwen Woods, both as an enhancement to the museum property and as a memorial to Aiken as a wildflower pioneer. He quickly replied that he would.

George David Aiken was born on August 20, 1890, in a small farmhouse in Putney. He attended a red one-room schoolhouse there and graduated from Brattleboro High School in 1909. In a far corner of a pasture of the farm his father ran there was a woodlot filled with wildflowers. Aiken



Entrance to the George Aiken Wildflower Trail

said that he became entranced with them from about the age of eight. He was so filled with wonder and delight by studying them when he was supposed to be rounding up the cows for milking that other family members would be sent to find him and bring him back home along with the cows. He became passionate and poetic about what he found, writing:

“What a paradise of wildflowers the early pioneers must have found. Looking at some of these flowers, I can see the pages of history turn backward and visualize those who gazed upon them for the first time.

“In the Showy Ladyslipper, I see the Jesuits of France, their canoes breasting the currents of mighty rivers, as they plunge deeper and deeper into the forests to establish outposts of civilization in the far flung recesses of the vast Canadian wilderness . . .

“And the Hepaticas, Bloodroots, Violets and Columbine, in them is colonial New England – school days, homemade clothes and bare feet, the bunch of flowers shyly placed on the teacher’s desk, childhood games, laughter and sorrow.”

In 1912 he borrowed \$100 to begin planting raspberries, and within five years had 500 acres devoted mainly to fruits and berries. He eventually became the largest grower of raspberries in New England. In 1926 he began the commercial growing of wildflowers and ferns and later established a substantial mail-order catalog business with the motto: “Grown in Vermont – They’re Hardy.” By the time of World War II, Aiken’s nursery was using a greenhouse to start cabbage, tomato, and pepper plants from seed to sell in the spring. It had women making Christmas boughs from evergreens to sell in the holiday season, and a catalog that had grown to 24 pages. He sold the business in 1953 after being elected to a third term in the U.S. Senate.

The bulk of Aiken’s nursery revenue came from fruits and berries,

but the propagation of wildflowers was a labor of love, undertaken in part because he feared they would be lost if people didn't take an interest in protecting them and growing them. As he wrote in his book's introduction: "Constantly pushed back by immigrant people, immigrant animals, and even immigrant plants, many species are now making a gallant last stand in the face of extermination. If some of them are to be saved, it must be through the prompt action of our people. We must learn how to propagate and grow all the worthwhile species. . ." He dedicated the book: "To Peter Rabbit in the hope that flattery will accomplish what traps and guns have failed to do and that the little rascal will let our plants alone from this time on."

The Aiken catalog was mailed to customers in virtually every state and many foreign countries. Stephen Terry, who worked for Aiken as a legislative aide, said that when he was traveling abroad on behalf of the Senate and State Department, Aiken would be particularly pleased when people he met at embassy receptions would ask him if he was related to the Aiken who had the catalog business in Vermont.

The former Aiken nursery went out of business two decades ago but the volunteers' plan for the wildflower trail will keep its legacy alive. The site of the trail is a woodlot that was given to the museum by George Hadwen and his family. Hadwen was a prominent businessman who owned the Pennysaver Press, and was a museum trustee. The woodlot has a large, covered open-air pavilion near the entrance suitable both for educational programs and social events. For several years the trails were maintained largely by Norman Wilder, who took a single short and overgrown trail that had been built by students from Monument Elementary School and expanded it through the pine grove while creating another trail through the hardwoods that border Jennings Brook.

Since early in 2009, the work of creating the woodland garden has been done mainly by a small cadre of volunteers who are master gardeners or Bennington Garden Club members. They have had help from students in the Ideals program at Mt. Anthony Union High School, both the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts (who created information kiosks), and work crews from Bennington College, Southern Vermont College, and the



James Mabee sets the descriptive plaque at the Aiken Trail's entrance.

Bennington Museum. Some supporters of the project have done heavy-duty weeding, planting, brush cutting, and trail building, while others have donated money and plants. Ann Herrick donated a hooked rug with a McAdoo wildflower design she had made, and when it was raffled off it raised more than \$900 for tools and plants.

While the area survived both Hurricanes Irene and Sandy with minimal damage, a fierce windstorm on December 21, 2012, knocked over more than thirty of the towering pines, leaving the area looking like a war zone. But by early March 2013 the fallen trees had been removed, most of the fallen branches had been ground into mulch, and the process of restoring and enhancing “the garden in the woods” had begun.

“What a wonderful thing it would be if just outside every city or large town there could be established a wildflower preserve,” Aiken wrote in his book. That is what the project intends to bring to Bennington, and anyone wanting to help can contact the project’s co-chairs, Sara Bonthuis at sara-bonthuis@gmail.com or Jackie Marro at jcminvt@hotmail.com.

**What Aiken actually said was that “the United States could well declare unilaterally that we have ‘won’ in the sense that our armed forces are in control of most of the field and no potential enemy is in a position to establish its authority over South Vietnam.” Such a statement, he said, “would herald the resumption of political warfare” — not combat— “as the dominant theme in Vietnam.”*

Bibliography

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