

A History of Conservation Stays Alive at Camp-Fire

By Jim Adams

In June of 2017 Camp-Fire members got a couple of very special treats when the granddaughter of Ernest Thompson Seton, charter member and early president of the Club, made a pilgrimage to her grandfather's old haunts and helped us understand a good bit more about the man, his role in the history of our Club and his impact that extended to the world beyond through his writing, art and service to youth and conservation.

Seton's granddaughter, Dr. Julie A. Seton, made her first trip to our area to gather information about her grandfather's time here, and along the way imparted enlightening information about her grandfather she had gathered over the past few years to augment her Seton Family Legacy Initiative, which was founded to reintroduce her grandfather's works, as well as other family members' accomplishments to new generations.

Prior to and during his affiliation with Camp-Fire, E.T. Seton amassed an impressive body of work as a founder of the Boy Scouts of America, author of 40-plus books (many still in print) and hundreds of articles and lectures on wildlife, nature study and his adventures in the wild. He was also an accomplished wildlife artist and early conservationist who worked with the likes of William Hornaday, Daniel Beard and Teddy Roosevelt, fellow Camp-Fire members who were giants of the early wildlife conservation movement.

Julie Seton is also a person of substance in her own right, having earned multiple advanced degrees in communications, psychology and theatre. She owns and operates a consulting firm with services in professional communication, emergency preparedness planning and training. She lectures extensively on several aspects of her grandfather's life and works and is an active volunteer for the Boy Scouts on the local and national levels.

Julie grew up in "Seton Castle" in New Mexico, her grandfather's home where he moved after he left Greenwich, Conn., in 1930. While he was in Connecticut he built three homes over a period of nearly 20 years, including Wyndygoul, his 200-plus acre estate that is now a town park in the Cos Cob section of Greenwich. It was on that property where he organized a group of mischievous local boys into the Woodcraft Indians to learn Indian lore, wildlife and nature. This group grew quickly and combined with Daniel Carter Beard's Sons of Daniel Boone to become the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). The BSA of today still embodies many of the basic principles of Seton's Woodcraft Indians. Seton went on to become the BSA's Chief Scout when it was chartered in 1910 and he also authored the first Boy Scout Handbook.

When Seton was President of Camp-Fire in 1909 he established what is now the Club's Conservation Committee with a letter to the membership that stated, "...the Club has a duty to enter actively into the general cause of wildlife protection, and do everything possible for the enforcement of existing game laws, for the creation of more preserves and for enactment of such protective legislation as may be necessary...." These principles have guided Camp-Fire's conservation actions and investments for over one hundred years.

During her visit "back East" in June 2017, Dr. Seton accepted our invitation to speak to the CFC Conservation Committee. The topic she chose was "E. T. Seton: Conservationist Among Friends, his relationships with Conservation Giants – Hornaday, Beard and Teddy Roosevelt."

Her lecture highlighted her grandfather's accomplishments, which were based in his love for nature. His art, writing, field research and professional associations all had strong ties to wildlife and wilderness living. He also had complex and sometimes controversial relationships with those three other well-known naturalists whose lives crossed in many different areas including youth development, science and art. These men were William Temple Hornaday, the first Director of the New York Zoological Society and credited with saving the American Bison from extinction; Daniel Carter Beard, writer, illustrator, social reformer and youth leader; and Theodore Roosevelt, writer, avid sportsman, war-hero and politician. Along with E.T. Seton, all four of these men were honored recipients of the Camp-Fire Medal of Honor in the early 1900s for their respective accomplishments.

As members of the Camp-Fire Club, these and other members met for dinner in New York and fought for nature conservation in the halls of Congress. Ernest Thompson Seton was president of CFCA from 1909-11 and created the Committee on Game Protective Legislation and Preserves whose mission is "the duty of advancing the interests of conservation of forests and wildlife and the promotion of policies of the Club in respect thereto." That committee evolved into what is now the Club's current Conservation Committee which continues to invest and support the preservation and conservation of wildlife and their habitat through grants and donations to conservation and research projects in the U.S. and internationally.

Further, Dr. Seton's comments referenced the work of CFCA in conservation over more than 100 years, including some conservation efforts that E.T. Seton was directly involved in. Here are some highlights of CFCA conservation accomplishments from 1910-1912:

- Pribilof Island fur seal closed season for 5 years (1912) to regenerate the seal population
- Supported the Plumage Act prohibiting the sale of wild bird plumage in New York
- Supported a bill against the spring shooting of ducks on Long Island
- Secured a \$20,000 appropriation for the elk in Wyoming
- Expanded the Alberta game preserve

- Codified the game laws of New York
- Pushed passage of the Bayne-Blauvelt bill prohibiting all sale of wild game in the State of New York, touted as “the greatest protective legislation ever enacted” since many states also enacted.

E.T. Seton’s Wyndygoul estate was also the site of early Camp-Fire Club meetings, outings and encampments, and many of the traditions from those events are still honored today in our events at the Club’s Preserve in Chappaqua, NY.

In a small hollow between two mounds next to “Pipestave” lake at Wyndygoul stands “Medicine Rock,” the ceremonial center stone of Seton’s Woodcraft Indians, as well as the activity center for the early Camp-Fire Outings held there. To commemorate the works of E.T. Seton, on June 16, 2017 the Camp-Fire Club and the Greenwich Council-BSA jointly funded the permanent placement of a large bronze plaque near Medicine Rock.

The text on the plaque commemorates E.T. Seton’s founding of the Boy Scouts of America and his leadership in the conservation activities of CFCA. The plaque’s dedication ceremony included brief speeches by Greenwich First Selectman Peter Tesei, Camp-Fire Club President Hugh Wiley and Julie Seton. Each speech stressed the strong linkage between the Boy Scouts and the Camp-Fire Club, both of which were so deeply influenced by Seton and the lasting, positive impact these organizations are still having on the world today.

Dr. Seton’s message at the dedication ceremony focused on the importance of continuing the tradition of grooming our youth to love and respect the outdoors and to conserve and preserve our natural resources, as her grandfather had espoused throughout his life.

Other speakers at the plaque dedication ceremony included Greenwich First Selectman Peter Tesei, who stressed the importance of preserving the history of Wyndygoul and the positive and lasting influence that E. T. Seton had with the Town of Greenwich and the world. CFCA’s president Hugh Wiley also spoke at the dedication ceremony and had the following comments:

“As members of the Camp-Fire Club of America we’re honored to be here today as part of the commemoration of Medicine Rock with this Plaque.

Ernest Thompson Seton was a visionary and conservationist, who was both a Founder of the Boy Scouts of America and the Camp-Fire Club of America, so it is fitting that our two organizations – the Boy Scouts & Camp-Fire – share this Plaque.

Camp-Fire is an organization that was founded in 1897 as a club of outdoorsmen and conservationists. Men such as Dan Beard, Ernest Thompson Seton, naturalist William T. Hornaday, Arthur Rice, and a rider of the old Chisholm Trail, Edmund Seymour, knew well the value of a camp fire in wild country, and that is why our organization chose “Camp-Fire” for its name. It’s the nucleus around which civilization was built. Because it is the symbol of the great outdoors, the Camp-Fire Club bears its name.

Seton was at the core of our Club’s DNA, and central to our club’s ethos of Conservation. Since the formation of the Camp-Fire Conservation Committee in 1909 and later, the Camp-Fire Conservation Fund in 1977, millions of dollars have been spent on noteworthy projects supporting our North American game and its habitat.”

During Dr. Julie Seton’s visit to our area in June 2017 she also addressed an assemblage of 75 people at Ernest Thompson Scout Reservation in Greenwich, invited by the Greenwich Historical Society and the Greenwich Council-BSA where she lectured on her grandfather’s role on founding and supporting youth organizations, including the Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls and Girls Scouts of America.

She plans to use the knowledge gained and materials collected from her visits to Wyndygoul, the Camp-Fire Club, Greenwich Historical Society archives and New York’s Museum of Natural History to complete a compendium to her grandfather’s autobiography, detailing his years of involvement with the Camp-Fire Club and the Boy Scouts of America—content that was conspicuously missing in his original “Ernest Thompson Seton Trail of An Artist-Naturalist,” first published in 1940. We look forward to the release of the compendium which will, no doubt, enhance our understanding and burnish the image and ethos of our beloved Camp-Fire Club.

© 2018 The Camp-Fire Club of America. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.