



Lucy Ferril Ela, age 14, walking a mountain trail. Photo courtesy William M. Ela.

Lucy Ela Shined as Birder, Local Activist

By Kathy Jordan

Lucy Ferril Ela only stood five feet tall, but she was a giant among the “birders” of the world.

One section of the Colorado Riverfront Trail system pays honor to her for her efforts in spearheading the organization of the Audubon Society in Grand Junction.

Here is Lucy's story, so that when you are on the Riverfront trail and see the Grand Valley Audubon Society Lucy Ferril Ela Wildlife Sanctuary and Audubon Trail near Connected Lakes State Park you know about her and what she did for our community.

Lucy was born in Rome, N.Y. in 1891, but spent most of her childhood in Denver. Her father was the publisher of the Rocky Mountain Herald newspaper before becoming the curator of the Denver Museum of Natural History. The museum was then housed in the basement of the Capitol building.

According to one of her five sons, William M. Ela of Hotchkiss, a retired 21st Judicial District judge, Lucy was delighted that her father worked at the museum. As curator, he collected all kinds of birds and wild flowers. He would bring them home from a trip, lay out birds and flowers on the kitchen table and explain them to the children using their Latin names.

Ela said that Lucy grew up in a nature-loving family which took yearly train trips. He said one trip in particular his mother liked was going up Alpine Pass, through the Alpine Tunnel and into Pitkin. The train was moving so slowly that the kids could get off the train and pick Columbines.

Lucy and her husband, Wendell (Dent) met while they were both attending Colorado College in Colorado Springs in 1912. They were married two years later in 1914.

Ela said he thought his mother quit college after her third year because the family needed the money to send her brother, Thomas, to college. Thomas Hornsby Ferril became the Poet Laureate of Colorado, and one of his poems is inscribed in the Colorado Capitol Building Rotunda.

After attending Colorado College, Lucy taught school in a one-room school at Burlington and boarded with a farmer and his wife for a year. Lucy had a nice singing voice, as did one of her friends, and they soon became known for singing duets. On Sunday afternoons the people on the party line would take their phones off the hook, and Lucy and her friend would sing for them.

During the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s Lucy was involved in raising her five sons, Dennett, Thomas, Wendell, William and Charles, but that didn't keep her from becoming involved in other activities. She was a charter member of the Grand Junction Garden Club which was instrumental in establishing the Duck Pond on Orchard Mesa. One of her projects with the Garden Club was planting a rose garden at the old Grand Junction Depot for train passengers to enjoy as they were waiting for the train. The garden was located on the north/west side between the depot and the Beanery Restaurant.

In 1946 Lucy was one of the main organizers of the Audubon Christmas Bird Count in Western Colorado. Twenty years later, she helped form the local Audubon Society.

Lucy had always loved to travel, and three years after death of her husband in 1959, she decided to do some world birding, a hobby which she enjoyed into her 70s and 80s.

Her first trip was to Hawaii and Japan. Her second was a 4 ½-month trip touring Europe. In 1966 she joined a Canadian group of bird watchers on a world tour that took them to the Orient, India, Asia, Europe and Iceland. In 1968 she traveled with the same group on a tour behind the Iron Curtain. Lucy was the only person from Colorado who went on a bird-watching excursion to California with the Oklahoma Ornithological Society in the fall of 1969.

Lucy didn't center her life just on bird watching and gardening.

She was the first woman to serve on the Mesa County school board, serving from 1929 to 1950. In 1950 she was the Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce's Woman of the Year. She was also a member of the Reviewers Club, Grand Junction's oldest literary group.

She is also credited with writing the original by-laws for the Art Center, which is now the Western Colorado Art Center. She was also active in the active Beaux Art Club the forerunner to the Brush and Pallet Club.

Chances are that Lucy would be delighted that the Audubon Society has set up a gift shop at the Botanical Gardens, 641 Struthers Ave. The winter hours are Tuesday through Friday noon to 5:30 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. So go on down and soak up two of Lucy's loves, birds and flowers.