

April 2003
A 70th Anniversary Celebration
by Cherry Wunderlich

A nursery school that opened in its co-founder's back yard and basement in Chevy Chase celebrates its 70th anniversary this May in a beautiful setting with ties to Washington and national history.

Bertha Belt and Virginia Johnson started the school named Outdoor Nursery School in 1933 at Bertha Belt's home on Meadow Lane. Today the school is located near Connecticut Avenue in the beautiful building and grounds once owned by Alexander Graham Bell's daughter and her horticulturist husband. Outdoor Nursery School serves 75 children in 5 classes, with activities both indoors and outdoors in the school's many yards.

This spring Co-Directors Barbara Hutchinson and Susan Miller invite alumni to come to the school on Saturday, May 3 from 2 to 4 p.m. to "revisit timeless memories of a special place for generations of children and their families."

Most of all, the 70th Anniversary Celebration is a time for renewing friendships. Highlights of the afternoon include dancing, music, a display of pictures, and outdoor festivities. For the fundraiser raffle, the school staff has created a quilt depicting themes of school activities throughout the calendar year. Each class is contributing a class gift basket. School T-shirts and watercolor prints will also be available.

This newsletter's Winter 1985-86 issue related some of the school's history. We'll tell more here, from The History of the Outdoor Nursery School, written in 1993 by Evelyn Litwin, Ann Archer, and Michael Horsey to commemorate the school's 60th anniversary ten years ago.

Beginnings

o "Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Belt...established the school via a door-to-door campaign, attempting to convince parents of the importance of early childhood education. This was not an accepted idea at the time, and acceptance was made more difficult by the financial constraints of the Depression....The school began with four students and grew to 10."

o Born in Massachusetts, Bertha Belt received a degree in physical education from the Maryland College for Women in Baltimore. Later, she attended the Bank Street School, part of Columbia University, in New York City, known for early childhood education. "Mrs. Belt is remembered as observant and a good listener. She spoke in a thoughtful and meaningful way, and had her finger on all that was going on in an unobtrusive way."

The School Grows and Moves

o "The school originally began in the basement and large backyard...it soon took over the house!....The third floor was devoted to classroom activities. The third floor landing and one third floor classroom with an interior window served as a puppet theater. A second floor bedroom

became the block room, and the living room was the home of the 'story hour.'...the beautiful circular staircase was a funnel for balloons released on each child's birthday...The upstairs sleeping porch served as an observation porch for parents."

- o In 1952 Outdoor Nursery School moved to its current location. Mrs. Belt rented the house and two and a half acres of gardens, which were part of the original 34 acres of gardens and the home named "In the Woods." The gardens and distinctive home had been created by world-famous horticulturalist and author, Dr. David Fairchild and his wife, Marian Bell Fairchild.

- o The Fairchilds' home was completed in 1910. The house reflects Mediterranean and Japanese influences. Now the home of the school's classrooms, nearly every room on the ground floor was designed with direct access to the beautiful gardens.

The Fairchilds

- o Marian Bell Fairchild was the daughter of inventor Alexander Graham Bell, a frequent visitor at "In the Woods." Bell used a one-room cottage called the "Retreat" as his laboratory and workshop. One of Bell's grandchildren recalled, "For us children that was the place to go, to sit and talk to him." Another grandchild recalled, "It was nothing fancy, rough wood inside. It has a porch, a kitchen, a little bath and one large bedroom. Grandpa could stay up all night and work if he wanted to." Another frequent visitor was Fairchild's brother-in-law, Gilbert Grosvenor of the National Geographic Society.

- o David Fairchild considered himself a "plant explorer." He titled his 1938 book *The World Was My Garden: Adventures of a Plant Explorer*. He studied botany in the United States, Germany, Italy, and Java. In 1904, he became the Director of the Office of Plant Introduction for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, serving until 1926. He traveled around the world and helped introduce the soybean, mango, and some 200,000 other plants to the United States.

- o In 1905, David and Marian Fairchild visited Japan. They were particularly impressed by the flowering cherry trees. As a result, in the same year, Dr. Fairchild introduced the first Japanese flowering cherry tree to the Washington area. It still blooms each year on the grounds of Outdoor Nursery School. Fairchild planted 100 more cherry trees of 40 varieties in his gardens. He also was responsible for the Japanese government's gift of the cherry trees for the Tidal Basin in Washington, DC. He sponsored tree plantings for children as well. These plantings "greatly increased the popularity of the tree in areas such as Kenwood."

The School Today

Today at Outdoor Nursery School, the children enjoy varied activities in the classrooms, as well as outdoors in the varied yards. As one teacher said, "The environment shapes the curriculum." Children learn about the growth cycle of the varied trees around them every day, as well as about the lives and activities of varied plants and animals. They create paintings and other art projects amid blooming shrubs in the spring, and enjoy playing in the snow in the winter.

The children gave the yards their names. The "Walk-in-the-Woods Yard" had a plywood train. The "Spruce Tree Yard" was distinguished by two enormous spruce trees. The children named a yard that was overgrown at first the "Jungle Yard." The "Front Yard" became the name of the yard around the main entrance. The children's classes rotate among the yards, so all the children enjoy all the yards. On special occasions, children bring plantings home to their families.

The gardens, with their trees, shrubs, and flowers, will be in full bloom this May as former students gather to honor the school's 70 years devoted to early childhood education.

Note: We thank Barbara Hutchinson, Outdoor Nursery School's co-director, for the information for this article. Sara Phang, who edited this article, attended and enjoyed Outdoor Nursery School. For the 1985-86 article about the school, see the Newsletter section of Gary Ditto's web site at <www.garyditto.com>.