

Old Eagle Garden Club, A Main Line Establishment

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Lemon Hill, Strawberry Mansion, Woodford, Cedar Grove, Chamonix—say them and the words become a magic spell, conjuring up those elegant Fairmount Park mansions. For many years, in early December, the Old Eagle Garden Club decorated these lovely houses for a weekend of Christmas tours for the public. Longtime member, Beth Butler, recalls that club members used historically accurate natural materials such as fruit, nuts and live greens, to create times past when Lemon Hill and the other estates were in their prime.

Ruth Lieberman was the first president of the Old Eagle Garden Club, founded in 1956. In the following year ‘the Eagles’ joined the Garden Club Federation of Pennsylvania. Sixty-two years later Ruth is still a lively contributor to the Club’s agenda, joining in activities, attending meetings at members’ houses or at places of interest in the Tredyffrin-Easttown area. Old Eagle’s guiding principles are identical to those that, in the 19th century, inspired the founders of the garden club movement: to beautify and cultivate public space, to encourage members to make their own gardens, and to carry out the motto of the National Garden Clubs: “Plant America.”

From the beginning, Old Eagle has participated in civic beautification and educational projects. A few years ago, Beth Butler and the rest of the crew, along with two other garden clubs, landscaped an entrance to the Blue Route. Calling the design “Greening the Blue,” the gardeners added large marble balls to the traffic islands and these features are still there. In recent years Doris Recktenwald and Barbara Jones have overseen landscaping projects at Baker Industries (founded by member Louise Baker), Bryn Mawr Rehabilitation Center, and Devon Manor, among other institutions.

Monthly meetings are educational, featuring speakers on topics such as flower arranging, soil conservation, pig farming and the cultivation of hemp (a.k.a. marijuana). Eagles present workshops on designing and building floral displays and enjoy programs by busy members who travel the world and return with news and pictures of their journeys. In 2016, Susy Baum and Barbara Juda visited Holland and Belgium, and then regaled the club with

photos of thousands of flowers in full bloom. Last year, Susy and Cynthia Clough toured gardens in the lake district of Northern Italy and entertained the members with stunning pictures.

To use Barbara Juda’s expression, our “nifty little club” has occupied a visible place at the Philadelphia Flower Show. Blue ribbons have fallen like spring showers upon our artists, and other prizes, like a silver bowl in 1973, decorate our members’ shelves. Anne Hayes was the presiding genius whose brilliant ideas informed winning exhibits in categories such as store fronts, tables, and garden constructions. Diane Martineau who, among others, worked with Anne, cites memorable themes such as a Moroccan rug shop, a chapel with real organ pipes, an exhibit named “Under Construction” (a big winner), the Cannes Film Festival, The Big Apple, a roof terrace garden and a tribute to Van Gogh. The Big Apple won the Garden Club Certificate of Excellence in Garden Design. Eagles made all the props, such as a grand piano and those organ pipes. Projects began every summer in Jeanne Trudell’s and Carolyn Shelling’s garages and moved to Diane’s heated garage in winter. After Anne Hayes retired in 2010, club entries ended. However, individual members, such as Susy and Diane, continue to win blue ribbons every year.

The Eagles honor absent members by planting trees and installing memorial benches in their names. Three trees with identifying plaques at their bases stand at The Willows in Radnor. Ardyth Sobyak reports that when the Radnor Trail opened, the club placed a bench on the trail near the Wayne Art Center.



2006 dedication of garden bench on Radnor Trail to commemorate 50 years since the founding of Old Eagle Garden Club. FRONT ROW (L-R): Ruth Lieberman, Founding President; Luena Whitaker, Treasurer; Beth Butler, Ways and Means. BACK ROW (L-R): Margaret Samman, First Vice-President; Betsy Girard, President; Joanie Migliaccio.

Though a relatively small flock, the Eagles are still flying. Connie Kirker is working on her third book, “Coconuts,” for a British publisher of a series of books about food. Ardyth Sobyak exhibits her water colors in juried shows throughout the area. Meetings are lively, well attended, everyone contributes to discussions, the atmosphere is animated and inquisitive. At the annual picnic this year we’ll gather around Ruth Lieberman and celebrate 62 years of cultivation and camaraderie. And we’ll remember proudly what the Old Eagle Garden Club once did at Lemon Hill, Strawberry Mansion, Woodford, Cedar Grove and Chamonix.

Editor’s Note: In 2018, the Old Eagle Garden Club donated nine photograph albums and scrapbooks to the TEHS Archives and Special Collections. The books cover the years from 1956 to 2015, and contain an assortment of memorabilia and many photographs depicting the activities and many award-winning designs from the club and its members. Special thanks to Society and Garden Club member Susanna Baum for her assistance with the donation of this collection. We are pleased to note that founding president Ruth Lieberman celebrated her 100th birthday in 2019.



ABOVE: Members of the Old Eagle Garden Club, photographed in 2018. *Courtesy of the author.*

BELOW LEFT: Tree planting at Philadelphia State Hospital, 1961. BELOW RIGHT: Prize-winning flower arrangement at 2003 Philadelphia Flower Show.
Photos from the Garden Club Photo Album and Scrapbook Collection *Courtesy of TEHS Archive.*

