

CHICAGO DAILY NEWS Aug. 21, 1975

## *Mrs. May Watts dies; creator of Ill. Prairie Path*

Mrs. May Theilgaard Watts, creator of the Illinois Prairie Path and a pioneer in conservation education and ecology, is dead at the age of 82.

Mrs. Watts, who died Wednesday at her Naperville home, also was a writer and illustrator. She was the recipient of numerous awards and honors from horticultural, conservation and natural science organizations.

The daughter of Danish immigrants, Mrs. Watts was born in Chicago on May 1, 1893 — the year of the Columbian Exposition.

**SHE WAS** a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Chicago in 1918, where she concentrated on botany and ecology. For a time, she was an associate of noted landscape architect Jens Jensen and lived at Ravinia. She taught at Lake View High School in Chicago.

In 1942, Mrs. Watts became staff naturalist at the Morton Arboretum in west suburban Lisle, a post she held until her retirement in 1961.

She organized the Arboretum's education program, including its interpretive nature walks, and during those years wrote and illustrated "Reading the Landscape," an early,

landmark ecology handbook which is still in print.

**SHE ALSO WAS** the author of "Reading the Landscape of Europe" and numerous popular guides to the outdoors, including "Tree Finder" and "Flower Finder."

After her retirement, Mrs. Watts turned her energies to the creation of the Illinois Prairie Path, a 40-mile recreation and hiking trail running westward through Du Page County and now a part of the National Trails System.

For her work on this project, she was honored by the Interior Department and snipped the ribbon which inaugurated the National Trails System.

Mrs. Watts was a stately, enthusiastic woman and her associates at Morton Arboretum remarked Thursday that her affection for the landscape and nature was infectious.

**SHE MARRIED** Raymond Watts in 1944. He preceded her in death.

Mrs. Watts is survived by a son, Thomas; two daughters, Erica and Nancy; two sisters, Mrs. Laura McVey and Ethel Theilgaard, and two grandchildren.

No funeral services are planned. A memorial service may be scheduled.

# Mrs. Watts dies at 82; devised 'Prairie Path'

MRS. MAY THEILGAARD Watts, 82, a leading Chicago-area naturalist for many years, died Wednesday night in her Naperville home.

A teacher, author, and lecturer, Mrs. Watts was best known as the person who did the most to establish the Illinois Prairie Path on the former right-of-way of the Chicago, Aurora & Elgin Railroad thru the western suburbs.

A onetime science teacher at Lake View High School, she also spent 19 years as a staff naturalist at the Morton Arboretum. She was a naturalist emeritus there at the time of her death.

Her books included "Reading the Landscapes," "Reading the Landscapes of Europe," and "Trees." In addition

she wrote a nature column in The Tribune in 1966.

"I LIKE HARDWARE store words. They are short, simple words with force," Mrs. Watts once said of her writing.

One of her pet peeves was the term "senior citizen." "If you want to say old, say old," she said in 1972 when she was an active 79.

Mrs. Watts grew up in Chicago's Ravenswood area, the daughter of a landscape architect, and held a degree in natural science from the University of Chicago.

A widow, she leaves a son Tom; two daughters, Erica and Nancy; and two sisters.

## Tribute for naturalist April 3

By Art Kozelka

FEW PERSONS have the sensitive awareness of the importance of a tiny seedling-emerging from the earth or a mature tree in the landscape as did May Theilgaard Watts, naturalist at the Morton Arboretum from 1941 to 1961, and naturalist emeritus until her death at 82 last August.

Mrs. Watts combined the skills of artist, writer, gardener, teacher, and, especially, as an observer of natural wonders. Her books, "Reading the Landscape of America" and "Reading the Landscape of Europe," impart an appreciation of nature and are a legacy for new generations facing increasing environmental concern.

On April 3, former associates, friends, and students of Mrs. Watts will pay tribute to her at the 11th OIKOS [from the Greek for ecology] conference to be held in the Thornhill Center at the arboretum. The all-day meeting is sponsored by the Open Lands Project, Morton Arboretum, and the American Society of Landscape Architects.

The conference theme appropriately will be "Reading the Landscape: A Tribute to May Theilgaard Watts."

MORNING LECTURES will be devoted to looking at landscapes in ways that reflect her influence. Speakers will include Dr. Alfred Etter, arboretum naturalist; Mrs. Elizabeth Zimmerman, natural history instructor at the arboretum; and Prof. Douglas Wade of Northern Illinois University.

After a luncheon break, the conference will resume with Eugene Lewis, who will speak on "The Illinois Prairie Path: A Dream Realized." Mrs. Watts inspired the founding of the Illinois Prairie Path.

Miss Helen Turner of Hendersonville, N. C., will be the moderator of this segment.

Registration for the conference will be at 8:30 a. m. and the program will begin at 9:15 a. m. The fee is \$8.50, which includes a box lunch.

Mrs. Thelma McComb, conference coordinator, urges preregistration because of the limited seating capacity of Thornhill Center. Call her at 968-0074 for further information.

*Art Kozelka*



May Theilgaard Watts: For new generations she leaves a legacy to face the increasing environmental concern.