

Delma Donald Woodburn, A Donald Park Founder

by Brian Bigler

Delma Donald Woodburn was Born June 2, 1899 in Springdale Township to John Sweet Donald and Vona DeCrow Donald, she spent her early years on the farm which her great-grandparents, the Rev. James Donald and Margaret Strong Donald, established in 1855. A self-described "tomboy" who loved outdoor play, climbing the farm's huge oaks, getting together with neighbor kids, playing with her dog, and tending her favorite pony, "Flashlight," whom she named after its invention, Delma attended grade school at the nearby Malone School. The young girl's job each Saturday was to clean the farm home's many lamps and chimneys, help card horse hair for mattresses and, when old enough, tend the livestock. Delma spoke often of the early deaths of her only siblings, Robert, who lived for just a few weeks in 1901, and especially her sister Dora, born June 3, 1903, who lived six months.

Delma was raised in a politically active household. Her father served in the State Assembly from 1902 to 1907, the Senate from 1908 to 1911, and spent two terms as Secretary of State from 1912 to 1916. These were the years of Progressive legislation and Delma recalled visits from such political notables as Robert and Belle Case LaFollette and the famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Her mother, Vona, was interested in the causes of the day, including the Women's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) and progressive ideas on rural education which she championed while at the farm and later after the family's move in 1917 to 211 Prospect Avenue in Madison. In 1920, at age 21, Delma voted in the first election for which women had achieved this right.

Delma spent her high school years at Madison and was one of the first graduates of Wisconsin High School. She received her B.A. in Economics from the University of Wisconsin in 1921. Delma married James Woodburn on December 1923. James's career as a professor of civil and hydraulic engineering took them to Pullman, Washington, Ann Arbor, Michigan and Germany. Amid these moves Delma studied home economics for a semester at Indiana University in 1924 and earned a degree in a farm short course at the UW College of Agriculture from 1938 until 1940. She also gave birth to two sons, James Donald Woodburn in 1925 and Robert Donald Woodburn in 1928. In 1937 Delma and James moved into the family home at 211 Prospect. James passed away in 1980.

Never one to sit idle, after her father died in 1934 Delma assisted her mother in the maintenance of their three contiguous farms in Springdale, including the one on which she was born, as places to give young farmers a start. She continued to oversee the Vernon Valley Farms, eventually with the aid of her sons and grandchildren, throughout her life. Area residents knew Delma best through her involvement as a life member in the Friends of Donald Park and the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society.

The Donald Park Friends group emerged after Delma and her family contributed some of their farmland to Dane County for a park near Mt. Vernon, which the County has subsequently expanded. From around the United States, Delma's family remains actively involved in the Friends group, which in recent years has volunteered its assistance with projects to expedite the park's opening to the public.

Delma Donald Woodburn, at age 102 and a half, passed away at her Madison home Nov. 8, 2001. Her Legacy lives on through The Friends of Donald Park, as well as the Mt. Horeb Area and Dane Country Historical Societies.

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