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Newsletter

Friends of the Florissant Fossil Beds eNewsletter

Every Fossil Needs a Friend

#44—January 2020

Violet “Vim” Crane Wright (1926 -2003) – Defenders of Florissant

Last August, the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument celebrated its 50th Anniversary. Many events were held including several panel discussions. During one of those discussions, John Wright, son of “Vim” Wright, spoke eloquently about his mother and her role in the establishment of the Monument. Her legacy continues through generous donations from her son John. The Friends of the Fossil Beds and the staff of the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument are deeply appreciative of his monetary donations.

Vim Wright, as she preferred to be called, saw a lot in her 76 years. From an impoverished childhood in Istanbul, to society life in Baltimore with adoptive parents, to eventually becoming a primary player in Washington State’s environmental issues and in Colorado with the saving of the Florissant Fossil Beds from development, Wright was known for her vitality and determination. Her professional accomplishments in Washington State included working as the assistant director at the University of Washington Institute for Environmental Studies and founding several organizations. Her strong belief in democratic principles, grassroots efforts and the merits of science inspired all who knew her. Her cause was for that which didn’t have a voice –plants, animals, and the land they called home. She made it her life’s work to speak for those who couldn’t speak for themselves.



Lisetta Iakovidou (Violet
“Vim” Crane Wright),
Istanbul, 1933

Courtesy Estella Leopold

In 1960, Wright moved with her two sons to Denver, Colorado where she established a small real-estate business. During the late 1960s, a conflict over the future of the nearby Florissant Fossil Beds was heating up. Thirty-five miles west of Colorado Springs, a field of trees, insects, birds and fish had been fossilized by a volcano 34 million years ago. In 1962, the area had been officially proposed as a National Monument, and conservationists and developers had been dueling over the land ever since.

In 1969, the land proposed for the Monument was still owned by a developer who

was ready to build. Wright during the late 1960s had met the esteemed scientist Estella Leopold who told her about bird fossils buried in the land and her activist blood was awakened. Wright was a member of the newly formed Denver Audubon Society as she had a special place in her heart for birds. Wright, Leopold and Betty Willard formed the Defenders of Florissant to organize efforts to stop development on the fossil beds. When asked what inspired her involvement in the cause, part of her answer was “it was inconceivable that anyone would desecrate the burial grounds of these creatures.”

To keep the developers from tearing up the land, Wright recruited a group of women including a pregnant mother and several children, to sit in front of the bulldozers. They made their intentions public, alerting the press and government. Believing that no one would run over a well-dressed woman, Wright had her hair done and put on her pearls and high heels. She drove the group to the site before dawn. While they waited scared, at 6 AM they got a message that a federal judge had issued a temporary injunction to stop the development. Their plan had worked. On August 20th, 1969, 6,000 acres became Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument. At 43, Wright had made a dramatic entrance into environmental activism.



Vim Wright, sons John and Ted, Baltimore, 1959

Courtesy Estella Leopold

In the years following the Florissant Fossil Beds conflict, Wright came into her own as an environmental leader. In 1971, she became president of the Audubon Society of Greater Denver and in 1972, she became president of the Colorado Open Space Council. She was awarded the Rocky Mountain Center for the Environment's Organizational Award for her many accomplishments.



Vim Wright receives the Washington State Environmental Excellence Award, 1986

Courtesy Estella Leopold

During her years in Colorado, she initiated radio programming and the first television program on environmental issues in the United States. In 1976, she was awarded the Feinstone Environmental Award from the State University of New York (SUNY) for her work in Colorado.

Wright moved to Washington State where she worked at the University of Washington where she acted as the resource person in the Institute of Environmental Studies Department and was responsible for connecting students with appropriate internships. She taught several graduate courses and developed close relationships with the director as well as with Dr. Estella Leopold whom she knew from their work together in Colorado. In Seattle, she also became involved with the Seattle Audubon Society. In 1979, she was appointed to the Washington Department of Game, Non-Game Advisory Council, where she was a champion for non-game species. In 1980, Wright was appointed by Seattle mayor to the Copper Creek Citizens

Advisory Committee, which was charged with researching whether the city of Seattle should build a dam on the Skagit River. Wright adamantly urged protection of the irreplaceable eagle habitat on the Skagit.

The committee recommended not to build the dam because of the eagles and the impact it would have on the local population and Indian Treaty fishing rights.

Wright's expertise on environmental issues and people skills made her a much-desired member of many environmental causes. Luckily, she had enough energy to go around and the list of her environmental involvements, committee work, and awards runs long. Her ability to bring people together from both sides of the political spectrum on behalf of an environmental agenda was repeatedly praised.

Over the years, Wright earned a number of awards for her hard work and expertise. In 1987, she was awarded the Washington State Environmental Excellence Award. In 2000, she received the Southwest Parks and Monument's Danson Award for her work on their Board since 1975. Her crowning achievement came in November 2002, when she received the "Environmental Hero" award from the Washington Environmental Council for launching Farming and the Environment.

Wright died of lung cancer in 2003. Her legacy lives on through the many organizations she founded and the inspiration she passed on to all who worked for her.

The Great Backyard Bird Count - 2020

The Friends of the Fossil Beds will be sponsoring our 8th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count on Saturday, February 15th, 2020 starting at 9 AM. We are holding this event in conjunction with the 23rd Annual International Great Backyard Bird Count which will be held for four days from Friday, February 14th – Monday, February 17th, 2020.

This international event is a citizen science effort to capture a worldwide count of bird populations. It began in 1998 and is a joint partnership between the National Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. This yearly count helps us to learn more about how bird populations are doing around the world, how to protect them and keep track of endangered species. The statistics from the count help scientists all over the world implement conservation measures wherever necessary. The count of 2019 yielded the largest numbers since the first count. 6,715 species were counted by 224,781 participants in over 110 countries. 205,779 checklists were submitted. Over 30,000,000 individual birds were counted. If you wish to learn more about the 2019 statistics and what important information was compiled, go to birdcount.org.

The sign-in site for our event on the 15th will be in the yurt at the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument starting at 9 AM. We will have 3 separate starting times for 3 different bird walks of one hour each to count and record the birds seen. There will be walks starting at 9:15 AM, 10:15 AM and 11:15 AM. Everyone participating will learn how to record and send in the count data. From 1 PM to 3 PM there will be activities for children and their families including a bird scavenger hunt and making bird feeders.

Bring your family and friends to have a great time learning about birds. If you like to help with this event, please contact Sally McCracken at 719-510-5518 or e-mail her at sammckind@aol.com. We encourage all of our members to join us and/or help with every event. We are always looking for volunteers for our events.

See you on February 15th!!!!



Great Backyard Bird Count

Saturday, February 15th, 2020 at 9 AM
Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument



Count birds in your backyard, local park, or wherever you spot a bird, and submit your observations online.

birdcount.org

Carolina Wren. Photo: Jenny Burdette/
Great Backyard Bird Count



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"Stumps Y'all, and other Songs for Junior Rangers."

Ranger Jeff Wolin has been working on a professional development grant, called the Albright-Wirth Grant, to record songs for a CD called "Stumps Y'all, and other Songs for Junior Rangers." The Friends group is involved as they are holding the money for the grant to pay for the recording. For the project, Jeff has been working with a local, award winning children's musician named Steve Weeks. Steve and Jeff have been recording since September and are almost done.



Ranger Jeff Wolin (top left), Steve Weeks (top right),
and the four naturalists

Recently, they were able to bring in four students (aka. naturalists) from the School in the Woods (District 20) to be on the album. The students came into the studio in Colorado Springs with their parents to record songs and got to wear headphones, sing into a microphone, and be real musicians!

Hip Hop Camp at Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument

During the summer of 2019, Florissant Fossil Beds hosted Hip Hop Boot Camp. Hip Hop Boot Camp was inspired by the work of the Youth Ambassador Program (YAP!) which started at New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park. The goal of YAP! is to connect youth to the NPS and its mission through hip-hop music.

Through the Interpretation and Education fund, FLFO was able to fund a project this year. The park collaborated with Ben Gilbarg of Big Picture Anthems (BPA) in Oakland, California. BPA utilizes the power of music and video to produce communication movements that have an educational and social impact on society. Ben Gilbarg was one of the founders of the YAP! program. Another partner was the National Council for the Traditional Arts. The goal was to find two high school aged youth hip-hop artists, provide opportunities for them to deeply connect to Florissant Fossil Beds, and have them compose and record two hip-hop songs about their experience at the Monument. Jeff Wolin, Lead Interpreter for the Monument, and Education Intern, Kevin Jauregui (Geoscientist in the Parks Intern) led the efforts.

In late July, Ben Gilbarg along with Nehemiah Vaughn and Joey Lovett embarked on a journey to Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument. Joey Lovett, also known as Cangaroo, is a 19-year-old Hip Hop artist from West Oakland who was inspired to write music at the age of 15 when one of his closest friends was murdered and turned to music as a healthy way to find healing. Nehemiah Vaughn, also known as Nuisance, is a 19-year-old Hip Hop artist from Oakland who started rapping as an outlet for his anger and painful obstacles he was facing and while informing others that they are not alone with any hardships they may be facing.

For two full days, these three artists accompanied by Kevin Jauregui, took in a mind-blowing amount of information. Nehemiah, Joey, and Ben hiked on the Monument's trails, learned about paleontology, and searched for fossils at a nearby privately-owned quarry. They experienced wildlife and became absorbed in deep time, and they learned about the human history at Florissant. During their time at the Monument, Joey and Nehemiah began to free-style to beats provided by Ben. With beautiful mountain meadows and Pikes Peak in the background, they would pull out their laptop and just start rhyming. In mid-August, just days before the Monument celebrated its 50th anniversary, Ben emailed rough drafts of the two songs they created.



Hip Hop artists Joey (left) and Nehemiah (right) and GIP Intern Kevin Jauregui (middle) finding inspiration at Florissant Fossil Beds

The songs were amazing and even gave Jeff and Kevin chills!

The two songs written by Joey and Nehemiah expressed the joy and freedom they experienced at the park. One of their songs called “The Defenders of Florissant” was inspired by the landmark environmental law case and grassroots effort, which saved the Florissant Fossil Beds from development in the late 1960s. The song was so amazing and inspirational, it was played at the 50th anniversary celebration and the crowd was in awe.

Note from the Editor:

If you have not heard the songs produced by these two young and very talented artists, please do so by checking out the links to each song below:

[Defenders of Florissant](#)

[Circle of Life](#)

WARNING: They are very catchy. One or both may become your new favorite song(s)

A Message from the President

My message for this newsletter is a shout out to some of the unsung heroes of 2019. All of our contributors deserve thanks and recognition. Any and all efforts and donations are truly appreciated. There are, however, a few folks I really would like to mention.

Each year, our monument is blessed with the presence of hopeful young people that care deeply about our world. The interns that come to work for us do a great deal behind the scenes to help in many areas. This year, three special paleontology/geology interns did wonders for the Friends. They freely volunteered to work above and beyond their hours at the park to help our organization with fundraising and community outreach efforts. Did you know that an intern, **Kacy Patrick**, designed our 50th logo and all of the panels displayed at the amphitheater? She also designed decorations and helped to promote our fossil collection at the Western Interior Paleontological Society’s Founders Symposium in Denver. She even created the poster and marketing materials for our Suds, Stumps, and Stars event. I do not know what we would have done without Kacy this year!!! **Bret Buskirk** and **Alyssa Fjeld** gave countless hours to community outreach efforts throughout the summer. They manned tables at gem and mineral shows and offsite events. They researched and created presentations for local businesses. They assisted at our 50th summer events and went above and beyond the call of duty when the Friends needed help. Trust me, there was some tech advice going on behind the scenes!! These lovely, positive, kind young ladies made my summer. I can’t thank them enough!!

Please take a moment to look at the names of our board members on the green tab at the side of the front page of this publication. These people put in a tremendous amount of work to pull off the fabulous 50th anniversary celebrations that took place this year. Countless hours were spent doing everything from bussing tables to picking up and delivering cake. The people on this list do not get paid a dime for all they do. As a matter of fact, they often pay out of pocket to make things happen. A huge thank you goes out to my board members!!

None of what we do could take place without our generous financial donors. There were many of you who simply added money to your banquet donations or handed us donations at offsites. I am sorry I can't list each and every one. I would like to acknowledge some of the largest donors on record for 2019.

Deborah Woodcock

Robert and Sara Miner

David and Carolyn Hibner

John Wright

Brian Baldwin

The fabulous One Eleven Band!!

Fossil Craft Beer Company

Colorado Springs Astronomical Society

Newmont Corporation

Lake George Gem and Mineral Club

Colorado Springs Mineralogical Society

Our efforts were truly blessed with the gifts of time, talent, finances, and support of all kinds this past year. Many thanks go out to all involved!! Bring on 2020!

For all who contribute to the success of the
Monument in one way or another...

THANK YOU!!!