

Mary I. Roddis Connor Gordon Robert Phelps Connor

Garden Wedding Unites Lumber Families

“Two of Wisconsin’s oldest and most honored lumbering families were united when Miss Mary Roddis became the bride of Gordon Robert Phelps Connor at one of the loveliest summer weddings that State has seen for many a day.

The bride is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton Roddis of Marshfield, Wisconsin, her father being president of the Roddis Lumber & Veneer Co. of that city. The bridegroom is the son of former Lieut. Gov. And Mrs. W. D. Connor, his father being the head of a family which has been noted in the Wisconsin Lumber industry for the last seventy years.”

Thus began the American Lumberman magazine page of photos and the wedding report in the July 27, 1929 issue.

After a three-month honeymoon in Europe, the young couple returned home to the Depression. It was not an auspicious time to begin a career in the cyclical lumber business. Gordon Connor managed the Stratford mill and retail yard for several years and then was transferred to Minneapolis and Ironwood, Michigan. He worked for the Roddis Company for several years in Park Falls in the 1930's.

Gordon Connor was born December 12, 1905. As one of the younger members of a large, lively family he had to carve his niche. He raised Rhode Island Reds; he and his sister had a pet lamb. In a childhood which included many friends, he and his sister would give plays and parties with their friends in the carriage house behind their home. Gordon was a fine athlete. He was captain of the football and basketball teams at Marshfield -High School, from which he graduated in 1924. In 1925 he Graduated from Phillips Andover Academy and in 1929 from The University of Wisconsin. He was a varsity football player at Madison, a lifelong member of the “W” Club, and an enthusiastic Badger fan.

While in college, he accompanied his mother to Western New York to visit relatives. His knowledge of antiques developed on these trips and whetted his appetite for collecting. Many happy hours were spent "antiquing" wherever he traveled. Mary Roddis was brought up in a very different atmosphere. Her father imposed a strict regime from which no deviations were



allowed. Reading and academic achievement were stressed rather than pets and athletic activities. Mary and her twin sister Sara were very precocious and responded to the learning environment readily. At the age of six they were in third grade. (There were no rules in those days about the age at which children could enter school.) Mary graduated from Grafton Hall and attended Wellesley College and the Universities of Iowa and Wisconsin. Finally she could attend the same college as her fiancé. The families were business rivals and were in different branches of the Republican Party and disagreed on many public issues. Their children were not allowed to date.

Finally, however, young love conquered all, and the wedding so fulsomely described by the "American Lumberman" took place on July 20, 1929.

Following in his father's footsteps, Gordon was a Marshfield alderman from 1933-35. He, too, was a well-known banker: founder and president of two Wausau area banks, chairman of an Athens bank, and president for fifteen years of a Stevens Point bank.

When the Gordon Connor family moved to Upper Michigan, deemed a cultural and spiritual wilderness by some, Gordon brought Community Concerts to the area and was active in Rotary, UW Alumni Association, and the Boy Scout Council. Mary was a 4-H leader, organized a DAR chapter, was conservation chairman of the Upper Peninsula Women's Club and active in her church guild. Gordon devoted much effort to lumber industry organizations: president of the National Hardwood Lumber Association and Northern Hardwood and Pine Association; director of the National Forest Products Association and The American Forest Institute. He founded the Timber Producers Association of the Lake States. One of the last railroad and logging camp operators, in 1945 Gordon Connor initiated the Lakes States Logging Congress to help the industry make the transition from horse power to the great technical advances brought about after World War II.

Gordon Connor was first in the Lake States to introduce new forestry techniques, such as hardwoods fertilization. He was honored for his innovations and outstanding "perpetual use" intensively managed forest practices.

Timber and land acquisitions were an integral part of the logging industry, as Gordon learned from his father. He worked tirelessly for thirty-five years to expand the timberland base. Gordon recalled that he "tramped most of the Upper Peninsula in high boots and snowshoes in the 1930's and 40's." Dr. George P. Graff, manager of natural resource programs for the Michigan State Chamber of Commerce wrote in a newspaper article in 1986: "Students of Upper Peninsula history will recall that in the 1900's, a logging camp foreman was often referred to as 'The Bull-of-the-Woods'. He was always the strongest man in camp and possessed logging experience seldom equaled by downstaters who came north to work in the woods during the winters...Gordon ... you'll always be 'The Bull-of-the-Woods', and a real smart one at that."

Gordon and Mary Connor moved to Wausau in 1951 where he took charge of the Underwood Veneer operation purchased by Connor Forest Industries two years before. At the suggestion of his older son, Gordon enlarged the product line of the Wausau plant to include kitchen cabinets. Wausau became Gordon and Mary Connor's permanent home.

Gordon was President of Connor Forest Industries from 1965 until 1978; the company was sold in 1982. In preparation for the company's centennial in 1972 Mary Connor wrote "A Century With Connor Timber." She and Gordon launched Camp Five Museum in Laona to preserve log-

ging history and promote ecological education. The museum, forest tour, and steam train have won national and state awards for excellence and a National Arbor Day Foundation Award in Education.

Gordon testified before state legislatures, national lumber and trade associations, and Congressional committees. Mary Roddis Connor was corporate secretary for twenty-four years and legislative liaison for Connor Forest Industries. She had been brought up in a lumber family and was an effective speaker to government and industry Mary groups; she motivated women's groups to assume leadership in conservation. Mary served as National Conservation Chairman for the Daughters of the American Revolution during the Bicentennial years (1974-1977). Together Mary and Gordon were a dynamic duo in business and their community.

The Connors had five children. The whole family spent eight weeks in Europe in 1957; Gordon Connor said it was the best investment he ever made. The storybook courtship and wedding of the local beauty and the football player, helpmates for 56 years, ended with Gordon Connor's death February 28, 1986. Their legacies live on at Camp Five - the museum, forest tour, and ecology walk.

Submitted by Mary Connor Pierce, for the Marshfield History Project, Volume 1, "The Marshfield Story, 1872-1997: Piecing Together Our Past", pages 360-361.