



Roots & Branches

The Origins and Directions of the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society

ISSUE #18 MAY 2020

Connie Bailie-Crancer: Community in Bonsai

By Will Faison

Many readers are familiar with the old adage, “The only finished bonsai is a dead one,” which speaks volumes to the unique nature of bonsai as an art form. Bonsai trees transcend time: their value is often determined by age, and by necessity, many artists and generations of people will have worked on any given tree. This development of many hands, many ideas, and many years suggests (even mandates) a communal involvement behind any and every bonsai tree worth its weight in akadama. It is this sense of community and camaraderie that attracted Connie Bailie-Crancer to bonsai in the first place.



After Connie graduated from Michigan State University, she traveled to Europe and Hawaii. She returned to her hometown near the shores of Lake Michigan to stay for three years before heading to Ann Arbor.

Connie was first seriously drawn to bonsai in the early 90s while watching Jack Wikle working with a group of Ann Arbor Bonsai Society volunteers through the collection at Matthaei Botanical Gardens. Connie had just started working at Matthaei when she was taken with bonsai. She would clock out of her paid time at Matthaei, go work alongside the AABS volunteers for the hours they spent working on the collection, and then clock back in to her paid time at Matthaei. "I saw a group of people working on these trees, so of course I had to come out and poke around. The way the trees looked, the horticultural endeavor. That is truly what intrigued me. I didn't know what bonsai was. The community surrounded around bonsai - the volunteers and club members, gave me the opportunity to learn this fascinating art. Everyone was so welcoming, so willing to share" she recalls.

Connie's initial intrigue quickly blossomed to passion, and her draw to the community of bonsai brought her immediately to the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society in 1991. She passed through the positions of Press Secretary, Public Relations Chair, Recording Secretary, and eventually President in 1999. Her interest in bonsai continued to be rooted in the communal aspect of it. When prompted about her influences in styling trees, she paused and recounted, "influences and inspiration came from everyone I worked with.... including volunteers, and people I taught, people I became good friends with, visiting club members, etc." She goes on to joke that some of the people she taught eventually progressed to surpass her own talents, including Bill Heston, another well-known name in this community, parts of which can be seen on display at Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Hidden Lake Gardens.

While Connie no longer practices Bonsai with the same vigor she once did, she still deeply values the personal connections she made during her years in practice. "You become close to them... you become friendly with people you may just normally walk by. [Bonsai] opened up... a lot of good people in my life," she says. Despite her busy and travel-filled lifestyle in retirement, she continues to maintain ownership of a single tree, due to sentimental attachment. "When I was living on the grounds of the gardens, I had a couple of small bonsai stolen from my backyard," she laments, "and Bill Heston gave me this tree because he felt sad for me. I won't let it go for anything." She tremendously values her time at the Ann Arbor Bonsai Society. "It was wonderful source of camaraderie, and inspiration."

When prompted on influential visiting artists over the years, she mentions Bruce Baker and Dave De Groot. She speaks fondly of Dave, but more along the lines of him as a person than his instruction or knowledge. She obviously appreciated his styling and horticultural art, but what really stood out to her “was his demeanor,” she says. “He didn’t put on any airs... he was very down to Earth.” This is another instance in which the interpersonal relations with members of a common interest kept her attention more than the trees themselves.

If she had to pick a central influential character in her pursuit of bonsai however, it would be Jack Wikle. “His [trees] are not overly styled, they just look.... natural, but beautiful. He has a way of styling trees such that there is no chaos, but they’re not contrived.”



Connie teaching a bonsai class.

Connie was a volunteer assistant to Jack Wikle’s Adult Education class held at Matthaei Botanical Gardens. “I did that for several years until Jack decided to give up the class and he turned it over to me. I continued to teach the class for another 5 years.

Connie and Jack Wikle grew to be great friends – one of many friendships she cultivated in bonsai. I worked with him a lot through the years... many years,” she says, “I just love what he does with trees.”



Volunteers at Matthaei Botanical Gardens: (left to right) Joan Wheeler, Monique Camelot, Bill Heston, Wilbur Barnardi, Connie and Bob Thatcher.

Connie continued as president of the AABS from '99 to '01, after which she remained on the board as well as an active member. All the while, she was working at Matthaei as a Senior Horticulturalist and Collections Specialist. In her last 10 years of tenure at Matthaei, she was also working towards her Masters in Terrestrial Ecology that she earned in 2011. At this point, in keeping with the theme of transcending the art through many hands and many ideas, Connie passed the Collections Specialist title to Carmen Leskoviansky. In that passing, Connie and Carmen visited a Bonsai show in Kentucky, where they roomed together, took classes together, and embarked on a lasting friendship. It was Carmen's first real introduction to bonsai, Connie says, and "that girl took to it like you wouldn't believe... it was amazing... and I felt relieved, that someone who was going to take it over was so inherently good at it." Carmen is still the Collections Specialist at Matthaei, and Roots&Branches will have an article about her in the near future.

Connie retired from Matthaei some time after passing her duties along to Carmen, but reminisced about some of her favorite trees in the collection. "There are two Ficus plantings... I started those trees from plants for a class,

some were leftover, and Jerry Meislik came and made them into a forest. They were beautiful.” She continues to recount a particular very old Scots Pine – about 80 years old at the time. “I enjoyed watching that because if you look at the photos from the very beginning, any one of us would have shaken our heads at it, but it developed into a beautiful tree.” It was donated from Maurice Seevers originally, and, “it was pretty raw... pretty stiff,” she chuckles. Jack Wikle and Hester Hill went to work on it over the years, as did Bill Heston among others, and it has since developed into “a very handsome tree.”

As a bit of a personal aside, hearing Connie’s thoughts and experiences with bonsai and the surrounding community really hit home with me as a new member of AABS. Admittedly I was completely awestruck with the trees at Matthaei first, but had never heard of bonsai, let alone met anyone interested in it. My girlfriend Laura and I had no idea where to start, and decided to go visit a nursery to learn. We called Jack Wikle (having no idea who he was at the time). Jeannine answered, and I was shocked by her kindness, despite me not knowing a pot from a tree. She told me Jack would love to speak with me, and urged me to not be self-conscious about how little I knew. Since then, Laura and I have been blown away by the support this community has shown us. Kurt and Lita Smith have been incredibly forthcoming, and patient with what we now know to be very “green” questions. Ghazi Zouooi has shown me the same patience as I watched him work in the nursery, and peppered him with questions. There have been multiple encounters where members (strangers to us at the time) were so candid and welcoming to us, and only later did we find out how esteemed they were in the community. I came for the trees, and still love the trees, but staying for the people.



During Connie's last year David De Groot visited Matthaei Botanical Gardens. (Left to right: David, Bruce Baker, Carmen Leskoviansky, Jay Sinclair, Monique Camelot, Jack Wikle and Cyril Grum.

While Connie may no longer be addressing the Bonsai Society in person, if she could address the current members of the AABS, and more specifically the newer members, she'd pass along several tokens of wisdom. "A lot of people who just get started get stuck on the rules and guidelines," she says. "They see some raw material, they're inspired... but they're so anxious about the rules that they lose the tree they saw." She advises that newcomers ought to not over-style to any particular preconceived notions or outside influence beyond the point that their initial inspiration for the tree is lost.

Furthermore, and in the same vein, she advises to err on keeping the trees healthy rather than pushing the limit horticulturally. "It might mean giving them a bigger pot," she says, "it might mean a little more water retention, it might mean keeping a little more foliage," but to err on prioritizing overall health of the tree above anything else. Keeping the trees alive and healthy is of utmost importance, as a finished (dead) bonsai can no longer circulate through the very community of artists who raised the tree.

Previous issues of this publication are located in the [History section of the AABS website](#)

NEXT WEEK: Cyril Grum: Dedicated Bonsai Artist

HOW YOU CAN HELP WITH OUR 50TH CELEBRATION

1. To help us in this celebration effort, all Ann Arbor Bonsai Society members present and past, and all others wishing to contribute are invited to submit personal statements (60 words or less) to be published in our Yearbook. Each text contributor is also strongly encouraged to submit a favorite photo (with caption) of a bonsai tree or a bonsai activity to accompany his or her personal statement. (We can scan old prints or digitize color slides for anyone needing this help with old pictures.) [Upload Form is here.](#)
2. Let's all Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the AABS in style with shirts that have our commemorative logo printed on the front. Shirts will be available for purchase for \$20 each at our monthly meetings, at the Annual Club Show August 29-30, and at The Flower Market in Dundee, Michigan.



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