

A Tribute to Elizabeth Perkins Varner GCV President 1974-76

by Mina Wood, Former GCV President
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Known to all in the Garden Club of Virginia as Betsy, she was born in 1922 and grew up at “Misfit” in Greenwood, Virginia. She died August 10, 2016. Betsy was predeceased by her husband, John D. Varner. She is survived by three sons and their wives – John Varner and Susan of Wilmington, N.C., Mark Varner and his wife, Amy, of Ivy, Va., and Keene Varner and his wife, Lacey, of Roanoke, and many grandchildren and great grandchildren who were the pride and joy of her life.



Educated at Chatham Hall, she enjoyed time travelling in Europe with her relatives. She was president of the Roanoke Valley Garden Club, served as treasurer of the GCV from 1970 – 74 and GCV president, 1974 – 76. Betsy was instrumental in the procurement and restoration of the Kent-Valentine House. In recognition of her service, she was awarded the Massie Medal in 1996, which was framed and proudly displayed in her home at Westminster-Canterbury.

During her reign, Betsy’s club nicknamed her “Top Blossom.” For our country’s bicentennial, the Garden Club of Virginia published *Historic Virginia Gardens*, which celebrated the GCV’s outstanding contribution to the state of Virginia. In the same two years, the judging school was instituted and billboard legislation guarded our highways. In 1975, Bacon’s Castle was open to the public for the first time for Historic Garden Week, and the GCV voted to contribute \$3,400 to Virginia Tech for the research project, “Boxwood Root Rot Disease.” Horticulture Field Day was held in the spring at the National Arboretum and was a sell-out with 65 people.

On the eve of assuming her new role as GCV President, Betsy and her predecessor, Lee Cochran, stayed at the Boar’s Head Inn. As they left for the evening’s festivities, an open horse-drawn carriage called for them. Lee describes feeling like Cinderella as they were driven in style to Hunter Falconer’s Westover Farm for cocktails and then on to Farmington for dinner. Both were fearful that if their UVA sons saw them, they would be embarrassed. Needless to say, they created lots of excitement on their way, and crowds of GCV members gathered when the carriage arrived.

Devoted friend Mary Ann Johnson, also of the Roanoke Valley Garden Club, reflected that being president of the GCV meant a lot to Betsy, and she relished attending the BOG and Annual meetings. Mary Ann states, “She knew all of the back roads of Virginia, main roads, too. I never knew where I was or even how we got there, but we always got there early. Our time was precious together, as there is something special about the leisurely and lengthy conversations that take place as the miles unfold. Betsy had many sides, many dimensions, like most of us. Sometimes you saw one and sometimes you saw the opposite. There was the feisty, no-nonsense Betsy, and deep down, there was the Betsy who was a woman of strength, of intense personal belief, of upright character.”

For Mary Ann and for those of us who spent time with her, she’ll bloom forever. 🌸