

Garden History 101: Ruth Larabee's Camp Fire Gown

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For those of you who haven't been in the Larabee Museum for a while—or maybe not at all—I'd like to share with you today one of our most prized exhibits, because it gives us more insight into the history of one of our founders, Ruth Baird Larabee.

I'm speaking of Ruth's Camp Fire Girls ceremonial gown, which we were lucky to acquire two years ago from the San Diego Camp Fire Association, who held onto it somewhere in their storage since the 1950s.

Ruth was 14 when she made this gown, in the year 1918, to celebrate having reached the rank of Torch Bearer. She would have been among the earliest members of Camp Fire Girls. Ruth's aunt was a life-long friend of Mrs. Charlotte Gulick, who founded Camp Fire Girls in 1910 as an offspring of Boy Scouts, so young women could learn many of the same skills and share the outdoor experiences.

This gown is actually full-length, but it was necessary to fold it so it could be framed and displayed. Stitched inside the collar is her name, "Ruth Baird." It's made by hand from brown cotton canvas with leather fringes, and adorned with colorful beadwork and designs, and hand-stamped badges that represented her various accomplishments.

One of the most significant emblems on the gown is the hand-embroidered Native American sail boat right in front below the collar. It's likely she chose this sign because it best represented her interests at the time. After all, the Baird family lived in Kansas City, which has a number of lakes and rivers which were sailed by the Native American fishermen years before.

And you may recall from reading her biography that while in high school, Ruth wrote a story for the yearbook in which she said, "All my life is connected with water ... and water does seem to be my element." She went on to say, "I feel quite sure I shall come to a watery grave," a statement which is ironic given the fact that Ruth died in 1969 from smoke inhalation in a hotel fire.

Ruth Larabee painted herself here—using embroidery—as the captain of this boat, standing at the bow with arms extended, reminiscent of the famous scene in the movie "Titanic." Perhaps it's a symbol of the confidence she felt as a young woman expecting a bright future ahead.

Years later, when she and Charles supervised high school scout groups here at the Larabee House, Ruth was involved with Girl Scouts, but then transitioned in the early 1950s to Camp Fire Girls, because it was most near and dear to her heart. The organization's long-held traditions based on Native American history and culture still resonated for her as an adult.

Best of all, she is pictured in this photo at a Camp Fire Girls Ceremony in 1953, most likely held in the Kumeyaay demonstration home site located below us in the Native Plants/Native People exhibit. Once again, Ruth is proudly wearing the gown and moccasins from her teen age years.

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Just so you know, the Larabee Museum is open every month on First Tuesdays, and staffed by our trained Museum Guides, usually from 10 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.