

ELIZABETH WATERS BURBANK (archive file I-10L)

The daughter of Riley and Josephine Waters, Elizabeth Burbank was born Bessie M Waters, in Hastings, Michigan on December 23, 1887. She was one of 6 or 7 children. Through her maternal grandmother, she was said to be related to Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin. Elizabeth, like Luther, had a brother named Alfred. In 1918, after Elizabeth's marriage, her brother Homer named his first son Luther.

She was educated in Illinois at Olivet College* and for several years worked in Chicago for a publishing company as a proofreader and editor of manuscripts.

According to Peter Dreyer in *Gardener Touched with Genius*, Mrs. Burbank came to California (in 1912 or 1914) and lived with her sister in San Jose. She met Luther Burbank when she accompanied her sister and brother-in-law to Santa Rosa on a business trip.

She first worked for the Burbank Press in late 1914, editing field notes for the twelve-volume set of books, Luther Burbank - His Methods and Discoveries and Their Practical Application. Sometime later, she worked as Luther Burbank's secretary. December 21, 1916 the two were married in San Francisco in the pastor's office at a Unitarian church. Emma Burbank, Margaret Chryst (EB's sister), and Thomas Brownscombe (Santa Rosa School Superintendent and Burbank friend) attended.

Luther and Elizabeth lived in the Tupper Street house until his death in 1926. According to the 1920 census, the two lived alone in the house. (In the 1900 census, Burbank and his mother along with two servants lived in the original Burbank cottage. From late 1906, he and his mother had lived at Tupper St. until her death in 1909. The 1910 census listed Burbank alone in the Tupper Street house.)

The Burbanks had no children, but their mongrel whippet/terrier, Bonita stood in. For some years, Mrs. Burbank's niece Betty Jane Waters, lived with the couple. Dreyer states that a very young Betty Jane Waters initially came with Elizabeth to Santa Rosa when she first arrived but I do not believe this to be the case. Our first photos of Betty Jane in Santa Rosa are dated 1924. She was probably born to Alfred Waters and wife in January 1917. Had she been a boy, she would have been named Luther. A birth announcement is found in one of Luther's scrapbooks (now at the Library of Congress).

Mrs. Burbank helped her husband with his business interests and continued as his secretary throughout their marriage. She appears to have had a hand in working with the Collier's Publishing house to republish the 12-volume set as an 8-volume set in 1921. During that year, she traveled to Massachusetts (to see LB's family, to New York to Collier's, and to Michigan and Louisiana to see her family. It's possible that she brought Betty Jane to Santa Rosa when returning from this trip.)

After Burbank's death, Mrs. Burbank renovated then moved into the cottage. She continued his work by assisting in supervising his experimental plots. In the early years after his death she made extensive lecture tours in the West and Southwest, giving talks

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on her husband's life and projects. For a year or two, she also had a short radio program where she spoke mostly of her husband's work.

When efforts to use the Santa Rosa and Sebastopol lands as an experiment station for Stanford and/or UC Berkeley failed, she contracted with the Stark Nursery and Burpee Seed Company to reap the harvests of the land. She also signed off on plant patents (filed by Stark Brothers Nursery) awarded to Burbank posthumously.

She sold the Tupper Street house and for a time, Elizabeth served on the Board of Directors of the Burbank Business College that was located there.

She was an original member of the Sonoma County Humane Society and remained an active supporter throughout her life. She endowed a scholarship at SRJC in her husband's name and organized his papers. She learned Spanish and at one time donated to Tulane University some historical documents that related to Spanish-ruled Mexico.

Mrs. Burbank was reputed to be an active antique/junk store shopper and her purchases added to the household furnishings and decorations. The green chest in the kitchen which she referred to as her "dilly" is one such item. She collected tiles, glass, and tins that still decorate the cottage and greenhouse. The parlor wall of her home was decorated with a "wall of photos" similar to the one on display today.

In later years, Mrs. Burbank became a more private person, refusing to give interviews. She died in a convalescent hospital in Santa Rosa on June 19, 1977 of an aortic aneurysm due to advanced arteriosclerosis.

At the time of Mrs. Burbank's death, Georgina Knight Stewart, a friend's child who was like a daughter to her, was living in the Burbank cottage to help Mrs. Burbank. Georgina was the executor of Mrs. Burbank's will. Upon her death, many of Luther's papers and photographs were donated to the Library of Congress as requested in her will. The house, its contents, and the surrounding property came under the stewardship of the City of Santa Rosa. Mrs. Burbank had deeded the property to the City in 1955 but had retained a life tenancy.

Gaye LeBaron eulogized Mrs. Burbank in the Press Democrat:

Mrs. Burbank, a gentle lady with trunks full of memories living her life on the fringes of a national monument, was wed for a decade to a national hero, destined to live five decades to be guardian of his personal story.

* Olivet Nazarene in Illinois has no record of her attendance (checked in 1998) She may have worked there.