

Memories of Flora Patterson: A manager and a friend

from Kathryn Mikoski and Betty Deavy



Kathryn Mikoski

I first met Flora on September 15, 1971. It was my first day on the job as a professional librarian at the National Library of Canada (now Library and Archives Canada). The day was a blur of introductions and tours. I do remember though, that Flora stood out as a manager. (Her exact title at the time I do not remember – probably Chief of Reference.) She was wearing a “pant suit”. This was, I found out later, rather unusual for the time and proved to be something we had in common. I had distinguished myself with my Public Service interviewers at university as the woman “in a pant suit”! I was hired as an LS 1 (denoting my junior position in the organization). Flora was an LS 6. So you see, we were several levels apart on the organization chart. There were other barriers to friendship which took years to scale. Physically, Flora was housed in a rather large corner office with full walls and a door that closed. Lesser managers might have a half-wall; supervisors might have a screen. The rest of us had desks in a large open concept room. At that time, I would never have called her Flora – she was Miss Patterson.

Miss Patterson was attractive, petite and soft spoken. She was always very polite and serious. Her sense of humour which I discovered much later, was well hidden to most of us. My direct dealings with her were few and far between for several years. There would be an occasional general meeting over which she would preside. She would attend Christmas parties and give speeches for departing staff. As I climbed the ladder slowly to become a supervisor (LS2) and then a Section Head (LS 3), I probably became more of an individual to her but my day to day dealings were still with others in between. As a Section Head I did begin to appreciate the stresses upon Senior Management and aware that Miss Patterson had to “fight” with others for resources and I developed an understanding of the pressures upon her part of the organization which had direct contact with a demanding public. I think it must have been challenging as her colleagues and bosses were also friends. She had come to the National Library in its early days when the staff was small, and everyone knew each other very well. I remember her once telling me that the higher you go in an organization the lonelier it

becomes, encouraging me to find friends outside the organization.

Because she was remote and quiet, we junior librarians referred to her as the “ice queen”. This was not meant unkindly but is an indication of the culture the organizational structure imposed at the time. which was unfair. As the years passed and I took on more managerial responsibilities, I did have more opportunity to get to know Flora as a person. She was anything but an ice queen. She cared about her staff; she considered problems and challenges carefully and tried to find solutions that worked best for both the library and the staff. She did not make hasty or dramatic changes which sometimes frustrated the younger more impatient amongst us. She was very discreet. Pressures from fellow managers, problem staff or the executive were never shared.



Although Flora was responsible for a large and diverse staff, she was always alert for opportunities to encourage and develop people at all levels. She did her best to support requests to attend and participate in conferences. She would recommend staff members for special assignments that not only provided learning opportunities but also enhanced their visibility and career prospects. I was a beneficiary of such encouragement. On the other hand, she was very loyal to long time colleagues at all levels, and very insistent that problems of performance be handled with compassion given her knowledge of personal histories.

I left the National Library after several years but retained many contacts. In fact, Flora and her friend and colleague Jean Higginson sat behind me at concerts at the National Arts Centre. One evening Jean suggested that I apply for a position under her part of the organization. I did and returned to my “home” at the National Library, this time just one supervisor away from Flora.

The Sandhill Crane Story

Betty had been a birdwatcher for many years. This interest was shared by Flora and was a topic of conversation between them. One year either the Ottawa Field Naturalists or the bird column in the local paper announced that sandhill cranes were in the neighbourhood. This was a rare event in those days. They have become more common now.

Betty had lived for many years in Navan, just east of Ottawa and now a part of the city proper. It seemed that the cranes had stopped in that area on migration. By the description, Betty could identify which farm they were on – the Lagermatt’s. She knew them well enough to feel comfortable visiting for a close view.

And so, it was agreed that one Saturday or Sunday, Kathryn would drive Betty and Flora out to the farm. Our friendship with Flora was quite new in those days. We were fully aware that Flora was a boss a couple of levels above. We had not had much contact outside the work environment. However, we enjoyed our drive out to the country and found pleasant topics to discuss.



Finally, we arrived at the farm and drove up the lane to park in the farmyard. The weather was typical for early spring – grey, cool and moist. Between melting snow and spring showers, the ground was soft. Luckily seasoned birdwatchers know how to dress, complete with rain hats and rubber boots. We left the car and walked across the field looking for the majestic birds. Sure enough, there they were. We proceeded slowly and quietly as close as we dared. Binoculars helped. We were quite thrilled. There were between 6 and 8 birds.

After spending time observing the tall grey birds, noting the red crown, the long legs and necks and the tufted rump it was time to get back to the car. Meanwhile the car had sunk into the farmyard. We were stuck! After Kathryn tried her best to rock the car in low gear to no avail, Flora and Betty decided to try pushing. Where were the Lagermatt's when needed? Well, the tires began spinning and the mud and manure started flying! Flora, always neat as a pin in lovely clothes, was covered – including her face. Kathryn was so embarrassed. But we had a good laugh and our friendship grew.



Besides birdwatching, Flora was a music lover. She favoured baroque composers, and we would discuss the relative merits of Handel (her favourite) and Bach (mine). But she loved jazz too – especially percussion. Gene Krupa was a favourite. She was also a great fan of the deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie. For many years Flora was a member of the Westboro Recorded Music Society which met monthly in our home. She researched and presented programs of recorded music for the group. Another member remembers Flora as “a very bright and knowledgeable contributor.”

Flora lived alone and as she aged, I worried about her as she did not have close family. In fact, at one time when Betty and I were running our Bed & Breakfast, Flora asked if we might consider opening a seniors home – specifically for retired librarians. She was thinking ahead. But by some miracle, just at the right time, Flora's nieces reached out to her and made her last years in the Lake Simcoe area a safe and happy place complete with two cats and a Newfoundland dog.



Betty Deavy

I remember in the 1980's one evening when Kathryn started experiencing a lot of pain just before bedtime. We called an ambulance, and they took her to the hospital. I accompanied her in the ambulance. I waited in the Emergency Room through the rest of the night. I decided to call Flora and even though it was the middle of the night, she came to the hospital, waited with me and then took me back home. The fact that she was kind enough to come in the middle of the night, that I was at ease in calling her even though she was levels above me at the library, that she always seemed more like a friend than a superior speaks volumes about her. I also remember how helpful she was to me in my career as Government & Law Librarian. She made sure I always had permission to go to any conference or useful meetings to help me increase my knowledge to do my job.



As Kathryn, I also remember how interested she was in birdwatching. I remember joining her once to participate in the Christmas Bird Count. We were assigned a part of Ottawa where we had to count all birds seen or heard between dawn and noon. We met with all the other teams after at a restaurant to share our counts. It was the only time I ever did that. It was a lot of fun with Flora.



Flora was a great traveller and went on many trips with various friends. In 1993, after retiring, Kathryn and I spent 3 months in Florence. While there Flora and her friend came to visit us, walk around our favourite sights and join us for dinner at our apartment. Once when Kathryn and I were set to go on a 3 week holiday, our dog sitter backed out at the last minute. We didn't know what to do. Typically, Flora offered to come and stay with our Shih Tzu, Misty. This was a special offer because Flora, who had owned and loved two Siamese cats, had never owned a dog and she had always lived in an apartment, never resided in a house by herself.

All went well. Misty and Flora got along famously. In fact Flora tells us that Misty slept on her bed and Flora woke up one morning feeling her head particularly warm. Misty had decided to share her pillow and lie across the top of Flora's head. She enjoyed her time with Misty so much that she took a whole roll of pictures of Misty to give to us when we returned home.



Flora shared Christmas traditions with us. She would help us decorate our tree and she had fun finding very unusual gifts to put under it.



We last saw Flora when we visited her in Keswick, Ontario in 2019. We were accompanied by Hope Clement and Maria Calderisi, both former colleagues at the National Library. Sadly, the pandemic and life changes got in the way of any subsequent visits.



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