Dedication of Helen’s Garden  
Remarks by Patsy and Dave Eisler  
October 9, 2010

The story of the Ferris Institute is also a love story between two remarkable individuals, Helen Gillespie and Woodbridge N. Ferris. They first met in the early autumn of 1872 at the Oswego Normal and Training School in New York. Helen would graduate in the summer of 1873 and began teaching in Franklin and Fulton, Indiana.

During the spring of 1874 Mr. Ferris gained employment as the principal of the Spencer Free Academy in NY. Helen and Woodbridge Ferris were married on December 23rd, 1874 at the Gillespie Home and both taught together at the Spencer Academy. After five years when Woodbridge Ferris served as superintendent of schools in Pittsfield, Illinois, they arrived here on May 16th 1884 following what Mr. Ferris describes as a tedious journey. When the Big Rapids Industrial School opened its doors on September 1st, 1884, Helen and Woodbridge were its only teachers. Mrs. Ferris would teach at the Ferris Institute until 1901, when health challenges forced her retirement.

We know some of Mrs. Ferris from the memorial volume assembled by Woodbridge Ferris when she passed away in 1917. It is easy to sense his love and admiration for this remarkable woman, his wife of forty-two years.

In these pages, Mrs. Ferris is described as a beautiful, dignified, gracious woman who loved books and drama, and who delighted in nature –

*She had the enthusiasm of a child for getting out of doors into the sunshine, where she could laugh with the flowers, the trees, and the birds.*

Mr. Ferris describes their home in these words,

*I was born with a melancholy disposition. Mrs. Ferris furnished the sunshine for her husband and boys... She listened patiently to the trials and tribulations of her children and her husband... Her love and sympathy for children extended far beyond her own hearthstone.*

I find especially interesting Mr. Ferris’ observations about Helen’s teaching,

*Her love for young people was profound. She was eager to assist, direct, encourage, and instruct the most backward and discouraged students... Her gracious manners won the abiding love of all who came under her instruction. Her students exerted themselves to the utmost simply because they could not summon courage to disappoint her.*
Here personified was the opportunity of which her husband so frequently spoke, but in a kinder, gentler more humanized fashion. Fittingly Woodbridge sums up Helen’s contributions best -

Whatever there is in the Ferris Institute that resembles the work of the teacher of teachers, had its origin in the seventeen years of loving service rendered by Mrs. Ferris.

For me it is so very meaningful that we gather here today to honor one of our founders, Helen Gillespie Ferris, and that we do so by recognizing her great love of flowers and the out of doors. Thank you for being here on this special and historic occasion on this campus Mrs. Ferris helped found as we celebrate a truly remarkable woman through the timeless beauty of nature.