



The Importance of Getting Mud between Your Toes: The Thornton Burgess Society Celebrates a Centennial

by Mary Beers



Painted Turtle, photograph by Abby Kelley, age 8

From a childhood running wild in the woods and fields of Little Compton, Rhode Island and Elizabethtown, Kentucky, seeds were planted that grew into a passion for the natural world. My past has led me to this sweet oasis on Cape Cod but my love of Thornton Burgess has kept me here.

May 2010 arrived on Cape Cod with unusually warm days and thankfully cool nights. May marked my 23rd year of employment for the Thornton W. Burgess Society (<http://www.thorntonburgess.org>), a small nature center nestled on Cape Cod. It's been a year of reflection, once the initial shock of the sheer number of years wore off.

I have never been in one job so long in my life. My past jobs were all so radically different from my current position. How did I ever go from shoe department clerk to telephone information operator to nun to teacher naturalist?

I could easily blame the science department at Bridgewater State College for inspiring me so intensely that I would ditch my social work degree track and dive into biological science.

It is a blessing and a curse to stay in one place for a long period of time. I have had great blessings here. Many of my current students have parents who, as children, came to my classes.

I've had some wonderful students who are now in their mid-thirties and still come by to visit. A few of them have even chosen careers in science and the environment.

The curse is that I have also seen a change in the way parents and grandparents view the outdoor experiences offered here at the Thornton W. Burgess Society.

When I first came to Burgess, I was lucky enough to work with some great naturalists who helped me grow into the get-down-and-dirty naturalist I am today.

Parents and grandparents never questioned the mud between the child's toes; they would instead question whether their child had a good time if that child was not returned to them caked in muck and mud.

Times are different now. I see parents arrive with heavy baggage, filled with concerns and worries. Their children are withdrawn and timid, afraid of what might be lurking under that log.

Just recently I had a grandmother go ballistic because her grandson was wet and muddy after a class entitled "Marsh Muckers." Her call to the Society for a refund was fueled by concerns about the dangers of rip tides and the potential for drowning.

In reality, the eight children were not allowed above their knees and we teachers were right in the low tide water of the marsh creek with them. What bothered me most was that this child definitely needed to be in my class.

He needed exposure to the wonders of nature to instill in him a respect for life, whether it was the beetle

he tried multiple times to kill or the crab which did not escape.

Respect for all life is a thread throughout the literature of Thornton Burgess. His love of the little wild folk is so evident in his animal tales.

In his autobiography, *Now I Remember*, Burgess tells the story of his first gun and the chickadee whose body he held out proudly to his mother. He speaks of how he looked at the dead bird and remembered the great times he had watching chickadees and their antics. His eyes became tearful as the impact of what he had done grew clear in his heart.



Jerry Muskrat, photograph by Abby Kelley.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of *Old Mother West Wind* written by Cape Cod native Thornton W. Burgess. This nature book, the first of many penned by Burgess, introduced children to a wide variety of local animals, their habits and habitats.

Born in Sandwich in 1874, Mr. Burgess achieved international fame as a children's author, conservationist and naturalist. He was a staunch advocate of habitat preservation and championed respect for all living things.

During his long literary career, Burgess authored over 170 nature books and published over 15,000 stories in 200 newspapers across the country. Many books were translated in Braille, Chinese, Gaelic, Swedish, German, French, Spanish and Italian.

During this centennial year, I'm enjoying working with young readers enrolled in our Burgess Book Club. It is so much fun facilitating a group discussion on the month's book then introducing them to animals and habitats mentioned in the stories. These children inspire me to continue my mission here.

Life is a precious gift best lived fully and passionately, with frequent opportunities for mud between your toes, twigs in your hair and seeds stuck to your socks.

Mary Beers is the Education Director for the Thornton W. Burgess Society. She lives in Sandwich with her husband Don and daughter Jenny.



"to inspire reverence for wildlife and concern for the natural environment"

www.thorntonburgess.org

Special Centennial Fall Events



SEPTEMBER

- **September 5:** *Happy Jack Squirrel's Puppet Show (F), 4pm*
- **September 18:** *Chatterer's Apple Walnut Conserve Workshops, 9:30am (A) 1:00pm (F)*
- **September 24:** *Burgess Book Club for Children (C) 4:00-5:30pm*

OCTOBER

- **October 10:** *My Life as a Crow (F, A) Presentation by June Auger, 6:00pm*
- **October 29:** *Burgess Book Club for Children (C) 4:00-5:30pm*
- **October 30:** *Hooty Owl's Halloween Trail Walks, Various Times*

NOVEMBER

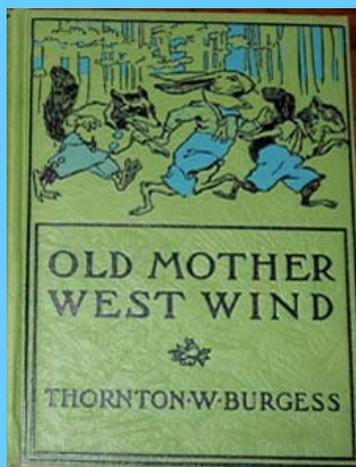
- **November 6:** *Peter Cottontail Puppet Show (F), 4:00pm*
- **November 20:** *Old Mother West Wind's Christmas Craft Fair (A), 10:00-4:00pm*

For a complete listing of Centennial Events go to

www.thorntonburgess.org/CentennialEvents.htm

For more Program Information go to

www.thorntonburgess.org/ProgramSchedule.htm



Old Mother West Wind, first edition book from the Thornton W. Burgess Society collection.

The *Thornton W. Burgess Society* is a non-profit educational organization founded in 1976 to carry on the pioneering conservation work of author/naturalist

Thornton W. Burgess (1874 - 1965).

Mr. Burgess, who was born and grew up in Sandwich, MA., went on to achieve national and international recognition for his children's stories that teach lessons of conservation and love of wildlife.

The *Thornton W. Burgess Society* operates three facilities: The Thornton W. Burgess Museum, on the shores of Shawme Pond on Water Street (Rte 130) in Sandwich village; the Green Briar Nature Center and Jam Kitchen, at 6 Discovery Hill Road (off Rte. 6A) in East Sandwich; and the East Sandwich Game Farm.

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