

From Recording History to Making It: George and Ellen Scripps Booth

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Bloomfield Hills, Michigan is a town known for possessing many positive attributes, including its tight-knit community, celebrated architecture, and long list of famous inhabitants, from Robin Williams to Gordie Howe. Unfortunately however, when thinking of Bloomfield Hills it is unlikely that the names George and Ellen Scripps Booth come to mind. These philanthropists and art extraordinaires were instrumental in taking Bloomfield Hills from a small farming village to the focal point of creativity and innovation that it is today.

George Gough Booth was born on September 24, 1864 in Toronto, Ontario. His family income was modest, limiting him to receiving only minimal formal education. However, at only 14 years old a young Booth left school to become a metalwork apprentice. He was a natural and had a keen eye for design. His talent was so apparent that he was able to “acquire a half interest in a Windsor iron works firm” where he was resultantly able to manufacture his own unique designs for metalwork products such as grilles, fences, and gates (A Brief History 1). With Booth’s fresh creative vision, the business prospered.

In contrast to her husband’s humble beginnings, Ellen Warren Scripps was born into an affluent family and enjoyed a comfortable life. She was born in Detroit on July 10, 1863 to Harriet and James Scripps, who was famously known for being the founder of *The Detroit News* (House and Gardens). Ellen enjoyed a thorough education through her high school years, after which she often traveled to Europe with her parents. It is likely that through these vacations that Ellen developed her eye for fine art as the Scripps’ often purchased a variety of trinkets including “paintings, prints, rare books, and other works of art” for their Trumbull Avenue home (A Brief History 2).

Booth Publishing

Booth's family moved to Detroit in 1881 where he met Ellen Warren Scripps, and the two were married on June 1st, 1887 (Moutzalias 1). Within a year of marriage George Booth sold his iron works business at the urging of his father-in-law, James Scripps. Instead he joined his Scripp's staff at *The Detroit News* as the business manager (House and Gardens). Through his keen mind and eye for creativity Booth was able to work his way up the ranks and become president of *The Detroit News* in 1906. Under his unique vision and creative direction the paper blossomed into one of the "great metropolitan dailies in the nation" (A Brief History 2).

Learning from his previous experience with private investing in iron works, George began to purchase interests in a plethora of other Michigan papers. Amalgamated with the newspapers that were already under the ownership of his brothers Ralph and Edmund Booth, they formed Booth Publishing in 1915. George served as chairman and later became president of the paper chain. He was able to successfully lead it into becoming the most profitable chain in the history of Michigan (House and Gardens).

Cranbrook Estate

As much as George and Ellen loved their home in Detroit, they yearned to live out their dreams of developing a large estate in the countryside. 21 years into their marriage they purchased a 174 acre run down farm. They christened it Cranbrook - after the Canadian town that George Booth originated from (A Brief History 2) . Immediately, the Booths began to restore the property from untended countryside into a majestic estate and working farm. Together with the help of landscaping architects, farmers, gardeners, and skilled laborers, George Booth designed plans for "laying in roads, grading hillsides, creating lakes, erecting farm buildings and initiating a massive planting campaign to cover the barren rolling terrain" (House Gardens). As renovations continued the family continued to spend winters at their home in Detroit and summers at their budding estate.

Unfortunately, the death of Ellen's father, James Scripps catalyzed the family to prepare for the sale of their Detroit home. Resultantly, Booth hired his friend and famous Detroit architect, Albert Kahn, to design a house on the Cranbrook estate. Khan made sure to infuse the creative spirit that the Booths both valued, creating an "English Arts and Crafts-inspired design" (House Gardens). The Booths moved in shortly after it was built and in June of 1908 became "the first family of means to live year-round in Bloomfield Hills" (House Gardens).

While furnishing their new home George and Ellen's early taste for fine art became apparent. They personally commissioned a variety of items of fine craftsmanship including tapestries, wood carvings, metalwork, and glasswork. In this way George became a spokesman for the American Arts and Crafts Movement and helped to popularize the value of craftsmanship (Moutzalias 1). By the early part of the 1920's the Cranbrook House became famously known for both its outside beauty and domestic treasures.

Cranbrook Schools

However, the estate was far from being completed. A multitude of other buildings including the Greek Theater and the Meeting House were also built on the property as "a center for a variety of social, recreational, political, and religious community gatherings" (A Brief History 2). In 1922 the Meeting House also became an early school for the neighborhood children. Known as Bloomfield Hills Schools, the institution was founded by the Booths and later enlarged by their son Henry Booth who changed the name to Brookside School Cranbrook (A Brief History 2).

From the success of this initial educational institution the Booths began to consider establishing other schools as well, including a girls' school, a boys' school, and an art academy. The idea of an art academy became cemented in the Booth's minds after a 1922 trip to the American Academy in Rome. Impressed by the caliber of this institution George saw the potential to establish a similar educational philosophy in Bloomfield Hills (A Brief History 3). With

the help of a visiting professor of architectural design at the University of Michigan named Eliel Saarienen, this plan was able to come to fruition in 1928 (Our History: About).

Saarienen also headed the architectural plans for the Cranbrook School for boys and the Kingswood School Cranbrook for girls in 1930. While these buildings were being constructed, the Cranbrook foundation also established the Cranbrook Institute of Science for focused instruction in the natural sciences (Encyclopedia of Detroit). This became one of the most popular of Cranbrook's public buildings, and when the bones and tusks of a mastodon were discovered in Bloomfield township less than 4 years later, the remains were taken to the Cranbrook Institute of Science to be identified (Bloomfield Mastodon). Volume III Number 9 of the Bloomfield Tatler attests to the great impact of Cranbrook Schools, stating that as of October 1929 "the enrollment is now 200. . . with 500 additional entrants expected next year" (Tatler 2) It is this dedication to both education and innovation that is self-evident in the city of Bloomfield Hills today.

Although George and Ellen have long since passed, their legacy lives on. Today, the early paintings, prints, and books accumulated by the Booth's now serve as the centerpiece of attraction for the Detroit Museum of Art and the rare book collection found at the Detroit Public Library. Cranbrook schools are now the gold standard for institutions known for both their rich history and academic prowess. Thousands of visitors trek there year after year, enticed by stunning architecture and Cranbrook's 1989 designation as a National Historic Landmark (About Cranbrook). Each year the Cranbrook Academy of Art produces leading artists, designers, and creators. Thanks to George and Ellen Scripps Booth, Bloomfield Hills is home to a diaspora of creativity and artistic passion.

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