

# The Storied Life of Millie Benson *Outreach Guide*



## **Millie Benson – A SHORT BIOGRAPHY**

Raised in rural Iowa, the daughter of a local doctor, Mildred grew up as something of a tomboy. She's been heard to reminisce about the freedom afforded her in the wide-open spaces—and more innocent times— of her childhood, for she was able to roam around the fields and woods at will. Always interested in writing, she published her first story in *St. Nicholas*, a children's magazine, when she was still a child herself. As an adult she participated in all kinds of sports, becoming especially proficient at diving, swimming and golf. She also became an experienced aviator, and maintained her pilot's license until well into her old age.

Mildred studied journalism at the University of Iowa, and became the program's first female graduate. While she wrote over a hundred children's books in her lifetime, the regular bread-and-butter of her professional life has been journalism; she has worked for several decades on the *Toledo Blade* newspaper as a regular columnist until retiring in 2001. In 1994 the University of Iowa, Mildred's *alma mater*, hosted a Nancy Drew® Conference in her honor.

*An excerpt from:*

*<http://www.stratemeyer.net/stratemeyer/ghostwriters/benson/mildred.htm>*

## **A SCREENING EVENT**

Suggested audience: Invite pre-teen and teen-aged girls (11-15), their mothers and their grandmothers to view the film. Be sure to include refreshments at the beginning or close of the session!

### Discussion activity prior to viewing:

What was life like for women in 1905, the year Mildred was born?

Discuss the changes that have taken place in America for women since 1905.

Did most women work outside the home in 1905?

When were women given the right to vote?

How have opportunities for women in sports changed?

### Discussion activity immediately after viewing:

Was Mildred Benson ahead of her time?

How was Mildred's view of Nancy different from her employer's view?

Why do you think Nancy Drew was so popular with young girls especially in the 1930's and 40's?

What were some of Mildred's accomplishments later in life?

Does Millie Benson's life encourage you to reach for your dreams? How?

### Follow-up activity

(Pass out copies of Millie Benson's timeline to mother/daughter groups.) Talk about timelines and how they document major accomplishments in a person's life. Give each group some markers and poster board. Suggest that they make a timeline for one of the persons in their group – the daughter, the mother, or the grandmother. (A daughter's timeline could include things she would like to accomplish in the next 75 years.) If time permits, ask some of the participants to share their timelines. Suggest they illustrate them with photos or other mementos at home.

## THE TIMELINE OF MILDRED WIRT BENSON

- 1905 Mildred Augustine was born July 10 in Ladora, Iowa
- 1919 Published her first short story
- 1925 Graduated from University of Iowa
- 1927 Mildred earned her Masters degree from University of Iowa. She became the first woman at that institution to earn a master's degree in journalism.
- 1928 Mildred Augustine married Asa A. Wirt
- 1929 The first Nancy Drew books were published with Millie as Carolyn Keene
- 1936 Daughter Peggy was born
- 1945 Began work as a reporter for the Toledo Times
- 1950 After being widowed, Mildred Wirt married George A. Benson
- 1962 Millie earned her pilot's license
- 1970's Millie began working at the Toledo Blade
- 1993 Inducted into the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame
- 1994 The University of Iowa, Mildred's alma mater, hosted a Nancy Drew® Conference in her honor.
- 2002 Mildred Wirt Benson died in May in Toledo, Ohio. She was still employed as a writer for *The Blade* newspaper.

## **OUTREACH EVENT: Tea with Millie's Contemporaries**

Suggested audience: Invite pre-teen and teen-aged girls (11-15), their mothers and their grandmothers, or anyone interested in exploring the lives of women in early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The "tea" could be a catered "high tea," or something more simple, but equally as fun.

To "set the stage," you may want to introduce the audience to the book, *Amelia and Eleanor Go For a Ride* by Pam Munoz Ryan. The book offers a fictionalized account of a night when Amelia Earhart had dinner at the White House with Eleanor Roosevelt in 1933. While still dressed in evening gowns, they decided to take an airplane trip over Washington DC. (The book would make an appropriate party favor for each young woman in attendance.)

This event requires "actresses," who have researched the lives of some accomplished women who lived during the time that Millie Benson was also a pioneer in fields not commonly open or pursued by women. Circulating among the invited guests to the tea, would be these actresses, who adapted the dress and persona of a specific character.

A local theater group or Women's Education Club may be willing to play these roles.

## **Gifted Women Pioneers**

### **Mildred "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias 1914-1956**

Babe Didrikson was the child of Norwegian immigrants, and grew up in poverty in Texas. She became one of the most prominent female athletes of the last century. She began her athletic career playing high school basketball in the 1920s. She switched to track and field and won gold medals in the 1932 Olympics. She excelled in almost every sport she tried, but she also combined her natural talent with hard work. She became a professional women's golfer.

more information at: <http://www.greatwomen.org>

### **Althea Gibson 1927-2003**

Althea Gibson lived in Harlem, in New York City, in the 1930s and 40s, with her family on welfare. She began to win paddle tennis tournaments sponsored by Police Athletic Leagues and the Parks Department. She learned to play tennis, practiced hard, and won national and international championships, including those at Forest Hills and the French Open. She was the first African American to play and win at Wimbledon, playing there in 1951. She wrote an autobiography called, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*, in 1958.

more information at: <http://www.greatwomen.org>

**Sonja Henie**  
**1912-1969**

Sonja Henie was born in Oslo, Norway. She was an Olympic and world champion figure skater who helped promote the popularity of skating. She won gold medals at the 1928, 1932 and 1936 Winter Olympics. In 1941, she became a citizen of the United States and toured with ice shows throughout the 1950s.

more information at: <http://www2.lucidcafe.com>

**Esther Williams**  
**1922-**

Esther Williams was an actress, but best known as a swimmer. She was an AAU swimming champion, set to represent the United States at the 1940 Summer Olympics in Helsinki, but the games were cancelled because of WW II. During her career, she starred in nearly 30 films, most featuring her swimming prowess.

more information at: <http://search.biography.com>

**Admiral Grace Murray Hopper**  
**1906-1992**

Computers are one of the things that have led the way for women's equal participation in the world of science and business. It was a woman, Grace Brewster Murray Hopper, who was a pioneer in the field of computer science. A graduate of Vassar, and Yale; she earned a Ph.D. in mathematics in 1931. She joined the WAVES in 1943, eventually promoted to rear admiral. She was one of the first software engineers and one of the first strategic "futurists" in the world of computing.

more information at: <http://www.sdsc.edu/ScienceWomen/hopper>

**Eleanor Roosevelt**  
**1884-1962**

Eleanor Roosevelt was best known in her role as First Lady, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, her distant cousin. She was the niece of President Theodore Roosevelt. When her husband developed polio, she became his helper, keeping his interest in politics alive, through his Presidency that ended with his death in 1945. Within

the year, Eleanor began serving as an American spokesperson to the United Nations and continued a vigorous career until she died in 1963.

for more information: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies> and <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex.eleanor>

## **Amelia Earhart**

### **1897-1937**

Amelia Earhart said in 1935, “Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be but a challenge to others.” She was born in Kansas, went to school in Chicago, and worked as nurse in Toronto, Canada with soldiers after WW I. She began to study to become a doctor, but left school soon after taking her first airplane ride. She then took flying lessons, and purchased her first aircraft. In 1932, she was recognized as the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, and continues to set various other world flying records. In 1937, she was declared missing over the Pacific, on her way to Howland Island.

## **MOTHER – DAUGHTER BOOK CLUB**

Based on the MASTERPIECE THEATRE Book Club, invite girls, mothers and grandmothers to become part of a Nancy Drew Mystery Discussion Group.

### First Session:

Begin with (at least an excerpt) from THE STORIED LIFE OF MILLIE BENSON, focusing on the writing of the Nancy Drew Mystery Series.

Ask these questions –

- What is a “pen name?”
- Why did women use “pen names?”
- What other women do you know who used “pen names?”
- How was life different for girls in the 1930s and 1940s in America, than it was for girls who grew up in the 1960s or 1970s, as compared with how it is for girls in the 1990s and the 2000s?
- What were some of the “inventions” that changed the lives of women in each of these eras?
- Assign first novel as a reading assignment

Meetings of the Nancy Drew Mystery Book Club can be held monthly, or sooner, depending on the group’s decision. Assign the next book at the previous meeting. Each member should have read the book prior to the meeting, and be ready to discuss it. Allow for some social interaction with the group, accompanied by refreshments.

The leader of the group may want to come up with new or additional discussion questions to add to the ones provided here. Also, if the group wants to continue beyond a few meetings, questions for other Nancy Drew mysteries can be written.

Web Chat: Keep your group interested with a special “Storied Life of Millie Benson” web page on your station’s web site, where club members can ask questions or post reviews. Also, collect email addresses from your group to notify members about upcoming meetings, or field trips to places like mansions or farms that might explore some of the settings for Nancy’s adventures.

Here are some proposed discussion questions for four of the early Nancy Drew Mysteries by Carolyn Keene (aka Mildred Wirt Benson). See the Bibliography that follows for other titles.

## **THE HIDDEN STAIRCASE**

### Clothing

Nancy and her friend, Helen, wore very different “every day clothes” than young women do today. Only at one point, they put on jeans, when they were going to do some exploring. They wore “sports dresses.” Compare Nancy’s dress to that of women detectives that you see on TV and in the movies. Which type of clothes makes the most sense? When Nancy and Helen were trying to open the attic trap door, they used a buttonhook? Have you ever seen one, and why were they needed to fasten high button shoes and gloves in Victorian times?

### The Mansions

We learned that the two mansions – Twin Elms and Riverview Manor – were virtually the same in structure. What turned out to be different? How did this help provide the clue to the hidden staircase? What other hidden doors and cabinets did the girls find to encourage them to keep looking for an outside passage into Twin Elms?

Have you ever heard of buildings that have the reputation of being haunted? Where? Do you think it’s possible that ghosts live in old houses?

### The Listening Post

In Colonial Times, it was difficult for people to decide who was for American independence and who remained loyal to the British. So, the secret cabinet allowed for the owner of the mansion to overhear what was being said in the kitchen. Is this a fair practice? Has anyone overheard something you might have said and it worked against you?

Before Nancy and Helen discovered the “listening post,” she was sure that there were microphones all over the house, picking up their plans and conversations? What kinds of similar spying devices do detectives now use?

### The Ghost

At what point did you begin to guess that Willie Wharton might be the ghost? When you read in the beginning chapters about Nancy and her father almost getting run over by a truck at the river, who did you think was responsible?

### The Crooks

What do you think should be the punishment for those involved in the kidnapping of Nancy’s father? Willie Wharton? Samuel Greenman? Harry the cabdriver? Nathan Gomber? Should Miss Flora be able to keep Twin Elms, even though she signed a contract to sell it?

## THE BUNGALOW MYSTERY

### Safety

In the opening scene, Nancy and Helen are in a motorboat, when a storm capsizes the boat. They have no life jackets. What would be the consequences of going out in a boat

without life jackets, today? What other kinds of safety precautions do we take today, that Nancy did not? (Wearing car seat belts, for example). Are there other things that Nancy could have done while solving the mystery to minimize the dangers she encountered?

### Impersonation

Actors can pretend to be other people. Do you know of an instance when one person pretended to be another for a joke or a criminal purpose? When did you become suspicious that the Dowds may be impersonating the Aborns?

### The Hideaway and the Hideout

Mr. Aborn was kept captive in the basement of a small shack in the woods, under very desperate conditions. Compare his “living arrangements” to that of the Bungalow, where the girls recuperated after their rescue from the lake by Laura.

### Greed

Do you think if the Dowds were not so intent on getting Laura’s jewelry, that they might have been able to get away with their crime of theft and embezzlement?

### Thanks

Who was grateful to Nancy for solving the mystery? How did those people express their gratitude? When Laura asked if Nancy had any souvenirs from her first two mysteries, she responded that she had “trophies.” What kind of trophy did Laura give to Nancy?

## THE MYSTERY AT LILAC INN

### The Setting

Talk about the similarities in the scenes of this story and THE BUNGALOW MYSTERY. . . .the river. . . a supposedly abandoned shed with a trap door. . . a wooded area. How does the author use these elements to build intrigue in the story?

### The Suspects

As you read the story, did you think that the jewel thief and Nancy’s impersonator were the same person, or two different suspects? What made you suspect Maud? John? Gil? The man with the crew cut?

The author is again using “acting” as a way of fooling Nancy, as she did in THE BUNGALOW MYSTERY. Do you think that Jean was a more convincing actress, almost fooling Nancy’s own father?

This story also has a ghost, just like THE BUNGALOW MYSTERY. Did the ghost have the same motive in both THE MYSTERY AT LILAC INN AND THE BUNGALOW MYSTERY? Do you think people today are more or less scared about ghosts? Do you think that pretending to be a ghost today would scare people as it did when Nancy Drew was a detective?

### Clues

When Helen and Nancy's boat capsized, as they were first coming to Lilac Inn, what did you think was described "as the big shark," which you later found out to be a small submarine? John found an "electronic part" in the woods when talking with Nancy, that he neglected to identify. What did you think that might be at the time? When Emily took her diamond to the jeweler in the city, and was told they were glass, what were your ideas for how that happened? Did you think that the diamonds were not real in the first place?

### The Language of Flowers

According to this book, lilacs are the sign of good luck, and help send away evil spirits. Do you know any other flowers that have similar omens connected to them? Lilacs are also referred to as "Blue Pipes." What are some other common names for flowers that are used that refer to what the flower looks like, or its purpose?

## THE SECRET OF RED GATE FARM

### The Secret

What was the secret of Red Gate Farm? What were your first suspicions about the Blake Snake Colony? Was the Black Snake Colony a real cult?

### The Perfume

The scent of "Blue Jade" was used as a secret code to identify the women involved in the counterfeit ring. How did that scent help and hinder Nancy in solving the case? How did the solving of the secret code from the telephone message left at the office named "305" raise further suspicion? What are other types of secret codes used by operatives for good or evil?

### The Insider

The lady from the colony with the sprained ankle was discovered to be the wife of Maurice, the Hale Syndicate Leader. How did Maurice treat her? After Nancy escaped, but captured again by Hank, Maurice said, "Good thing you got her, Hank. The little wildcat! We'll give her a double dose for this smart trick. No girl's going to put anything over on me!" What do you suppose was his general attitude toward women and girls?

### The \$20 Bills

Nancy reported getting the \$20 bills from her father. How do you suppose he got them? Why do you think crooks often counterfeit \$20 bills? How can you tell if a bill is counterfeit?

### Final Session: Create your own Mystery

Back in the 1930's and 40's Mildred was given a story outline, which she

would use to write her Nancy Drew mysteries.

***Use the following story outline to write your own mystery involving Super Sleuth Nancy Drew:***

### **The Case of the Missing Guitar Case**

Nancy's friends, Tonya and Tyler, are members of a band called, "Moss Covered Mansion." Tonya and Tyler are taking a train to New York to perform in a concert and Nancy is traveling with them.

There is a mysterious stranger at the train station who follows them on the train. Nancy notices that he's carrying a guitar case that looks just like Tonya's. A woman named Mrs. Jeffrey bumps into Tonya on the train and makes a rude remark about guitar players. A loud teenager named Stanley Sherwood sees "The Moss Covered Mansion" on board, asks for their autograph and makes a comment about how he's always wanted a guitar like Tonya's. Later at the concert hall, Tyler opens the guitar case but he doesn't find Tonya's guitar...

#### **You decide:**

What does Tyler find in the guitar case?

How did it get there and how does Nancy solve the mystery?

Provide computers and or other writing materials for the book club members. Share the various endings of the story as a group.

## **Bibliography**

### **Books written by Mildred Benson as Carolyn Keene**

Old Clock (1930)  
Hollow Oak (1935)  
Jewel Box (1943)  
Hidden Staircase (1930)  
Ivory Charm (1936)  
Missing Map (1942)  
Bungalow Mystery (1930)  
Whispering Statue (1937)  
Old Attic (1944)  
Lilac Inn (1930)  
Haunted Bridge (1938)  
Crumbling Wall (1945)  
Shadow Ranch (1930)  
Tapping Heels (1939)  
Tolling Bell (1946)  
Red Gate Farm (1931)  
Brass-Bound Trunk (1940)  
Old Album (1947)  
Clue in the Diary (1932)  
Broken Locket (1934)  
Moss-Covered Mansion (1941)  
Velvet Mask (1953)  
Blackwood Hall (1948)

### **Notes to Teachers: Relevant National Standards, English**

- Read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.
- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- Apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.
- Employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

### **Relevant National Standards, Social Studies**

- Distinguish between past, present, and future time.
- Interpret data presented in time lines and create time lines by designating appropriate equidistant intervals of time and recording events according to the temporal order in which they occurred.
- How the United States changed from the end of World War I to the eve of the Great Depression  
The student understands social tensions and their consequences in the postwar era.
- Analyze how the emergence of the 'New Woman' challenged Victorian values.  
[Examine the influence of ideas]
- The student understands how a modern capitalist economy emerged in the 1920s.
- The student understands how new cultural movements reflected and changed American society.
- Analyze the involvement of minorities and women in the New Deal and its impact upon them. [Assess the importance of the individual in history]
- The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society
- Analyze the effects of World War II on gender roles and the American family.  
[Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas]