

## Elisabeth Ruffner: Champion of “Everybody’s Hometown”

by Betty C. Marvin

(reprinted with permission from the Summer 2001 issue of *Rails to Trails: A Celebration of Trails and Greenways*, the membership magazine of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy)

The first thing you need to know before you meet 81-year-old Elisabeth Ruffner is that you'd better be prepared to keep up — intellectually and physically. At five foot 3 inches tall, slight of build, Ruffner radiates an energy and vitality that cheat the stereotypical octogenarian image by at least 25 years. Meeting for an early breakfast at the elegant Hassayampa Inn in Prescott, Ariz., she sports a spicy magenta silk blouse that accents her classy navy skirt and blazer and highlights cameo-colored, nearly wrinkle-free skin. This diminutive lady has chutzpah; she's brought her own bread and sweetly asks the server to toast it for her. He's eager to please. Clearly it pays to be one of the most well-known and respected members of this mountain community, Ruffner's home since she stepped off the train as a bride-to-be in 1940.

Buttering her toast, Ruffner reels off a dizzying list of legislative acts, influential organizations and current projects dedicated to preserving both the quaint, historic architecture of the city and protecting its stunning natural setting — “two of this city's greatest assets,” as she puts it. Founder and president of the Open Space Alliance of Central Yavapai County, Ruffner has had decades of experience working to protect the area's heritage. She taps a vast core of knowledge and speaks with an authority that any environmental attorney would envy. And as advisor to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Ruffner is as much at home soliciting support from Congress in Washington, D.C., as she is forming political action committees at the state level.

Though she's traveled the world; been appointed to commissions; received awards from presidents, governors and mayors; and served with the Arizona Department of Transportation Enhancements Committee and the Arizona Historical Advisory Committee (her resume includes dozens of projects that range from grant writing to garnering public support for tax initiatives to lobbying legislators to registering historic houses), Ruffner works especially hard for local causes. Her most recent accomplishments for Prescott — known affectionately as “everybody's hometown” — include co-chairing a political action committee that succeeded in convincing Yavapai County voters to pass a \$69.5 million bond for Yavapai Community College.

There's hardly a preservation entity in Arizona or, for that matter, Washington, D.C., that has not heard the name Elisabeth Ruffner. Anxious to share the spotlight, however, she touts the accomplishments of Eric Smith, the city's trails and open space coordinator. When Prescott hired him in 1999, Smith adopted the Yavapai Trails Association vision for the Peavine Trail. He wrote grant applications, negotiated the land purchase and arranged funding for improvements to the 9.2-mile rail-trail.

Smith tosses the compliments back to Ruffner. “If there had not been cooperation between us — with Elisabeth educating the public through newsletters and newspaper articles, and the Yavapai Trails Association providing lots of volunteer labor -- the Peavine Trail probably would not exist,” he says. “Elisabeth knows how to bring us all together.”

Ruffner shakes her head modestly at his high praise. “It's nothing but longevity and perseverance,” she laughs. One could also add “boundless energy.” It's mid-afternoon and she's been going strong since early morning. Her enthusiasm is as contagious now as it was at breakfast.

Married for 56 years to Budge Ruffner, noted Arizona historian, writer and humor columnist, Ruffner calls her push to protect the mountainsides from over-development a “natural progression.”

“My work today [with preserving open spaces] grew out of my efforts in the '60s to get public funding for our public libraries. From there, I got involved in historic preservation,” she says.

Having learned how to navigate the governmental labyrinth, Ruffner became excited at the role not-for-profit, volunteer, tax-exempt organizations can play in influencing public policy. She threw her expertise into developing this arena. Today, among other purposes, the Alliance supports organizations that develop trails, including a proposed trail that will eventually encircle the community and a footpath for the blind at a nearby town's park. Inspired by her grandson, Paul, who was born blind, Ruffner joined forces with local friends who had begun constructing a short hiking trail for the blind through a high desert park. The trail, which Paul “road tested,” features Braille signs and opportunities to touch and smell desert plants and be independent on a well-defined and groomed path.

Susan Schepman, public relations manager for Prescott's Coalition for Tourism, believes her office would not exist without Ruffner's leadership and support. “Elisabeth helped us secure matching grants from the state to promote Prescott as a vacation destination. With her help we generated national print coverage worth nearly a million dollars. She's amazing!”

Since one in four jobs in the area depends on tourism, preserving Prescott's history as well as its natural beauty is a high priority. That's why the Alliance strives for goals that make ecological as well as economic sense. “We must work hand in hand with the merchants, ranchers and developers to find practical ways to preserve our lands that benefit everybody,” Ruffner emphasizes.

Coupled with political savvy, this spirit of cooperation has enabled Ruffner, through the Alliance, to garner unusual support from Prescott residents. Last May, they voted to extend a 1 percent sales tax (spread over 15 years) that will fund road improvements and

(continued on page 9)



Elisabeth Ruffner at her home in Prescott, Arizona