



Alumni



**EDNA RUTH JOHNSON
(DECEASED)
*BA, ENGLISH '71***

Edna Ruth Johnson, a farmer's daughter from a small town in Wisconsin, was the consummate Renaissance woman. Her father nurtured her life-long love of music and dance at a young age. Edna moved to Milwaukee to study ballet, then went to Chicago to train and perform with the Edna MacRae Dance Company. She eventually opened her own dance studio. But, eager to become a writer as well as a dancer, Edna accepted a position at the *Chicago Sun* when Marshall Field began publishing it in 1942. Continuing her move east, she landed in New York City — where destiny prevailed. In

1943, editor Dr. Guy Emery Shipler hired Edna to assist him at *The Churchman*. Founded in 1804 during the Jeffersonian era, it was the oldest religious magazine in the country. The journal would become, in Edna's own words, her greatest accomplishment. She would ultimately manage the publication for over fifty years. In 1960, Edna moved to St. Petersburg – and the primary work of *The Churchman* came with her. She was named editor in 1971, after the passing of Dr. Shipler. The publication won many awards throughout its history, a testament to Edna's herculean stewardship.

A relentless champion of the underdog, Edna used *The Churchman* (later renamed *The Human Quest*) as her pulpit to foster civil rights, to oppose the war in Vietnam, and to forward the feminist movement. Fearless in the face of controversy, Edna aimed to provoke ongoing discussions that would ultimately transform society to benefit all.

To analyze first-hand the impact of global issues, Edna travelled to Europe, China, Thailand, Russia

and Cuba. But, her journeys were not all work and no play. She enjoyed cruising along the Volga and visiting the world's cultural treasures. But, Edna spent each summer in Wisconsin at her beloved lakeside retreat – and, of course, she had designed its architecture.

Edna was also an award-winning artist, having studied with the noted Prof. James Crane at Florida Presbyterian College (today's Eckerd College), among others, and at a summer workshop at the University of the South, in Sewanee, TN. Her pieces were the only two from that workshop to be selected for a fall exhibition at the college. Initially working with oil painting, Edna began designing unique collages, in which wood, colored tissue and other objects were interwoven. Her compositions were displayed in many area exhibitions. She sculpted, made jewelry and worked in pottery. She won prizes for her vibrant costume and clothing designs. Edna was also chairman of the Society of Fine Arts, a group organized to emphasize the unity of all the arts and to support the Beaux Arts Theater in Pinellas Park. She donated her art for fundraisers to benefit various groups including the St. Petersburg Symphony Orchestra. Edna hosted garden parties and chaired events like the annual Festival of States Beaux Arts Ball. She taught ballroom dancing across Pinellas County – and won trophies in dance competitions. As a USFSP student, Edna participated in the first student art exhibition on campus, held in the former SPA Auditorium (now MSL), as part of the student-organized "Spring Collage" arts festival in 1971.

Ever a feisty liberal voice and community activist, Edna also served on the Board of the American Civil Liberties Committee and on the peace committee of the local Society of Friends. She was a member of the Editorial Board of *The Humanist*. In 1975 Edna was named Florida Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Association Florida.

A professed Unitarian and an outspoken spiritual humanist, Edna's dedication to resolving social problems equaled her abiding immersion in the arts.

Nor did Edna forget her Alma Mater. Giving a significant donation to USFSP in the late '90s, the Johnson Sun Room, located on the second floor of the historic Snell House, is named in her honor. Some of her art adorns the walls and copies of *The Churchman* are available for perusal. After a remarkable life, Edna died in 2007, leaving a storied legacy in her wake.

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