

Reminiscences of Elizabeth Ames Jackson (1894-1990)

By Leila D. J. Poullada

Betty Ames was a mischievous, bright, outgoing little girl with a mop of wavy, pale blonde hair. She was born August 12, 1894, the youngest of four daughters of Charles Wilberforce and Mary Lesley Ames. The Ames family lived in the home which, eight years before, Charles and Mary had built at 501 Grand Avenue, St. Paul.

Her three older sisters and her ten-years-older brother treated her with great affection and considerable tolerance. Letters to and from her parents show love and understanding of her foibles, mixed with occasional cautionary remarks.

The neighborhood was full of children. Photos show Betty in a dominant position with her neighborhood pals. Though she formed deep, lasting friendships with everyone, young and old, male and female, she had high standards of behavior. As she grew older, her empathy and wisdom became legend. She claimed she was shy, and she never sought attention or publicity. But once she knew what she wanted to do and how to do it, she was indomitable.

During the many years she lived at 501, she thrived on the big, informal parties she held there. She often ran only on emotional energy gained from friendships and cultural stimulation. All her life, she was supported by the devotion of her childhood neighborhood friend and husband of 58 years, Norris D. (Nonnie) Jackson.

Glimpses of Childhood

On her fourth birthday, she was disappointed that her mother did not come down for that important breakfast. She was reconciled when told that her mother was upstairs with a very special birthday present for her. It was her newborn brother Theodore (Ted, or Theo as he signed himself to his sisters in their voluminous, lifelong correspondence). From that day onward, Betty considered Ted her special charge.

The family made many train journeys to the East Coast where both Ames and Lesley grandparents lived, as well as many other relatives. There were summers at Gloucester near Brace's Rock and in the New Hampshire mountains at Tamworth. They picnicked, sailed, swam, hiked, and played tennis, though Betty was never athletic.

At age eight, she traveled abroad for the first time, in company with her family, from whom she learned to be a consummate traveler. As she aged, the object of her travels was more and more to visit specific people or revisit favorite haunts. It was the quiet Nonnie who retained a serious interest in visiting new places.

Through eighth grade, she attended Miss Loomis's school in St. Paul, a mediocre student in a mediocre school, then followed in her older sisters' footsteps with four years at the celebrated day school in Boston, run by family friend Mary Winsor.

She boarded with the widowed Mrs. Bellows, who was part of the family's artistic and literary East Coast circle. She seems to have been freer there than she would have been if she had stayed with the elderly paternal grandparents, as her older sisters had done. She always spoke with a tinge of fear of feisty "Little Grandma Ames"--Fanny Baker Ames, second wife of Charles Gordon Ames, Betty's grandfather. That lady was apparently full of rectitude, and her dedication to Unitarian causes was notable. (A family member was once asked whether Fanny was loved. The rejoinder: "She was endured.") Quite a contrast to Fanny's preacher husband, Betty's grandfather, who was known as a saintly, gentle man.

Ancestors of Betty's mother, Mary Lesley Ames, had become Unitarians as early as 1830, and most ancestors born in England and Scotland and who emigrated to America arrived between 1630 and 1740.

On an early report card, Miss Winsor wrote that considering the shortcomings of her former school, Betty was doing well and working hard. But it was not all hard work. She recalled with enthusiasm the friendships, concerts and dances in Boston social circles.

Next, Italy. In the fall of 1913 she reluctantly joined 15 other young women at the villa and school of Misses Nixon and Sheldon in Florence. She had wanted to be in Paris with several friends "to improve her French." But her father considered this frivolous, and persuaded her that three years in Italy, studying art history, Italian and French would be preferable. Her first year in Florence was a joy to her. But World War I broke out while she was home for the summer of 1914, and she did not return.

During World War I

She did not enjoy academics, and unlike her sisters, did not go to college. When sisters Margaret and Alice went to France in 1916 to work for the American Fund for French Wounded, Betty, though no seamstress, took over some of Margaret's volunteer classes in sewing and domestic management at the Saint Paul Institute. She served in many local social service projects, and took a Red Cross nursing course.

In February 1918, despite the threat of German U-boats, Betty and her cousin Edith Winter sailed for France. She became receptionist at the American Fund for French Wounded headquarters in the former night club, the Alcazar, near the Place de la Concorde. (It is now the site of the U.S. Embassy.) The cousins rented a first-floor apartment at 3 Rue Verdi, a half-hour's brisk walk in the newer, western part of Paris. Between them, they ran an informal dating service and kept open house for dozens of friends--and friends of friends--on leave from the front. She mourned a new, very

special friend, Warren Hobbs, killed over Belgium, as well as many other friends who had been crippled or killed.

When the Germans made their last, nearly successful push into France, Betty joined a nursing unit at the front, near Rheims. Postal cards she wrote of the devastation there, which she kept for many years, help to explain her lifelong distaste for things German. (The romantic Austria of the 19th century and Vienna's music were striking exceptions.)

Home and Marriage

After staying in France for a few months after the Armistice, recuperating from her intense wartime experiences and working with orphans and convalescent soldiers in southern France, Betty returned to St. Paul in the spring of 1919. She plunged into volunteer community service work and, with two friends, founded the Saint Paul Junior League.

She then suffered an emotional breakdown, caused in part by her wartime experiences. A doctor ordered her isolation from family and friends during her recovery. After she recovered, she

had new shocks. Her beloved father died in April 1921, and her engagement was broken off when her erstwhile fiancé was shown to have seriously misrepresented his past.

But by the spring of 1922, faithful Norris Jackson had proposed. They were married in late December at 501. After Betty's older brother, Lesley, and his wife Linda, moved from 501 to their new home at Blue Gentian Hills in 1926, Betty and Nonnie moved in to keep company with Betty's widowed mother. Mary Ames died in 1929. The house at 501 was Betty and Nonnie's for the rest of their lives; they kept the house in good order during the Depression and bought it from the other heirs after World War II.

An Active Life

For many years, Betty was an active volunteer social worker, an active board member of the Saint Paul Institute, Summit School parent, pillar of Unity Church, and loving daughter-in-law to Alice and John Jackson. Daughters Leila and Kitty were born in 1924 and 1925 respectively. In the depths of the Depression, the family spent the winter in the Jacksons' house to save on utilities and other expenses at 501.

In the fall of 1937, the family took their Studebaker sedan to France, England and Scotland for two months. It was Betty's sixth trip to Europe, the first since her marriage 15 years earlier, and a chance at last for Nonnie to see the wider world he had studied and read about all his life. It was for us daughters the opening of exciting windows--the sharing of what Betty had loved for so long.

World War II

Only two years later, Hitler invaded Poland, and World War II began. As soon as France was invaded, Betty and her sister, Margaret Wright, who lived next door at 511 Grand Avenue, started war work, as they had done in 1914. Norris and Cushing Wright were their stalwart assistants, and soon the third floor of 501 became the sewing workshop for the Saint Paul branch of the British War Relief Society.

Norris, who had served in the Air Corps during World War I, in 1937 left his job at Gordon Ferguson, an outdoor clothing manufacturer, where his father was treasurer. He eventually found his *métier*, as a labor relations pioneer, first with the State of Minnesota and then, beginning in 1942, with Northwest Airlines, which was heavily involved in the war effort.

During the war, the Jacksons were informal foster parents to a number of youngsters. In September 1940, eleven-year-old Charles Morrison arrived from Britain and lived with the extended family, partly with the Jacksons and partly with the Wrights next door. His keen intelligence, wide-ranging curiosity, and sense of adventure were a delight to all the family. Nancy Ames, Ted's daughter, lived at 501 during the war, attending the Summit school while her father, a colonel in the U. S. Army Air Forces, was stationed in Britain. The Jacksons' nephew, Jim Turner, whose parents had both died, lived at 501 for a time. Other relatives and their friends were frequently welcomed for leisurely visits.

Shortly after peace was achieved, the British ambassador gave a private luncheon in Washington for Ted, Margaret, and Betty, and gave them membership in the Order of the Empire in recognition of their wartime services.

The Fifties and Sixties

After the war, the large third floor of 501 was converted into an apartment, which was used at various times by niece Clara Greenman and husband Bobby, niece Sally Ellis and husband Pepper, and other relatives. The two Jackson daughters, Leila and Kitty, were both married in 1952, Leila to Leon Poullada in March and Kitty to Sargeant Wise in June.

Betty resumed her advisory roles in community service, and she and Norris traveled widely and frequently, thanks in part to his position as Director of Labor Relations for Northwest Airlines. On various trips, they visited the Poullada family in Pakistan, Afghanistan and in West Africa. They went to Malaga, Spain and traveled with the Poulladas in a nine-passenger Renault bus with a driver and hired nursemaid, and spent a month in Greece with the Poulladas, gypsying *en famille* in a VW bus. They frequently visited their daughter Kitty, husband Sarge, and their four children, in Rochester, New York.

Later Years

The Jacksons played an important part in the two African institutes for high school juniors presented by the Junior League in the mid-1960's. They enrolled in University of Minnesota extension courses in history and current affairs. After Norris retired in 1956, he spent three years as a special assistant to the president of Macalester College, which amused Betty as "only a high school graduate."

They aged slowly and gracefully, reading aloud together, attending lectures, concerts and plays, revisiting old haunts at home and abroad, keeping up with widespread grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and the next generation of children, too. They took vicarious pleasure in the travel of others, sharing their excitement about new or familiar places. They loved city walking, country sightseeing, and everything to do with the sea. They almost never missed the wedding of any member of the far-flung Ames clan.

Norris was the admired leader of the exclusive, close-knit Ames In-Laws Club when it took over the 1986 celebration of the 100th anniversary of the building of 501. Some 125 clanspeople toasted "Aunt Betty and Uncle Non" in a big tent in the back yard. After Nonnie had cataract surgery on his one good eye, his great-nephew, Charlie Bathke, came to live with the Jacksons, "to keep a discreet eye on them," even though he worked in Minneapolis. His evening piano playing especially delighted Betty, who could play only the phonograph.

In her later years, Betty was beset by a number of ailments that slowed her down physically--two mastectomies, an irregular heart beat, shingles, emphysema, dry eyes. But whenever someone came to call, Betty was always "up." To their extended family, Betty and Nonnie were exemplars of the right way to grow old.

Betty died in March 1990, age 95, and Norris followed six months later. Their ashes repose, mixed together, half in the joint back yard of 501 and 511, where they played as children, and half in the waters of Frenchman's Bay, Maine, an arm of the great Atlantic Ocean they loved so much.

Postscript

From a letter written by Betty's father to her maternal grandfather, J. Peter Lesley, dated February 6, 1898, Betty being three years, six months old:

"Dear Father Peter: Perhaps you would like to have a few 'Gems from the Occident'-- pearls of speech which have been gathered from the lips of your youngest descendant!

“She seems to be rather theologically inclined lately, and after saying the Lord’s pray in a form which would be nearly unintelligible to anyone except the Person Addressed, she suddenly observed, ‘Now I have to help God be good!’

“Again tonight, she cheerfully observed, ‘God made everybody. He made Aunt Alice and Uncle Tom, and Gilbert and Grandma Baker and the Earth and the Cook.’ (A true rhetorical climax, but contrary to the general opinion that while God made the food, the devil made the cooks.)

“You have been told of her imaginary associate Lizzie Klondike. She and all her family seem to be very vivid realities to our little maid, and we have become accustomed to all sorts of revelations of the Klondikes’ tricks and manners. But I was startled--when after I had been holding forth with some violence in the tyrannical manner of my sex over some domestic arrangement of which I disapproved, Betty remarked quietly in a matter-of-fact way, ‘That’s just what Mr. Klondike says.’ ”

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