BEULAH HEPBURN EMMET AND HER DREAM OF A SCHOOL

by Lisa Gray Millimet

(an expanded version of the chapel talk I gave in 2015 at the 50th reunion of my class.)

Introduction:

When Alexis Pittman asked me if I wanted to do the chapel talk, he said to talk about whatever I wanted. Over time, I found that I was not inclined to talk about spirituality or philosophy. So, what then? I told him I'd think about it.

That very night I had a dream:

Hovering like a crazed hummingbird over the packed streets of the lower east side of New York, I was snapping photographs of peddlers with a television remote, one of a decrepit old man. In his crumby black coat and long beard, he chugged down Orchard St. behind a shaggy cart, drawn by an even shaggier ragtag tribe of goats. I was desperate to talk to him! But I was unable to get his attention no matter how hard I punched the buttons. I couldn't understand why he was ignoring me; I seemed invisible. Then one of my dead relatives showed up and began to beg me for help, but I ignored him. And anyway, I said, I had to cancel a dentist appointment.

Well, I woke knowing exactly what the dream was telling me: I was trying to go back, trying to get another chance to pay attention to what I once had not. I was trying to turn on history—the past's. And mine.

The old men and their carts are long gone now, never to be seen again. They represented the past I wanted to plumb. And my dead relative only drove home further that there had been people I'd been too young to appreciate.

Who were these peddlers, though?

Over the next weeks, it began to slowly take shape.

Aware that something rare and precious is being lost in the way we do things now, I spend a lot of time thinking and writing about people and places that have faded, unnoticed, into history, and whose extinction beckons me to rescue their stories from the dust bin—especially since we are now losing the last people to be brought up before much if any media, when your life's education came largely from your immediate environment and those close to you telling their stories.

Peddlers in my own back yard:

I wish I could click that remote today and go back to talk to those who taught me here at High owing sixty years ago, born in the 19th and early 20th centuries, humans so different from those created today. Mrs. Emmet wrote about the school's first years and of her first teachers. But I remember those of two decades later.

There was gymnast Mr Eberle, who fit my limited image of the German character, so precise and disciplined, and who expected excellence on the parallel bars *and* in the garden. Dr. Winkler, from Vienna, breezed through a time or two—only later would I learn that he was a physician who had studied under scientific pioneers in the field but had left Europe the year Hitler and Stalin decided to

divi it up. Some teachers sent the boys into paroxysms of mocking and mugging as they passed by. Like Hermann Poppelbaum. And that name! They didn't know what to make of him, only how to make fun of him. He had been with Steiner, it turns out, at the first school, the one started in Stuttgart just after World War I for the children of the Waldorf cigarette factory. But we had no possible conception of such a world or what he'd seen or done there, and sadly, little curiosity about it; he probably had no conception of ours either, modern kids from a fragmented and irreverent America; what *did* he think?

Winkler and Poppelbaum came and went like fleeting dreams, checking in, casting a hazy halo over my brain on their way to a place beyond my conjuring of it as something different and un-knowable, but something acutely alluring; somehow, their presence felt protective. They were descendants of a quirky, abstract, and captivating philosophy, and of a time soon to disappear. They were like characters on a stage, a brief illusion.

Some of our teachers were war refugees, like the Kerterzes from Hungary, whose homeland the communists took away in 1949. Hilda and Lazlo—he an accomplished cellist and she reeking of European tradition. Penelope Packard of '55 remembers Hilda Kerterz sweetly calling her husband "Latci" and "Tsunica." Trained as a seamstress in Hungary, she taught little Penelope the right way to do things, teachings which have stayed with her throughout her life. Once, when the child made an entire coat by hand, Hilda exclaimed, "Vell, it's okay. But not as good as I do." Her charm and example only made the girl excel further. Hilda ironed their sheets and pillowcases and folded them and tied them round with ribbons; Lazlo taught the cello and filled the school with music. They were old world. Civilized. Cultured.

Miss Friedl taught French and German, and interesting and patient Herb Swanson taught the sciences and geometry. And there was Mr. Karl, in his ever-present tweed jacket telling spine-chilling tales of history in a thick accent that threw me to a time and place of which I could only wonder. I often watched his plod across the oval to the red house, his aging face a faded memory of handsome and his eyebrows waving, his demeanor looking thoroughly elsewhere. And there was Isobel, who became his wife. With her hair held in place with a thin pin, and her unpretentious, homespun-looking cropped top and ankle length skirt, and shoes that smacked of Hansel and Gretel, she fascinated me. Ethereal at first glance, she was anything but—she was sharp, and knew what she was talking about, and she knew how to explain it. Her domain was the pottery studio, she didn't fidget with any of the rest, and she appreciated those who were comfortable with the process she asked of them: how to begin with preparing clay then working toward your own application of it with intention. She would teach for decades, with guidance and authentic genius, setting an example of how to live.

Lovely, smart Mrs. Prince from Latvia was here too, whose father made and sold instruments to Russia, but whose life with politicians and artists was cut short when Germany and Russia went to war. Born on the border with Estonia, the family later moved to Riga. But the war took her mother and her husband and she had to flee the country, traveling in boxcars until she got to Germany, finally making it to this country. Her PhD was not acknowledged in this country, though, but she somehow found her way to Mrs. Emmet and High Mowing. I knew without asking that she had seen things that I never would.

An Austrian math teacher, who talked about phlegm and bile and of whatever "choleric" and "sanguine" meant, seemed to have come to us from another planet. Diana Bent (a street-tough in our class who didn't last long) used to bring a bath towel to class, covering her desk in the front row as he flailed his arms repeating, "FORM, FORM!" with a bit of foam at the mouth while she, the whole time, was checking out the guys at the other end of the row. Did he have a life before I set eyes on him?

And Johanna Bosch. How I wish I'd talked to her.

It was she who brought history alive. She was strong, a real academic, and a liberated woman long before we knew the word. Why did she leave Turkey, though, and why did she come here? What

had she seen in life? The fall of the Ottoman Empire? Did she have children? What did she have in her refrigerator?

I can still hear her muted Turkish accent, a sing-song growl rocking the facts as she sought the right words to impart to us the wonders of history. She'd pump her fingertips together—push ups to exercise our sleepy minds, lighting up the past with that impassioned smile. Our insulated class must have found out about the changes out in the country through her, because there she is in an 8 by 10, her "END THE WAR IN VIETNAM" button on her collar. I remember she went to the first public march against the war that year. Vietnam? Where was that? Whatever happened to her? Why did she only last a short time? We'll never know; that library burned down. But she made such an impression on us that we dedicated the yearbook to her.

For the Americans who helped to keep it all running, we had the Coyles, cigarette-smoking, television-watching cooks, Maine toughs with big hearts who made lamb with raisins, unheard of in those days. And Joe Miller, who never said one word as he emptied our trash and cared for us without our knowing. The full page close-up of him that we put in the yearbook caused quite a stir with the faculty. Aging, tan, and wrinkled, he was slow and bent, a janitor. Wasn't he? Well, it turns out he was quite a bit more—a "weather prophet," as Mrs. Emmet tells it, and in his day, considered the strongest man in Wilton. Having lost the sense of smell to a broken nose, he was the one to call for skunk duty. I had no tools then for appreciating such a human, but I wish I had. He died under a tractor a few years after the fire.

Those I remember well. But as I dug further, I learned of names I'd never heard, those who had nurtured the school before me: the early eurythmy teacher, Miss Loman, with her beautiful dark hair in place no matter how challenging the dance; and Miss Erikson, who taught art and introduced Goethe's thesis of color and wet painting. And what about Ruth and Hans Preuss, cooks at the school in the '50s who had fled Germany; or a Mr. Bart, who fell in love with another faculty member, Miss James, and married her? Who was he, and what happened to them? Tilo Kaufmann ferried the children from Lower School and built and lived in the little house next to the gym. Who remembers that he carved beautiful folk art and was the son of anthroposophists from the old country, that his mother was an herbalist? What about him? Many in the history of the school have silently slipped away, but just hearing their names struck me like a treasure trove.

Pay dirt came, though, from the discovery of a name that simultaneously humbled and excited me: the name of the person in the class of '44 who won the design contest held for a logo for the school, the person who gave each of us the indelible tug of heart as we crest the hill: the horse and weather vane, an emblem like no other. Mary Paul. Many names now forgotten—but hers no longer. The peddlers' remote haunts me a little less now.

In the end, there is one name we surely all know—always attending to everything everywhere from the beginning was the irreplaceable Bob Pittman from the first class, who stayed for all challenges, surely the second soul of the school, the man who taught me to country dance and who fixed, preserved, restored, built, created, organized and, in the end, saved the school.

Of course, I can't forget Mr. Tallarico, who gave so much beauty, passionately playing piano each Friday after lunch to the entire student body, humming to the music like a heat source running not so quietly and not so far in the background. He didn't seem to mind that we might not care about what he was doing—a squat and pear-shaped, blocky, Tweedledee of a man, with a bulbous nose and a smile.

Well, he hadn't always been pear-shaped.

He was born Pasquale Tallarico in the toe of Italy in 1891, and he made his debut in New York City, a prodigy at nine, one who memorized all thirty-two of Beethoven's variations in a week.

He studied with those who taught Gershwin and Copeland and, coincidentally, Paul Nordoff, studied composition with Rubin Goldmark, a student of Antonin Dvorak, and at twenty-two, he won the National Pianist Competition with his performance of *The McDowell Concerto*. With the recognition, he went on to perform with national orchestras conducted by people like Stravinsky and Stokowski. But he loved the music of Edward McDowell which evoked the beauty of New Hampshire. And so, somehow, Mrs. Emmet found him and he came here.

And he must have met his wife in New Hampshire, too. She was from Wilton.

That is, his second wife.

From a 1909 *New York Times* article:

"GETS FAME, LEAVES WIFE:
Pasquale Tallarico, a pale-faced young man of 19, with a mass of hair arranged in the fashion of musicians, told the Supreme Court…yesterday that he no longer loved his girl wife."

It seems he married when he was seventeen and Florence Agnes was fifteen. They'd had a baby, but Martha only lived two months and now he wanted out. Well, Pasquale got his annulment, and married a second time. At sixty he retired to New Hampshire, then joined forces with Mrs. Emmet. He was kind to me, and even though he could see I was too focused on boys to concentrate, he always smiled as I hit the wrong key—perhaps he understood things better than I knew.

It was Pasquale who wrote the exquisite music to Steiner's "I gaze in to the world in which the sun doth shine." I had no idea that that little smiling man could write such a thing.

So much for Tweedledee.

Maybe we teenagers thought them all strange. Well, not maybe. But being older now than many of them were then, my view has changed. That generation was the end of the old world as I see it, and we were lucky to have known them. The changes that have happened since then have left us in a very different kind of existence, and are proving to be more radical than the advent of the automobile. Who knows what life for future students will be like as time passes? They'll probably think that we were strange and old fashioned.

I say "Great!" to that.

CHAPEL Sunday June 21, 2015

We aren't sitting in the same building as when we were students in 1965. But thanks to the devotion and ingenuity of Bob Pittman and those who helped him, it's pretty close to evoking the feeling we had for the old one. Of course, Mrs. Emmet's door isn't at the end of it as it used to be, so it's a little harder to conjure her up today.

It might be easier to conjure up the times for the years we were here, because the class of 1965 entered the school at the very setting of High Mowing's classical world. My sister's class of 1961 was mature, elegant, and focused, obedient and yet stunningly creative. But by my time, a great shift had begun in the society, creeping up the hill quietly, at first. There was no media allowed in our bubble in those days, but change was unavoidably seeping in to the air everyone was breathing. During our

tenure, the country began its eruption into cultural revolution—and for years to come, we were just the right age to ride the wave of that disruptive ascent toward the new, for better or worse.

We were here during the Cuban Missile crisis and when President Kennedy was shot, and we were here when the Alabama marchers for voting rights were attacked by state troopers. We were here when President Johnson signed the voting rights act and when Malcolm X was murdered. And we were here when the Beatles first came to the United States and I put them on the turntable during social hour for the first time and we danced to the wow of "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" and "She Loves you." We were here during the first United States march against the Vietnam war, and right after we graduated, Pres. Johnson doubled the number of eligible draftees to 35,000 a month—something that would affect every one of us in one way or another.

But, back to the present:

It occurred to me that for some here today, it may be your first time in chapel after many decades. I was trying to remember exactly what the old chapel looked like and had a little trouble until I spoke to Penelope Packard from the class of '55. She had some vivid memories of her experience here which awakened mine.

She remembers:

"…a little room between the chapel and the Emmet living room. We would gather in there to wait. I remember an exquisite, small Dutch master painting hanging above the little fireplace. I think there was music while we waited, piano music before and after the service. We went in, sang a hymn, Mrs. E gave one of her wonderful talks, we sang more hymns, and then always, her '*Rise and close with 55*.' There was always a gathered arrangement of flowers, and of course always a blazing fire in the winter. Chapel was mandatory in those days, and we had to dress up. It was wonderful! All I know is that it had a profound influence on my life," (which, coincidentally, began when her parents could find only one school that would take a child with a dog; the interview was conducted as Mrs. E. sat weeding the garden—and when she found out it wasn't just Penelope coming, she said, "Oh, sure, why not? Bring Elan.")

Well, we don't have the Dutch master any longer or even the rooms anymore. But thanks to Bob, we have another gorgeous chapel. And today, we have the flowers of June and Gilbert to play the piano.

But in speaking with Heather Carver, I found out that the Steiner prayer, whose words were reworked by the man who then handled financial matters, aristocratic Mr. Steward, and set to gorgeous music by Mr. Tallarico and which we sang every chapel, was no longer sung at the school; I felt sad. But after a hunt on Saturday, Abbot Fay, '61, found it in the *Vesper's Book* written by Mrs. Emmet, and later Gilbert and I just happened to discover it with edges rough and blackened, preserved from the fire somehow and hiding there, framed, in broad daylight over the mantel in 'Mrs. Emmet's house!' So we set about to bring it alive again. Gilbert worked it up, sight reading on Saturday, and I thought that today, maybe for the first time in a long while, we could sing it together. Shall we open with that?

"***I gaze into the world in which the sun doth shine***

Where stars are sparkling bright and stones repose by night.

There living plants are found and birds and beasts abound

And man with soul divine in spirit dwells enshrined

Into my soul I gaze wherein my being lives

There weaves from depths without the world creator's might

There weaves from depths within the soul light of my being

And so to thee I turn for thy creator's strength

May thy great spirit bless my work with usefulness

And fill my heart with joy through all eternity."

I don't remember the last chapel of my senior year. But I *do* remember, a sense of well-being and completion, and a thrill of great expectations to come those last few days. And I remember, too**,** an underlying sorrow, a kind of hidden panic lurking beneath the somewhat magical thinking that I would always be here. The flowers were so glorious, and their smell and beauty, so emblematic of everything here at that time, carried me away. I felt that, that day, finally, we were outside all trials and confusions; that day we were a glowing unit of the best of youth, each one radiant at long last. This is what I remember of our last day at High Mowing. And even though there are so many more options in the larger world than there were when we were young, I imagine these feelings are still part of every graduation, of leaving High Mowing.

So, a lot of things came to mind to speak about in chapel—of friends now gone, and of our class and its historical position on the running board of history as the changes in the world began to affect the school and we young ones in it.

But, then I did the math—and she who spoke that last chapel for us hitched herself to my intentions for this talk and wouldn't let go.

Seventy days from today it will be the 125th anniversary of the birth of Mrs. Emmet, so I put something together from what I could find, hoping that here, where for decades she sat and spoke of the human experience as she saw it, I could give fitting tribute to the woman who changed all of our lives.

I first met Mrs. Emmet when she was exactly the age that we of the class of ’65 are now—though I doubt that I will *ever* feel as grown up as she seemed to me then. My sister Madlyn had just entered the school, and in 1958 there was no place like it. I was dumbstruck, and immediately loved it. I was eleven.

My father was looking for a prep school (ha-ha) and I think that, aside from what he saw as less than zero educational opportunities in the very rural town we’d moved to, he was just sick of chasing the school bus down rutted country roads with his Porsche Speedster. And when Maddy drove the car through the barn door, he must have figured she needed chances of another sort in her life.

I remember the first trip here to drop her off—farmland until you got to the restaurant named *Here ‘Tis*. “Here ‘Tis,” I thought. “Well, there goes.” My life was about to change. And as we turned to come up the hill, the rock formation there at the bottom looked like the Matterhorn to me. Abbott hill was undeveloped back then, it was rural and quiet, and arriving at the HIGH MOWING sign and then ascending further past the split rail fence and the greenhouses, was like approaching Shangri-La. The first person I remember seeing as the front steps came in to view was Johnny Eaton.

The next one was a woman who didn’t act *or* dress like anyone I’d ever seen. And she didn’t seem to be making any apologies for it. Who was she?

By the time our class came along, Mrs. Emmet was not the person who had years earlier organized treasure hunts for children or come to a school costume party as a ‘50s teen in Levis, chewing gum, (though once, on a Christmas wassail, I followed her, hand in yanking hand, into the highest point of what was then the girls’ dorm.) But in 1962, she was seventy-one and, to me, seemed like a fortress, an officious, sometimes disgruntled queen of sorts with an unflinching sense of her own importance. I didn’t know *what* she thought of me, or if she thought of me at all. She seemed impersonal, and I don’t remember her smiling much. And as she plowed through the Big Room in those long, diaphanous dresses—a formidable battleship rolling through the waves of the adolescent sea—she shuffled in a rhythm all her own, parting the waters with a “Dearie” here and a “Dearie” there, her bow elevated. When it was my turn to bring the breakfast tray to her in her bed, dread began to creep the full length of me as the Big Room door slammed against my reluctant butt, propelling me toward my doom and building to a crescendo of apprehension as I walked through the old kitchen, then the main house, then the chapel. By the time I got to her inner sanctum, my knees threatened to buckle like the tin man before Oz. ‘Knock, knock, knock’. God, please don’t let me drop this tray. PAUSE. Another beat, then that Gothic, “COME”—its upward inflection the command of royalty. Inside, I doubt I muttered a word. She scared me dumb.

But why was she the way she was? What was she thinking? Did she ever talk to anyone the way I wanted her to talk to me? Did she have feelings? Friends? What was her childhood like? Was she ever really a child? Who was she?

I knew nothing about her.

LOOKING FOR MRS. EMMET

It’s 1890. Van Gogh has painted seventy paintings but that year dies. Sitting Bull is murdered. Ho Chi Minh and Agatha Christie are born, and Groucho Marx too. But eighteen years before the

Model T took to the roads was considered a relatively quiet year—until Beulah Eaton Hepburn hit the world stage.

She was born to Alonzo Barton Hepburn and Emily Lovisa Eaton in Colton, NY, August 28, weighing in at 7 lbs 5 ounces, probably the only average thing Mrs. Emmet ever did. Her father was thrilled. "It's a girl! Do you hear? A girl!" he chortled. "Fat and perfect, and sociable." She would be the oldest of two, but initially, the youngest of three, having two half brothers from her father's first wife who had died nine years before.

That father, A. Barton, was born to Scottish descendants Zina and Beulah Gray Hepburn in 1846 in Colton, New York, sixty miles from Canada; the exotic name of Alonzo was given him by a mother escaping their border town to Spain during the war of 1812. His older brothers went off to fight for the Union; Alonzo stayed to work the land. But he wanted to do more than make hay. And, boy, did he ever.

Somehow he got himself to Middlebury College, and there begins an exhaustive list of accomplishments. He ran a saw mill, he bought land. He was a math teacher and a practicing lawyer, was on the board of Studebaker and at least four other companies. He served five terms in the New York state assembly and was the Controller of United States Currency under President Harrison. He reworked the bank laws for New York forcing audits on banks, and helped to stabilize the economy. And he was the President of Chase Bank which, under his watch, increased its capital five fold. His generosity saved a failing hospital and endowed eight libraries in the state. He was friends with Andrew Carnegie and Frederick Remington. And this country boy made money.

And he courted Emily Eaton from Montpelier—who first saw him "on a high stepping horse in the village…everyone …admired him." Once he sent her a cribbage board with a hopeful note that read, "Can't we have a meeting of the cribbage club the night after I get back?" And later, this important public figure broached engagement. But she was a sensible young woman who was, as a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of St. Lawrence University where they had met, smart enough to know that she was ill prepared for life with such a man. So she put him off, visiting far flung relatives, where she was exposed to the arts and to her uncle whose advice to "help the place you live in, Emily," she never forgot.

Barton waited and hoped, and built a ten room house—just in case. And finally, in 1887, they married in Vermont then went to the house in Canton, complete with a mother-in-law and two step sons. Barton was forty-one. Emily was twenty-two. Five years later they took their "fat, perfect, sociable" two-year-old and moved to W. 57th St. in Gilded Age New York across from Carnegie Hall. Cordelia came along in '94 and soon the girls were going to the opera every Saturday and were enrolled in the Spence School for Girls.

And they went places. In St. Louis they got Beulah a parrot for her birthday, and back home, when he flew out a window, the girl searched the city's nearby blocks until she found him in the Central park livery stables. He lived until Mrs. Emmet was into her 50s and is now at the Museum of Natural History. No wonder she accepted young Penelope Packard with her German shepherd when no one else would!

There's a black and white photo in *St. Lawrence County Portraits* of young adult Beulah and her mother and Cordelia decked out in fine, taffeta Victorian garb. Her sister sits on the running board of the great car beneath the side lantern, looking wistful and holding a dog. And her mother—prettier and more refined than her daughters—stands to the side, sweetly smirking. But it's Beulah who's at the wheel, staring unapologetically straight into the camera, the bulbous rubber Clara-belle horn of the vehicle ready to be blown at any moment.

They toured cathedrals in England, and in Scotland Beulah marveled at John Knox, the radical Protestant reformer. They went to Paris and traveled the French countryside pulled by Batiste, their

donkey, lived with families that didn't speak English, and witnessed the scandal of a woman smoking a cigarette! And everywhere, they went wild for the gardens. In old Algiers, Beulah worshiped with the Moors—an American female in lace ruffles—and on a trip to Germany she saw Wilhelm welcome guests to the birthday party of the Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; and scrambling to the gate each morning, Beulah would watch the Kaiser gallop off on his daily ride. When presented at court, Beulah said her mother fell back into a palm after curtsying to Queen Wilhelmina; Mrs. E. didn't think anything of it—she'd been brought up like the Roosevelts, and like them, she was no snob, she could pal around with anyone. But waiting to be presented at the court of St. James, stubborn World War I broke out, so Beulah would not meet royalty that day. And when Emily and Barton went without them, Barton would carry his girls' letters in his pocket. "Wish you were here," he once wrote. "You and Booey would make this trip complete." They were well on their way to living as an up and coming, educated, privileged, Euro-centric, bunch.

Time marched on, and Beulah was presented to "polite society." She dabbled in dance performances, and graduated from Wellesley, where her love for chapel would find fertility. She acted in a play there about not fitting into conventional society as the father whose evening chats with her she treasured steered the country through the 1910 panic as stocks fell by half. He followed it up with a safari in Nairobi—the trip was in the papers, and that he had built "one of the most handsome homes...in a town of beautiful homes" was too.

But that report was a bit misleading: Emily, not Barton, was overseeing the design and construction of *Altnacraig,* as Barton came to terms with the "new woman" his wife was becoming. "You ride our horses man fashion and you wear our britches and boots… and you want to make up your own mind. And ours too! We realize you have come to stay and we are glad you have come to stay, and are going to stay with you," he announced.

Eventually though, life caught up with him, and one day in 1922, after leaving the bank somewhat disoriented, he stepped off the curb on Fifth Avenue right into the rear wheel of a bus. He died at home a week later. There was a protracted international response, but all Beulah knew was that she would sorely miss his advice and their chats at night. He was buried next to his friend Frederick, so he could "snuggle up to Remington."

Emily had what it took to survive. She'd already begun to follow her own star during her husband's many absences, and after his death, she continued to thrive. She funded the building of the Dean Eaton Women's Dormitory at St. Lawrence University, joined a writer's club, nearly died from scarlet fever, then got back up and began to travel the country and the world, sometimes alone—uncommon for a woman in that day. She supported The New York Botanical Garden, a girls reformatory, and The New York Infirmary for Women and Children. As a staunch **s**uffragette, Emily didn't shy from encouraging society women to get off their pedestals and get their hands dirty. And after women got the vote, she filled a need: she bought the northeast corner of 1st and 49th streets in Manhattan and tackled the whale of a job of erecting one of New York's great Art Deco structures: the twenty-six story Panhellenic House, affordable housing for college graduate working women. She sold stock for it and she was involved in every step of its creation, saying that she "wanted to prove that women could do big business." In 1924 it was the only hotel owned and managed by women. And when the cornerstone was placed in 1928, there she was, wielding a golden trowel. I guess she showed them!

Beulah later said of her mother. “She enlarged our horizons and laid a groundwork of understanding of Europe which we have been filling in all the rest of our lives.” And all of it would trickle down to our block books.

From Hepburn to Emmet

They met at a friend’s house. “I was taking off my hat and coat in the hall,” Robert said, “when Beulah walked in…23, golden hair, and ivory complexion…she bowled me right over.”

They courted and were sometimes seen dancing on 58th at Reisenweber’s Café, where the youth of the late ‘10s went wild for the naughty sound of live Dixieland with its howling clarinets. You could dine on the first floor, hit the cabaret on the 2nd, and after champagne, dance on the 3rd. It was the first restaurant with a dance floor, and Bob and Beulah were there over a hundred years ago, kicking up their blue blood heels.

In 1910, *The National Courier* announced their engagement:

“Miss Hepburn has been passing the summer at her parent’s summer home in Ridgefield, Connecticut and is prominent in society in New York where she has taken part in many of the entertainments. She was introduced to society two years ago.” A debutante at a cotillion ball, our Mrs. Emmet being displayed to “polite society” as now eligible for marriage—a long way from the woman she would later become in handmade sandals.

The New York Times, October 18, 1914:

“Beulah Hepburn, a bride, to Lieutenant Robert R M Emmet, U. S. Navy.”

They were married on October, 17 at the summer home facing the Hudson. The wedding was on the same day that a World War I battle raged in the Netherlands—the enemy was defeated; it was a good day to join forces. A special train ran from Grand Central for the event, there were over 300 guests, and the house was decorated in chrysanthemums and oak leaves. The bride, in white velvet edged in pearls and a veil held on with orange blossoms once worn by her mother, came down the wide staircase with her father; she carried lilies of the valley and white orchids, her bridesmaids carried shepherd’s crooks tied with roses. The Lieutenant was in uniform and the bride cut the cake with his sword. Mrs. Emmet later quipped that “the groom looked somewhat unfamiliar,” but that it had been “a storybook wedding.”

Flash forward fifty-three years:

But sixteen year old me could not imagine her in a marriage. She didn’t seem to need anyone. Who could be married to her?

And then I saw him, an aging, elegant gentleman—as different in appearance as anyone could be from the wild looking men she’d brought to the school to teach. He was a classic, straight-man, not artsy, strange Europe. She didn’t wear a bra, and he was just so… natty. I could imagine him acquiescing in the face of encounters with her. I thought, well, she left her marriage for here, left him alone, twiddling his thumbs as the maid served him steak and kidney pie.

Clearly I was wrong.

The man under General Patton in North Africa in 1942 at the battle for Casablanca turns out to have been Admiral Robert Rutherford Morris Emmet. And two months after Mrs. Emmet opened High

Mowing, her husband was rolling up his sleeves to fight the Vichy French and the Germans. He was there, sneaking in for the fight in the dark early hours, helping to plan the invasion of North Africa and crack the myth that the Germans were unbeatable. In *The Great War*, he'd been the commanding officer of a sub that had laid a mine field in the North Sea.

So I guess if he could fool the Germans, he could handle Mrs. Emmet.

. She had clearly married into a powerhouse of a family. Robert's Aunt Lydia was a famous portraitist; his cousin, Robert Sherwood, a screen writer for Hitchcock and a speechwriter for FDR. His father was a military man, and another Robert was an Irish Nationalist who was hanged by the British in Dublin for treason at the age of twenty-five; a statue of him stands in Washington, D.C, not far from Gandhi's. His namesake and the society girl began their life together as the next solid rung on the ladder.

He tried to teach her to drive his Model T, but she said that she just "kept hurting its feelings" and gave it up. Robert always called her "mother," and they had four children together, later adopting refugee Dagny, whose barefoot escape from Estonia made walking hard throughout her life**.** Thei**r** own daughter was born after a party, but the doctor was out duck shooting so she just gave birth in her mother-in-law's bedroom without him. They caught bloody baby teeth in hankies, had birthday bashes, and embarrassed their children. About her coming to his school, son John said, "She was so damn cheerful. I hated it." They did all the things other parents did.

And things that others did not.

They went to Egypt, sailed for days down the Nile—sometimes ten men rowing and chanting in Arabic, which Mrs. E described as, "a much pleasanter noise than a vacuum cleaner." They marveled at the tomb of Tut and at Aswan, then went to Greece where they got fleas in the Peloponnesus. They lived at The Hague when Robert was the naval attache there; son John remembers riding in the back of the Packard with a huge Dutch cheese on his lap, its top cut out and him spooning it in, and where, riding on the beach of the North Sea, their father had called them "Hot Stuff." After his service, they returned home.

She went solo from the children a few times, though—once to tour the battlefields of World War I with the admiral, and another time to Spain with a friend, back on the boat just as Franco invaded.

Her daughter-in-law would later write that, "Many people saw her as a cold aloof woman with a will of steel. But she was warm and sensitive, optimistic yet patient. She had a deep wisdom, yet a twinkling sense of humor and as she was always standing by to give a hand." Her son remembered her as "warm, tender, beautiful, always near." They gave their children a family life with a supportive atmosphere of "love and affection."

Then one day it happened. They found it. New York friends who had a second residence in Wilton told her about a place they said was in "terrible condition." But they clearly knew who they were dealing with and knew she'd buy it. And she did. They bought this farm for a summer home.

She threw herself into its resurrection. She brought her antiques and her statue of Pan; from an ancient brick colonial in Virginia, she rescued pillars, doorways, bookcases, and shutters, and the iron railing now in the Big Room; the medieval fireplace mantel came from England, and the chapel's lamb from the days of Alexander the Great. She brought lilacs and lilies from her mother's and grandmother's flower beds and gardened like a maniac. She scraped and painted and scrubbed, uncovered murals, ripped out mountains of ragweed that made her children sneeze, and removed the horsehair plaster to find wide pine paneling painted by hand to look like wallpaper. They had the swimming pool dug and rocks and boulder dragged by a chain from the woods for its foundation, and

they made sure to blend their family in to what was then Wilton's small summer community. She loved every minute, and it was all written up in *Vogue* and the *New York Times*.

Both of her parents had been born on farms, and family was one of the two most important things to her; it thrived here—often four generations of it, peppered with a steady stream of visitors: artists, astrologers, health practitioners, and authorities in their field, off-beat, stimulating characters. Son John thrilled at, "the parties and girls and gay summers with lots of guests," which their mother said they could invite, "if they took responsibility for life." They spent holidays here, where many a time she sat knitting while her children read to her. Her mother's 90th was held here, and through the years, they would live, teach, farm, and marry here, be educated, go broke or divorce here; Dagny flunked her SATs here.

Bob's take on life was different from Beulah's in many ways, but it worked because they shared a love for family. As Barton H. put it, his father had accepted that less than desirable position at The Hague because he knew his wife would love it and it would be a great experience for the children. He would come to Wilton in summers to be with them, announcing his arrival by kicking up the gravel in the oval. Later, after the children had grown and the school was on solid ground, retired, he'd arrive with his assistant, Mini, and settle in to his own apartment upstairs in the central house. Mini would cook his meals and keep track of things, and she always had little packets of coins for the children running about, Christian and Isabel, Geoffrey.

But Beulah had been teaching at Miss Euphrosyne Langley's well respected Edgewood School in Greenwich, CT. Describing itself as a twenty acre "education lab...where the student is prompted to actively seek instruction rather than wait for it 'to be pounded into him,'" it was a place of literature and art where learning was meant to be fun.

And at one point, who knows where, the "society girl" found out about Rudolf Steiner. She went to lectures and read books about his philosophy, about metaphysical thought, and artistic innovation. It didn't take long. Beulah wanted something more.

Maybe she'd heard about him from someone she knew in Isador Duncan's dance troop, or through her interest in osteopathy, or her acquaintance with Edgar Cayce, the famous medical clairvoyant from Kentucky. Maybe it came from the Threefold Group's rooming house and vegetarian restaurant near her childhood home—with its Euro-modern wooden furniture, it must have seemed like a creative port in a storm of convention. Or maybe she heard about him through the Steiner Summer School where, in 1933, they danced among the trees and slept in tents in a town called Spring Valley. Did she know Steiner? He died around the time she began teaching. She'd had it all. So, why did she become a seeker?

I think it was his 'philosophy of freedom' that grabbed her attention. It was the human and spiritual version of radical politics: what should we humans do as we outrun the forms society has imposed? What would people chose for themselves if they were free to do so? She went to lectures and studied Steiner's words. She knew now, what she was meant to do.

As the story goes, with the agreement of the faculty at Edgewood, when Hitler closed the Waldorf schools in Europe, Edgewood was inspired to go Waldorf, and Mrs. Emmet introduced the block system and brought Steiner's ideas to the school. It was a very different kind of education for what was so important to her: education as "a weapon in an atmosphere of love and security."

But something must have gone wrong with Beulah's enthusiasm; there was a falling out—maybe the idea of reincarnation, or that "the eggs of Saturn are hatched on Sundays" put forth by the son of an Austrian housemaid didn't go over well. And when the finance committee rejected her continuing funding, she resigned "out of loyalty to a principle of freedom." Maybe Steiner's

philosophy sounded too strange. No matter. Beulah didn't waste any time. Off she went to New Hampshire to do it her way. Soon her worried mother was won over, entranced by her daughter's title of "Principal—"not realizing I had virtually given it to myself!!"

Was it one of the great adventures in New Hampshire history? To hear Miss Friedl tell it, it was: "That whole first set-up was absolutely fantastic."

Ann Friedl had always wanted to come to the states, and she landed at her aunt's place in the Bronx too young to have even gotten started in life. It was the year of the crash and they lost everything. But Ann was resilient and loved children, so despite no references and wanting to pursue her life's ambition of teaching, she got a job as a governess on Long Island where she worked for five years. She got used to the new country, went to Columbia and Middlebury, then Adelphi. And in 1941, she met the kindergarten teacher at the Manhattan Rudolf Steiner School; a rendezvous with a Mrs. Emmet was proposed, a dinner date was set; they converged. But the woman was very busy, and time shortened the lunch. It went like this:

Mrs. E: Forgive me, I have to leave. But, will you help?

Ms F: But we haven't talked about it yet!

Mrs. E: We've talked enough. I know all I need to know.

The deal was sealed. Friedl headed north. It was wartime but they would open in September. It was August; the floors were dirt, the place unfinished. But September it was. The school opened its door.

And Mrs. E had not come alone.

There was a Mrs. Koch and a Miss Cunningham, both teachers at the Steiner School in New York. And from Edgewood, the "wonderful" Bernard Hirons, a Canadian who wanted to be called "Sir" in the dorm, and who, as Friedl tells it, was "the best music teacher I ever met in my life. Everybody sang, the whole school." And there was Mrs. Flood to help in the dormitory, and another someone, known as Mammy, with white hair, "beautiful and unusual," from Belgian, who governed both floors of girls. There was Auriela Scott and Margaret Griffin and Miss Hill, all from Edgewood. The picture Mrs. Emmet painted must have been pretty inspiring—half of Edgewood's faculty left with her. She put them in the barn.

But the prize from Edgewood was Dr. Thompson and Hermann Von Baravalle.

Supportive of the Waldorf approach but not an anthroposophist, Dr. Thompson was greatly admired, considered "special," even by the local Wiltonites who lived near her apartment. She was an early feminist, Friedl said, one of baseball's *bloomer girls,* who helped to advance women's rights. And she was one of the first women to attend Yale University where she went for a doctorate, her first time learning away from the kitchen table. She taught in various places before Edgewood, married, had a daughter, then divorced her husband. As diminutive as a twelve-year-old, she wore old-fashioned Quaker-like, gray dresses with tight lace collars, punctuated with a pin of a Michelangelo, Friedl remembers. In her signature black stockings and shoes and tiny rimmed glasses, with her hair pulled taut in a bun, she stood for dignity. Dr. Thompson rang the morning bell and took the morning role call, she taught Latin and she delivered epochs of history that left Penelope thrilled. When she retired to Greece in her '80s, she walked her octogenarian and special self up to the Acropolis every day, eventually settling in Maine in her '90s.

Von Baravalle was almost as important in those early days. A math and science teacher, he taught in Steiner's first Waldorf school. At High Mowing, he helped build the science lab, hung

Beulah's mother's tapestry, and laid out the Big Room's windows and the grand three steps. His wife came to teach, too, and they helped get High Mowing on its feet.

But there was more to him than I ever could have known back then; I wonder if Mrs. Emmet even knew. From an interview I read given by University of Pennsylvania Professor Klaus Krippendorff, that Austrian math teacher had more to offer Miss Diana Bent than his sloppy and impassioned "FORM!"

Did he skip back and forth from Germany to Wilton? Because in 1956, Von Baravalle was teaching at the new School of Design in Ulm, Germany. Founded by Max Bill, an architect and former Bauhaus student, and Inge Scholl, the sister of young Hans and Sophie, murdered by the Nazis, it was a cutting edge, avant-garde institution that blended art and design with politics and philosophy, and focused on a new way of thinking about art and society. Every three weeks the school studied a new project—and there was Von Baravalle, teaching geometry and how different shapes and different forms come out of one another. No bath towel needed at *that* school.

Then came Sabina. Sabina Zay Nordoff. Brought up in a family of anthroposophists, she studied eurythmy in Europe and was influenced by Martha Graham. She danced in the original cast of *Oklahoma* and was a friend to e.e. cummings, and she thrived in a vibrating circle of artists throughout her life. At High Mowing, she was a powerful shot of creativity and imagination in the arm of every child who worked with her. Glorious Sabina—who I felt I was talking to, but whose life was never revealed beyond some magnetic mystery. I would much later find out that in 1949 she had started a kindergarten which would turn into the Green Meadow Waldorf School. Who knew?

Ann Friedl's realm was Lower School, with kids as young as four. A married couple tackled all the meals down there but Ann taught all the classes. There was one bathroom for eighteen humans, large *and* small, and they all ate supper in their bathrobes. A lot more than the three Rs went on there: hair had to be braided, stomachs had to be filled, baths had to be drawn, beds needed tucking in; hugs had to be given. There was rationing during that war, so teachers and students harvested the corn and dug the potatoes, and did everything they could do themselves.

But they had no way to get to the main campus, so Mrs. Emmet put out the word and an old green vegetable truck was found and converted into a bus with wooden benches. You couldn't get auto parts either, so tires were constantly flat and the cab constantly leaked, and there were no windshield wipers—but they drove it anyway. When they got to the bottom of the steep drive, Miss Friedl would yell out, "everybody lean forward quickly or we won't make it," so they all leaned and they all made it.

The war brought everyone close together, including a teacher who'd fought in the Belgium underground. Once, to give the students some idea of what was going on over in Europe, a meal was served made with the same limited amount of calories those abroad were having to eat. Young wounded soldiers from the veterans hospital came up and the girls served them tea; even prisoners of war had a connection to the school, and they came in buses to pick apples, singing German and French songs, and Mrs. Thompson braved it and spoke to them. And when Beulah's son John flew over the school in a B17 three times as low as possible on his way to battle, everyone was in tears as Mrs. E. stood by herself so he could see his mother from the plane. They endured those years together, and teachers spent a lot of time with their students, in and out of classes. The school was a family.

High Mowing's traditions began right away. It was at Edgewood that *The Nativity* grew, as well as Mrs. Emmet's history and Dante and Chaucer classes; she developed them there and she brought them with her. Her *History Through Art,* and her Emerson and Thoreau classes became institutions. At Christmas, *Sanctus* was sung—a Jewish chant from the 1st century which still raises every hair of every neck that hears it. And she directed her annual and always exciting, high quality production of a Gilbert and Sullivan. Lucky enough to be visiting my sister in her senior year, I remember attending one as particularly spectacular: *The Mikado,* with Geoff DeSilva, and Becky Amish as Katasha; it was so

fantastic that my thirteen-year-old self would always remember nearly the entire score; Mrs. E said the song about dying of a broken heart made her cry.

But Beulah refused to follow anyone by the letter, including Steiner, so she made High Mowing her own, a place that focused on excellence, art and culture and individuality. I had grave doubts that her enthusiasm extended to those of us in less traditional times. But in her later writing, I found the excitement she felt watching our production of *Boy With a Cart,* about a miracle-working saint which, despite a downpour, was put on outside. And it was yours truly who, against the rehearsed form, spied, then headed for a nearby puddle to land in on her tush, flowing costume and all—just for fun. She must have felt it too; I hadn't known that she had admired it. Or me.

Her dream had taken hold, but it was almost hard to tell it was a Waldorf School. She kept the spirit and the pedagogy, but she wanted a freer form of education, and the faculty met weekly to study it together in the little library. Teachers from other schools, some from England, came to lecture, but Beulah was a black sheep as she talked of values and freedom.

Miss Friedl admitted that, "you could easily find her overpowering; but she impressed me with her knowledge...she was an excellent teacher. She had culture and I liked that. She could talk about anything and everything." Noting that Mrs. E could also be somewhat condescending, she never once interfered with her, never once came into her classes. "She gave me a free hand, that's the way she did with all her teachers. You either made it or you didn't. She gave everybody enough rope to hang themselves."

But they didn't earn very much and everyone worked real hard, and there was a kind of isolation. "She had a certain way of wanting it done her way; faculty meetings could be very stormy, you had to stand your ground," Friedl said. "We could have easily staffed quite a few schools with the people who came and went; quite a few were only here a year." She called our Mrs. Bosch, "a fine woman and an outstanding teacher," who was "very political. She and Mrs. Emmet didn't get along too well." I had always wondered.

Ann Friedl paused here. I waited for her to continue as she looked further back.

"You know, when you start something, there is a devotion there. But when everything is set up, it's not the same anymore. We were pioneering. But the later people didn't feel that way anymore, the way we did. That strong feeling." She went on to tell that, as such an unusual place, the Waldorf organization didn't give Mrs. Emmet credit for what she'd done, they were critical of it. "It was Mrs. Emmet's school, not run by the book, and it was her and her money that brought it into the world. It wouldn't be here if there hadn't been her and her money. It was not Waldorf," Friedl insisted. "It was High Mowing. There was beauty everywhere." She became quieter. "There's something on this hill...something strong; don't forget it sits on granite. It's up high and it's solid, a Walt Whitman spirit, and it's not gone."

Larger than life, both Beulah and her school came through loud and clear as kaleidoscopic spirits.

I remember Mrs. Emmet's words as idealistic and philosophical, ideological, dreamy, and her language escaped my young brain as she expressed the challenges of living out in the world. I felt taken with her power, and I circled her in a kind of awe and, yes, fear of what I felt was her austerity, so I didn't notice the more personal things—that she loved the Christmas books, that she *had* noticed my performance. I didn't know that she'd once dropped everything to fly to Dornach to call her daughter back to life from some kind of breakdown either, or that she had buried the ashes here of a young student who had died of polio. I knew nothing of her nurturing side, I couldn't see it past the style of that ship plowing through the Big Room—though it was, I now understand, everywhere. Her high-

minded words might have gone unregistered by some of us, increasingly as the ‘60s approached. But the whole time, she was caring for the school.

I didn’t know any of this back then. Did any of us?

But like her father, the golden life couldn’t last forever, the times were changing, the students changed. And, aging, her strength waned as she began to retreat, feeling that more and more children were “asleep, purposeless.” The cultural revolution was too much for who she was and who she had once been.

And then the fire. And she lost it all. Everything she had went up in smoke—the gorgeous buildings, her ancient relics from digs in the desert, her Greek coins, her bed with the four archangels. Everything—except the cornerstone upon which she first built: her concern for other people’s children.

Devastated, she somehow carried on—and at the age of eighty she addressed the school: “What can we substitute now for what is not here materially, can we keep its significance...the culling of a long life’s experience? Let us try.” How could she go forth now to the future? Her answer was, “It is you people who have made it possible. You people. Now I will have to prove it, somewhere bitterly.”

I’ve just spent time with a woman I once lived with but didn’t know. Born fortunate and choosing a life of risk and idealism, she was a woman who followed her passion and who cared deeply about the work of the human spirit. I know that there were struggles, tussles and gaps, but I see her Big Room shuffle a bit differently now. No longer officious, I see it as more hesitant, perhaps dragging something behind her—maybe just the lifetime burden of her own willingness to allow for human frailty. Or maybe it was just a leftover ‘two-step’—a remnant, perhaps, of the memory of dancing on a cloud.

Beulah Hepburn Emmet built herself a world, and in her way tried to guide us through youth. Some training in test scores might have been helpful—but from this vantage point, having survived, it’s history and beauty and the arts that sustain me now. Mrs. Emmet’s gift.

I know this poem by Steiner was one of the touchstones by which she measured life’s meaning, so I thought I’d read it today. I think she took what it says very seriously:

To Wonder at Beauty…

To wonder at beauty,
stand guard over truth
Look up to the noble,
resolve in the good
This leadeth us truly,
to purpose in living
To might in our doing,
to peace in our feeling
To light in our thinking,
and teaches us trust
In the working of God,
in all that there is
In the width of the world,
in the depth of the soul.

Happy Birthday, Mrs. Emmet. And thank you.

Shall we “rise and close with 55?”

“Now, on land and sea descending,
brings the night its peace profound;
let our vesper hymn be blending
with the holy calm around.
Jubilate! Jubilate! Jubilate! Amen!
Let our vesper hymn be blending
with the holy calm around.

2. Soon as dies the sunset glory,
stars of heaven shine out above,
telling still the ancient story,
their Creator's changeless love.
Jubilate! Jubilate! Jubilate! Amen!
Telling still the ancient story,
their Creator's changeless love.

3. Now, our wants and burdens leaving
to God's care who cares for all,
cease we fearing, cease we grieving;
touched by God our burdens fall.
Jubilate! Jubilate! Jubilate! Amen!
Cease we fearing, cease we grieving;
touched by God our burdens fall.

4. As the darkness deepens o'er us,
lo! eternal stars arise;
hope and faith and love rise glorious,
shining in the Spirit's skies.
Jubilate! Jubilate! Jubilate! Amen!
Hope and faith and love rise glorious,
shining in the Spirit's skies."

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school building and the

HIGH MOWING

