THE HISTORICAL TIMES

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REMEMBERING MINNIE HITE MOODY

I

Minnie Hite Moody, Granville and Licking County's best known writer, is gone. Dead at the age of ninety-three and buried beside Wilkie Osgood Moody — "Coach" — her husband of fifty-seven years, on the airy, green mid-slope of Welsh Hills Cemetery. Wife and husband lie among those ancestors and villagers they loved, those whose lives she celebrated in fact and fiction, prose and poetry, during a professional writing career of some eighty years.

Having known Minnie Hite (as she preferred to be called) for more than forty-five of those eighty years, and having read at least half of the more than a million words she put in print — poems, short stories, novels, book reviews, columns, articles — I jot these notes in her memory. Readers of *The Atlanta Journal, The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Columbus Dispatch, The Newark Advocate, The Granville Sentinel, McCall's, Good Housekeeping, The Saturday*

TANNERY HILL

"I'll meet you at the side door. Watch out for the cats."

Evening Post, Ladies' Home Journal, and *Vogue,* —to name some of the publications in which her writing appeared— will, I am sure, flesh out these jottings with more vivid personal memories.

To visit Minnie Hite, one had to phone ahead to Tannery Hill, the red brick house that had been in her family since mid-nineteenth century, the house where she had been born on June 23, 1900 (and where she would die on October 25, 1993). If she had done her stint of daily writing and was "dressed to receive callers" (phrasing borrowed from her and Coach's having lived for thirty-three years in Atlanta, Georgia, where Coach had been director of athletics for the city schools), you would receive this welcome: "I'll meet you at the side door. Watch out for the cats."

And at the side door she would be, amidst a company of cats (twenty seven, my one-time count; thirty, hers), smiling, holding the screen door wide, calling out her robust reporter's "Hello! How are you? Come in, come in!" Avoiding high-tailing cats that meowed against your legs, you'd make it to the door. Three or four of the cats had names and house privileges ("Tiger Tom,""Sunny Sue," and "Streeter" are names I remember); the rest were resident yard cats or visiting strays who enjoyed the ever-full bowls of cat munchies and fresh water. With all cats distributed indoors or out according to their rights, Minnie Hite would close the screen door, hold her cheek for a ritualistic kiss, and then point you to one of the six straight-backed chairs surrounding the dining table that pretty well filled the small kitchen-dining area. From the left corner of the room a narrow stairs ascended to the upstairs living room, study, and sleeping rooms.

On the dining table would be a stack of current magazines and newly published books to be exchanged for the sack of fresh produce (asparagus, rhubarb, tomatoes, cucumbers, Bibb lettuce, zucchini, melons, apples, peaches, plums — whatever was in season) that I customarily brought. Although Coach was usually somewhere about the yard or house, and would call out a greeting, he did not ordinarily come to the table. (After his death in 1976 I sensed his continuing presence — regularly invoked by Minnie Hite — along with the presence of their two daughters, Elizabeth and Mary Lou, "the brown-eyed child and the blue-eyed child," one living in Connecticut, the other in North Carolina.) Having deposited the fresh produce on the kitchen counter or in the refrigerator, Minnie Hite would seat herself at the table and begin a conversation.

II

And what a conversation it was. On my part some effort to appear not uninformed; on hers the spilling forth of a lifetime of insightful observations and opinions. Unless Granville High School — her "finishing school" — was a school for genius, hers was the best self-education I ever encountered. Whether we talked about her writing or mine, or contemporary prose or poetry in general, she shone as a proud, audacious, well-informed, ready-to-inform lady. She leaned to the no-fools school of learning; everything she had seen she remembered; what she hadn't seen she had read about or imagined.

Topics she gloried in — local, regional, and national history; current literature; and natural science — she balanced against more practical subjects such as house-building, gardening, and athletics. One afternoon our conversation turned to golf — its having made millionaires of men and women born with a talent for it. She murmured: "Nature or nurture," then added, "I learned to play golf. Coach taught me how in the early twenties. You sit here!" She disappeared up the narrow stairs and came back a couple minutes later bearing a yellowed clipping showing a smiling youth-

ful Minnie Hite being honored for winning a golf tournament in Atlanta, Georgia.

Another time our talk turned to writing: its being always catch-as-catch can with words, and how every writer works to master the word game. Minnie Hite spoke of how Coach and she had played word games with the "brown-eyed child and the blue-eyed child" and how those word games had borne fruit in both girls becoming great readers, true book lovers. This conversation occurred shortly after I had hosted the Georgia poet and novelist James Dickey during his visit as Beck Lecturer at Denison. He and I had lunched together in the Student Union and after lunch we had talked poetry and word games. Being a gung-ho competitor Dickey had challenged me to a round of rimed vocabulary recall, had proved himself victorious, and to console me had said: "I never lose at word games!" I said, "I can believe you," and he went on: "I never met but one person who could beat me at such games. A lady book-reviewer for The Atlanta Journal named Minnie Hite Moody." When I related the James Dickey incident to Minnie Hite, her eyes took on a candle glow as she waved a hand in dismissal.

III

Discussing her long career in writing, Minnie Hite said her first love had been her poetry but she supposed her reputation would rest finally on her five novels — and the novel she was now writing upon a publisher's advance. She named her five published novels in order (I supply the publisher and date of publication): ONCE AGAIN IN CHICAGO (Alfred H. King, Inc., 1933); DEATH IS A LITTLE MAN (Julian Messner, Inc., 1936); TOWERS WITH IVY (Julian Messner, Inc., 1937); OLD HOME WEEK (Julian Messner, Inc., 1938); and LONG MEADOWS (The Macmillan Company, 1941).

She had little to say about ONCE AGAIN IN CHICAGO except that it began with a coincidence: two lovers meeting at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, meeting to consummate fora week the relationship they had begun forty years earlier at the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893. She hoped — Minnie Hite went on — that the novel might be read for its assertion of women's rights, its treatment of the total lives of Mattie Lester Thornton (from downstate Prairiesville, Illinois) and Henry, her lover (from a farm outside Madison, Wisconsin). Both Mattie and Henry had married and raised families with the hit-and-miss happiness and sadness most couples enjoy, and perhaps — she added — their honesty will carry close readers past the opening coincidence. When I reminded her that even a realistic novelist such as Thomas Hardy had used coincidence to bring off his Wessex novels, she nodded and said: "Life comes with a great deal of it, don't you think?"

In speaking of DEATH IS A LITTLE MAN, her novel of southern blacks trapped in the misery of "the Bottom" in a Georgia city, Minnie Hite said: "Of course Coach and the brown-eyed child and the blue-eyed child and I were living in Atlanta when I wrote the novels." Later, when we were discussing dialect in fiction — its strengths and limitations — she agreed that William Faulkner had managed to convey the strengths of dialect

with almost none of its weaknesses. Had we talked in greater detail about DEATH IS A LITTLE MAN I would have complimented Minnie Hite on her anticipation of Toni Morrison's use of "the Bottom" and her making Eenie Coade Weaver a heroic fully-drawn character capable of conveying the terrible price paid by women *and men* when denied meaningful roles in life. And I could have added that while DEATH IS A LIFILE MAN bears some burden of dialect and racial attitudes of the thirties, it prepared me to read such current black writers as Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Rita Dove.

Minnie Hite's favorites among her novels were the last three to be published: TOWERS WITH IVY (1937), OLD HOME WEEK (1938), and LONG MEADOWS (1941). TOWERS WITH IVY she always named "my Granville-Denison University novel." Relating one hundred years of town-gown history mirrored in the village's first family — the Winfields — it deserves to be read alongside Francis W. Shepardson's DENISON UNIVERSITY 1831-1931 (the novel covers exactly these years); William T. Utter's GRANVILLE: THE STORY OF AN OHIO VILLAGE; and G. Wallace Chessman's DENISON: THE STORY OF AN OHIO COLLEGE. What these historians do with facts, Minnie Hite does with fiction. Sometimes humorous, oftentimes droll, TOWERS OF IVY celebrates that ever-shifting delicate balance binding school and town. Graduation for the college class of 1931 aptly climaxes the novel by delivering even its ablest characters into a Depression World of uncertainty and change.

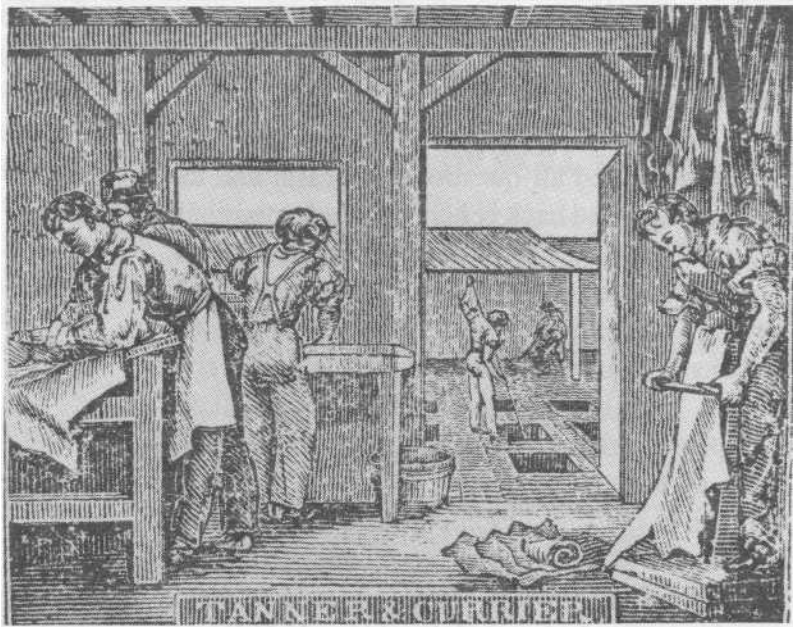
The smile with which Minnie Hite spoke of TOWERS OF IVY broadened when she turned to OLD HOME WEEK. And with reason. Rollicking OLD HOME WEEK records cupid's arrows piercing — not to injure but to make whole — most of the residents of Prairiesville, Illinois. (This is the same downstate Illinois village from which Mattie Thornton journeyed to the 1933 World's Fair in ONCE AGAIN IN CHICAGO.) The sexual shenanigans in OLD HOME WEEK are of Shakespearean dimensions, and I couldn't keep from bursting into laughter when Minnie Hite informed me she had been invited — "a la OLD HOME WEEK's one-hundred-year-old Grandma Samantha Johnson" — to be Grand Marshal of Granville's upcoming July 4 parade. "And me only in my nineties," Minnie Hite added.

I attended that Granville July 4 parade to wave to Minnie Hite. She waved back — waved generously with both hands — and I could imagine passing through her mind word for word that speech which Grandma Johnson delivered when everyone in Prairiesville was fearful lest she spill all the town's scandalous secrets:

The people who peered into her face were listening, waiting. She could not see Annie [her daughter] but she bet she was shaking with worry. All the faces before her were strange, yet she knew they were near to her. People forever were nearer one another than they knew. Samantha Johnson opened her arms wide as if to gather the vast crowd against her century old heart. "I love you all. God bless you all," she said simply and smiled.

IV

LONG MEADOWS differs from OLD HOME WEEK as the sun differs from the moon. A fictive saga grounded in extensive historical research (summarized in a three-page Foreword), LONG MEADOWS tracks the Joist Heydt (Hite) family for more than two hundred years. From Germany to Holland, to New Amsterdam, to the Mohawk Valley, to Pennsylvania, to Virginia (and West Virginia), to Kentucky, to Ohio, to Indiana,—this novel shows precisely how the United States got settled and became the puzzling nation it is. Generations of Hites — men, women, children —



A 19TH CENTURY TANNERY

Tannery Hill received its name from the tannery Spencer Wright established on the site in 1817

move from birth to death, from land to great house, to land and great house as they journey ever westward in dream and reality. Generations of Hites take crucial dramatic roles — generally supported by historic documentation — in each of our nation's first four wars: the French and Indian, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the American Civil War.

As long as her four earlier novels combined, LONG MEADOWS was the work by which Minnie Hite measured herself as a writer. Her eyes always took on a special glow when she mentioned it, invariably followed by her saying it had led to the novel she was working on at present "financed by a substantial advance from the Macmillan Company." Once in our talking of nurture and nature, she referred to the characters in LONG MEADOWS as her argument that genes do make a difference. And when she named LONG MEADOWS as also "written in Atlanta before World War II," I assumed she was explaining the irony of the southern Hites time and again hazarding their "all" in defense of individual freedom while they persisted in keeping their many blacks in bondage. Perhaps her final word on that subject, showing the tight-rope she walked, occurred when Hamilton (Hammy) Hite, Unionist, meets Madison Hite, Confederate, in LONG MEADOW's final Civil War death scene.

V

Arrangements for visiting Minnie Hite at Tannery Hill changed during the last several years of her life. My phone call one bright spring morning (which I remember as May of 1991) brought this response: "I can't meet you at the door but the door will be open. Do come right in. I'll be waiting at the top of the stairs. Watch out for the cats."

When I spoke her name at the side door she called back: "Before you climb the stairs, do look in the kitchen window well. Sunny Sue's got her spring litter of kittens."

I looked in on the orange spotted cat nursing four kittens with unopened eyes. Two of the kittens appeared to have taken their coats from a tiger or gray, but two were as colorful as their mother. When I got to the top of the stairs and mentioned the kittens — their color, their fur that still shone in birthday brightness — Minnie Hite exclaimed: "Good! I haven't seen them but my yardboy told

me of them." Then she explained, "My old ticker's been giving me trouble. No more climbing the steps if I can avoid it."

As if that settled all questions of health and the future, she leaned back in her afghan-draped chair and launched into a discussion of nature and cats, sexism and humans, how theories of "right" and "wrong" had changed since the 1930's, and the burdens a working woman bore in a patriarchal society. Only at the end of the hour-long visit did she speak again of her health: accusing her old ticker of letting her down. When I voiced my sympathy, she said: "Sometimes I'm afraid I'm not going to get to finish the novel on which I hold the Macmillan advance." Before I could respond, she added: "But I suppose I should be glad I put the royalties from the novels into Coca Cola stock, when I got them. I've never sold a share of that stock, and with all the stock splits — well, I'll be able to afford round-the clock nursing care if it comes to that."

"But you're still writing your column for *The Sentinel,"* I said.

"People tell me they read it, expect it. I'll write it as long as I can sit at that typewriter."

Later in the summer I called and found her under the round-the-clock care she had anticipated. Although obviously suffering from pain and shortness of breath, she merely accused her old ticker of not doing its part to bring about "a kinder gentler world." Her face had taken on the beam from which it glowed when I told her of James Dickey's compliment. I blinked and looked away, and she laughed her hearty reporter's laugh that suited exactly her more than ninety year hold on courage and facts and reality.

That day, when I stood to go, she said: "Would you do me a special favor — one of these weeks, one of these days?" She reached to the two black notebooks on the table before her and opened one to a red bookmark. "I'd like you to read this poem of mine at my burial service." She held out the notebook and sat back while I silently read the sonnet:

HOUSES

Not in the oak and mortar do I keep
  Houses that I have lived in. The strict mind
  Measures what preciousness I leave behind
In language past forgetfulness or sleep;
And little raptures like a pewee's nest
  Under a corner rafter, or a vine
  By right of love irrevocably mine,
Are blazing altars in the exiled breast.

Leaving this narrower dwelling some dark night,
  Bolting the shutters, turning the last key,
Shall I bear forth beyond the smothered light
  Some such small treasure, watchfully attended,
  Or nothing at all, knowing the need is ended
For even the utter grief of memory?

I inserted the bookmark, closed the notebook, and said: "Having built a house from scratch I like your `Houses'."

"Would you do me that favor one of these days?" she repeated.

"But of course!" I said. "And may that day be a long way off."

"One heeds that time the old ticker tells," she said and laughed.

VI

Minnie Hite became bedridden in February 1993; her daughter Elizabeth had come earlier from Connecticut to be with her. In March Elizabeth sent a copy of "Houses" and a note: "Here is the poem which Mother mentioned to you. When my sister [Mary Lou] was here last week she liked

another poem, "In Memory of Sara Teasdale." Mother says she doesn't care which poem is read. I have to return to Connecticut for an event (Book Festival at the University of Connecticut) and will be away for ten days. If you have time and would like to come down to call, Mother would probably like that. She has not asked me to send this xeroxed copy — she wants to get up and type out a copy, of course — but I felt you would want to have it at hand."

I went to call on Minnie Hite in Elizabeth's absence. We did not talk of Minnie Hite's last columns that had appeared in *The Granville Sentinel* in December. Nor did we speak of the novel-in-progress being written on the advance from the Macmillan Company. We did read and talk about the sonnet Mary Lou liked, "In Memory of Sara Teasdale." Minnie Hite contrasted her sterling marriage to Coach to Sara Teasdale's having been at pains to avoid the unsought and undesired attentions of the poet Vachel Lindsay, only to make an even worse match in marrying Ernst Filsinger. And we did speak of Sara Teasdale's having taken her own life at the age of thirty-nine. Ever a realist and ever alert to irony, Minnie Hite said: "Turn that thirty-nine around and you get my ninety-three. Maybe I shouldn't quarrel with the old ticker after all."

We both laughed. And I said: "Wouldn't it do — wouldn't it be right to read both sonnets when the time comes?"

"Why not?" Minnie Hite said. Then, pointing to "In Memory of Sara Teasdale" before us, she voiced something she obviously had been waiting to say, something straight from her tough old heart: "When a person writes about a poet *and is herself a poet,* she may be writing about her-self."

I close these notes with the second of the two sonnets read when Minnie Hite Moody was laid to rest in Welsh Hills Cemetery on that sunny Saturday noon, October 29, 1993:

IN MEMORY OF SARA TEASDALE

"All that was mind shall have been put to sleep,"
You said, and so it is. Sleep doubly well.
Let the heart find a refuge still and deep
In sweeter places than the tongue can tell;
Even your golden tongue, whose song shall never
Be less than music *on* the morning air,
Or wings upon the summer wind forever,
Or wistful laughter blown from anywhere...

"All that was mortal shall be burned away,"
You said, unreckoning the subtler fire
Of singing spirit that shall not gainsay
The echoes from an everlasting lyre...
Or did you know that pain and transient breath
Are all a poet loses - - meeting Death?

Paul Bennett
Denison University
Granville Historical Society

PAUL BENNETT has been poet-in-residence at Denison University since 1986, when he retired as Lorena Woodrow Burke Professor of English. Born in Gnadenhutten, Ohio, and educated at Ohio University and Harvard, he joined the Denison faculty in 1947. In 1973-74 he held a fellowship awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1992 he received Ohio University's Significant Achievement Award for his writing and teaching.

Well-known locally for their flower and vegetable gardens, Paul Bennett and his wife Jeanne reside in a hand-wrought house they designed and built on Burg Street in Granville.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM HAS SUCCESSFUL SEASON

The Granville Historical Society Museum welcomed between 1200 and 1300 visitors during its 1994 season. Traditionally, the facility is open April to October, Saturday and Sunday, 1-4 p.m.

Special tours of the museum are arranged by appointment through the Society's office. Last year, such groups as The Newcomers Club, Elderhostel, and the Munson Family Reunion were represented.

As the village of Granville draws more and more tourists, museum attendance reflects geographical diversity. Comments regarding the collection are highly positive and encourage the Board of Management to devise priority planning for continued preservation.

The enthusiasm and commitment of our museum docents is a prized possession. Sincerest thanks are extended to the following for their many hours of volunteer service: Dorothy Garrett, John Kessler, Vicki Lammers, Brittany Lammers, Martha Burkley, Elaine Mounsey, John Nairn, Eleanor Oatman, Ed and Rosemary Portofe, John Senn, Pam Shutz, Lee Sheffler, Bob Watson, Warnerand Margaret Wolverton, and Tom Martin.

The Museum Committee is always seeking new individuals for a variety of projects: docents, hospitality, garden, and documentation. Additionally, high school students that would enjoy participating as Jr. Guides are welcome. If interested, please contact Gay Weinberg at 587-2613.

Gay Weinberg, Co- Chair
John Kessler, Co-Chair
Museum Committee

1995 Membership Dues

If you ha ve not renewed your 1995 membership in the Granville Historical Society, please do so soon. Your involvement as a member supports all of the many activities undertaken by the society to preserve and enhance the rich and varied history of our community.

THE HISTORICAL TIMES is a quarterly publication included with membership in the Granville Historical Society and is sent to all members.

EDITORIAL BOARD: Maggie Brooks, Florence Hoffman, Anthony Lisska.

Send questions, comments and suggestions to:

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P.O. Box 129
Granville, Ohio 43023-0129