

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

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### **Ode to a Small Town, an Idyllic Childhood, and my Encounters with Benton MacKaye, the Founder of the Appalachian Trail**

*"The community par excellence was [and is] the colonial New England village. Take my own hill hamlet—Shirley Center, Massachusetts, as I knew it as a boy, with its seventy-one souls in the 1880's. A meeting house, a red brick schoolhouse, a store, farmhouses, wheelwright shop, and town hall—seats respectively of religion, education, commerce, agriculture, industry, and government—the basic elements of civilization.... Except for the motor car and plumbing, this description holds in large measure for Shirley Center today as I sit in my white clapboard house on one of its shaded streets and write these words."*

— Benton MacKaye

*"My boyhood years here among the happiest of my life."*

— Benton MacKaye

*"As soon as he reached Shirley, he knew he was home."*

— Lewis Mumford author, friend, and colleague of Benton MacKaye

**M**y siblings and I were raised in a small New England town that resides next to a long running track of railroad located about forty miles northwest of Boston. It has the feel of an old sleepy town that seems to only wake as the train hobbles through—a sound heard from nearly every spot one stands in this small hamlet we call Shirley, Massachusetts.

Despite its more than two-hundred-and-seventy-year history, Shirley remains the quintessential New England town. It has seen little change over the years with its cracked sidewalks, old, worn storefronts, and its Main Street homes with inviting porches practically bowing to each person as they settle in on a warm summer evening.

Summers brought magic of their own, and I remember them best.

In my mind, when I think about it, I'm there, lying on my back atop one of the highest hills I could find. I can faintly hear the birds chirping, and feel the sun's warmth upon my face. How complete it was. A world within a world.

There was a slow-running brook on our road where we looked for frogs along the water's edge, balanced ourselves on rocks, and made makeshift fishing poles and pretended we were fishing. We caught pollywogs and put them in glass jars, and our voices echoed in excitement as we crawled through moving water by way of a tunnel from one side of the road to the other.

Behind the brook amidst the tall oaks and pines, that as a little girl, reminded me of giant umbrellas, is where old Mrs. Thompson's farm used to be. Her two-story barn was filled with wandering chickens. Little did she know that my older brother, Stevie, and I would take the eggs and run them home to show my grandmother, who surely must have told us

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

to take them back, because we always did. Mrs. Thompson was a kind lady who always wore an apron and greeted us at the door holding a glass cookie jar filled with soft round buttery cookies topped with pink icing. We'd reach in and grab a handful, before running out and plunking ourselves down in the middle of the thickly overgrown field on the way home.

Down the hill from Mrs. Thompson's was Rettburg's farmstand, where my grandmother sent me on my purple bicycle to buy two tomatoes for a nickel.

There was a large field of tall grass with feathery tops where we ran and played freely and in a good wind flew kites with my mother. I can just about hear her calling out, "Stay away from the trees." When I think back, I spent so much time there. Depending on the season, I knew where the wild strawberries grew, and the rhubarb as well, and I remember an old stone wall that we'd sit on that was in the middle of nowhere. It never occurred to me that someone built it. I just assumed it came out of the ground, like the grass and trees.

In our backyard there were rows of evergreens for us to run circles around, apple trees to climb with strong limbs for us to sit on, and a swing that could glide way high up in the air. We picked up walnuts from the side of the road when they fell from the trees and sat lazily on my grandparents' porch cracking them open with rocks.

A great weeping willow tree in front of my grandparents' house gave us much needed shade on hot summer days when my younger sister, Christine, and I would spread out our blue and gray woolen blanket and play with our Barbie dolls.

And to this day, every time I hear the rustling of the leaves, the sound of the drooping branches swaying in the wind, and feel the gentle breeze across my face, I think of me and Christine under that weeping willow. I'm taken back to that moment in time—when we played in the shade with Tonkas and Matchbox cars, paving roads in the dirt, building bridges with sticks, and making little buildings and little houses, using our imaginations with whatever we could find. My younger brother, Timmy, loved his Tonka trucks, and I can still hear him, "Vroom, vroom," revving up the engine.

In 1972, when I was twelve, we moved to Little Turnpike Road in Shirley Center where you will find the Town Common, which reflects old Colonial New England and offers a glimpse into the town's past.

Prior to reaching the Common, you'll pass a hundred acres of rolling hills and sixth-generation farmland once belonging to the Longley homestead. They were farmers, poets, self-taught naturalists, and self-taught teachers, whose family history dates back to the town's beginnings.

Triangular in shape, the town common is bounded by five roads rich in well-preserved historic roots. It is a quaint and peaceful place. One finds themselves in a picture-perfect setting that takes on a personality of its own, sculpted from the lives of those who once lived there and who, like myself, have a story to tell.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

A Civil War Monument stands proudly on the green. Nestled in the countryside facing the town common is the historic Center Town Hall and the First Parish Meetinghouse. Built in 1773, the meetinghouse is the oldest public building in Shirley—its spire sits high above the trees. The scene is so beautiful during the winter, that Hallmark once used a photograph of the meetinghouse on a boxed set of Christmas cards.

Surrounding the center common are large, elegant eighteenth and nineteenth century homes, once occupied by Shirley's leaders and preachers, along with wealthy businessmen and intellectuals who wanted to escape city life for the summer.

A short distance from the common was Mrs. Johnson's house, a sprawling white Federal-style home built in 1796 where I held my first job dusting and sweeping on Friday afternoons for a dollar. Little did I know this experience would lead to an unexpected encounter—one that would remain stored in my subconscious all these years later, patiently waiting to resurface.

Mrs. Johnson, a petite woman with white hair, always greeted me at the door wearing a dress, thick stockings, and black leather shoes that had a wide heel. She kept her glasses on a long chain that hung around her neck and was someone who had very high standards for cleaning.

The hardwood floors gleamed as I stood at the bottom of the grand staircase and listened intently and politely, carefully following her instructions on how to sweep each stair, one-by-one with a dustpan and brush, being sure to reach in between all the railings of the banister. She then handed me a dust cloth and sprayed Pledge on it. The *pshh, pshh* sound of the aerosol so crisp and sharp, rang hard in my ears as she demonstrated while still talking—as if she were reading the directions from the back of the can—the exact amount of Pledge I was to spray onto the dust cloth. And today, whenever I hear that *pshh, pshh* sound, I think of when I was a young girl dusting for Mrs. Johnson.

When I was done, I'd wait by the back door in the kitchen, which always seemed like for a very long period of time, while Mrs. Johnson went upstairs to get me a one-dollar bill from her purse. After she placed it in my hand, I'd thank her and say, "See you next Friday," as I hurried out the door.

Every so often, Mrs. Johnson would ask me to dust the downstairs bedroom. I remember it like a photograph. There were books everywhere: in bookcases, stacked along the shelves in all directions, even on the large windowsills. A typewriter was on a desk and papers were strewn about. And lying on top of the bed, who appeared to me as a young girl, was a large, imposing man dressed in a suit. He always seemed to be asleep or resting. We never exchanged a word. I was unsure as to who this man was, and as a bashful girl of twelve, was a little afraid of him.

He never seemed to move much, but once in a while he'd make a sound that startled me. I always tiptoed around him, and I didn't look at him up-close because I didn't know if he could see me or not. I only studied him surreptitiously from across the room, and I often wondered if he was blind.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

Sometimes, he could be found sitting upright in a chair in the living room. His weathered face was etched in rugged lines and his eyes were gently shut.

It is strange to remember something so unimportant to me when I cannot recall other things in my life of more importance, but maybe it's because I looked at him so much in wonderment. Yet there was something about the room—the books, the typewriter, and the papers—that would inspire me years later.

Mrs. Johnson never said who he was, and I never had the nerve to ask. Only many years later, did I learn that this man was Benton MacKaye, the founder of the Appalachian Trail, a hiking trail stretching two-thousand, two-hundred miles throughout most of the Eastern United States, one of the longest hiking trails in the world, passing through fourteen states.

After seeing the movie, *A Walk in the Woods* starring Robert Redford forty-three years later in 2015, in which travel writer Bill Bryson challenges himself to walk the Appalachian Trail, is when I really started to make the connection and really started to realize the enormity of his accomplishments. And I told anyone who'd listen to me about my many encounters as a young girl with Benton MacKaye.

From there, my curiosity increased, not only because he was an important person in history, but also because he was an interesting man of a lifetime ago—a lifetime I feel myself being drawn to more and more as I age.

In doing research for my book, my own book, I found myself browsing the internet for more information. How did he end up in Shirley? And what was his relationship with Mrs. Johnson? I wanted to know.

Benton MacKaye was born March 6, 1879, in Stanford, Connecticut. He lived in Manhattan during his early years but spent a great part of his life in Shirley Center. The Shirley connection for the family began in 1882 when they first visited cousins who owned a summer home in Shirley. In 1888, when Benton was nine, the family bought their first permanent home, a "Cottage," as they came to call it, located a short distance from the common. The MacKaye home was located next door to Mrs. Johnson's house, and she took care of it for them when they weren't there.

Benton was immediately enamored with the beauty and freedom of the countryside and proclaimed he enjoyed it far more than urban existence. His boyhood explorations of Shirley at the age of fourteen laid the foundation for his later work as a regional planner and eventually resulted in the publication of *Expedition Nine: A Return to a Region*, which tells of those walks around Shirley. Mrs. Johnson ran a bed-and-breakfast out of her house. During the summers Benton would go there for meals, and during the winter months, he ate and slept there as his family's cottage didn't have central heating. The Shirley cottage would become Benton's true home for the remainder of his long life. Some would later refer to him as a summer person who never left. Showing appreciation for the town that adopted him, in 1953, Benton wrote and narrated a pageant depicting Shirley's two-hundred-year history.

Dated correspondence from Mrs. Johnson's grandson described Benton as a very large man who in appearance reminded him of Abraham Lin-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

coln. Benton's favorite delicacy was burnt toast served with black coffee, saying, "*A little charcoal never hurt anyone.*" "He [Benton] was one with delightful stories and has become my favorite MacKaye." And to the Johnson grandchildren he was simply known as "Uncle Ben."

Later, as his vision failed and Benton became more frail, he moved into the Johnson home permanently, as was his wish. Mrs. Johnson cared for him for the last ten years of his life, until he died at her home, on December 11, 1975, at the age of ninety-six.

It all made sense to me now.

But why did he intrigue me so much? Was it because this stranger had such an incredible impact in shaping America's conservation movement? Could this be why I was so fascinated with him—the echoes of childhood? Did my childhood experiences in Shirley speak to his experiences as well? Could it be because both of us loved Shirley? And both of us loved writing? He wrote about forestry and the wilderness, and he wrote about the Appalachian Trail, but I wrote about Shirley, a piece about a village, a place from which I drew all my inspirations.

In some ways, Benton MacKaye was living a parallel but separate life from me a generation earlier. One writer inspiring another to look at the world through the lens of nature. Suddenly, I saw that the trees and the brooks were as much a part of the landmarks in my childhood as the houses and the roads.

When I think of Shirley's Town Common, I can still see myself standing in the doorway waiting for Mrs. Johnson, living in a time when my dreams were simple, as simple as being with loved ones on sunshiny days when we were free of any sorrows or worries. So much has changed now. The field is gone, and the area is built up with houses too many to count. I picture this landscape of my childhood as it was then, this wonderful place I was before.

I see past the trees where we used to ice-skate, the pond, now depleted of any water, to the small hill on the side of our house, where my older brother, Stevie, and I learned how to use our first set of skis, Christmas gifts from my mother. I can see us sitting on top of the snowbank in our parkas and snow pants, leaning over adjusting the buckles on our ski boots.

I see a large open field with twenty-eight acres of rolling hills and small creeks where we built tree forts, played games of tag, hide-and-seek, and softball, and explored the narrow trails that took us to Shirley Center and other roads beyond.

I see that long-haired girl flying down the hill on her purple bike, pedaling like crazy trying to keep up with her mother. Sometimes I'm able to see the trees and the houses flying by—my mother's shoulders are bent forward—her black hair is blowing in the wind.

And when I hear the sound of the little black-capped chickadee, our state bird, sweetly singing, it takes me back to a warm spring morning of more than fifty years ago when my cousin and I packed a lunch and set off on a nature walk in the woods behind our house where we wandered freely for hours, soaking in the wonder of the natural beauty around us.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

I can still feel the soft carpet of moss under my feet. I can still smell the fresh rainfall. And I can still see the sun—filtering through the tall trees.

When I look back, I think my life was as idyllic as it could be for a young girl growing up in a small town.

Like Benton MacKaye, I too wanted to surround myself with books and I too was enamored with the beauty and freedom of the countryside, and like Benton MacKaye, my childhood years here were among the happiest of my life.

I moved from Shirley almost thirty-eight years ago. But there's never a time when I drive by Mrs. Johnson's old house that I don't turn my head and peer into the windows of my past, and for a brief moment, like Benton MacKaye, I know I am home.