

BEN & NATALIE

Some Memories of Benton MacKaye

BY NATALIE JOHNSON FRY HUNT

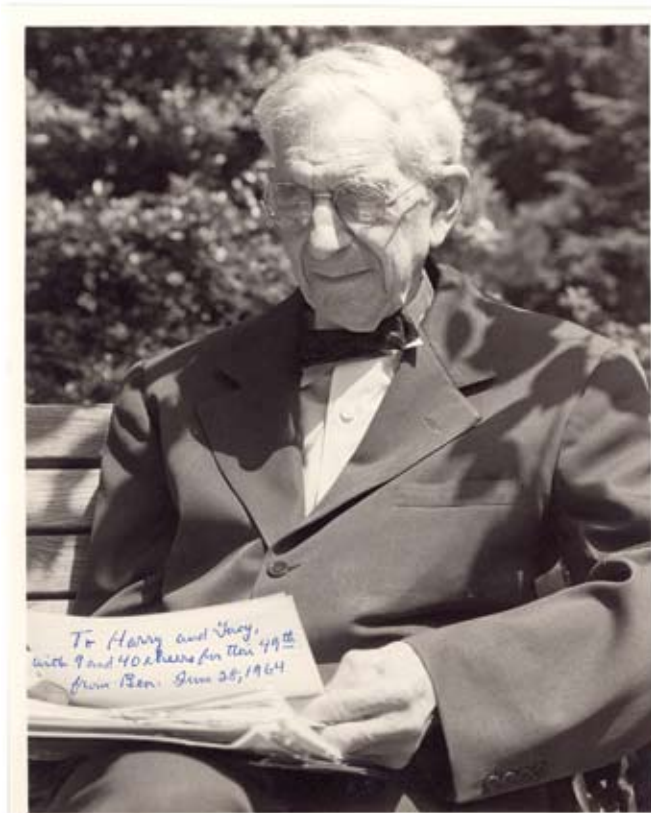
BENTON MACKAYE, wilderness philosopher, father of the Appalachian Trail, was my long-time friend. For more than 80 years he called Shirley Center home. This is a small Massachusetts community west of Concord. It was an accident of geography that various members of my family also lived in Shirley, next door, for almost a hundred years. Consequently I knew Ben personally for 50 years. Over time

I gradually became aware of his eloquence, intelligence, and prophetic ideas. But always he was more important to me as a friend, like an old uncle.

“The Countess von Lunenburg and her daughter Natalie.” The man had a loud voice and I had never seen him before. We were in the Town Hall in Shirley Center, where my father’s aunt had her summer home. We had come from Lunenburg wearing Martha Washington style long dresses to attend a costume ball. Everything about the affair amazed me as a seven-year-old. This was my introduction to my friend Ben and I have always remembered it. He called my mother a countess.

Ben was a letter writer with a long memory. Eighteen years after our first meeting my first child, William Reed Fry, was born. Ben sent him this long letter, a typical expression of his interest in his family connections, old friends, and personal history.

A celebratory note written by MacKaye on a photo of himself sent to Harry and Lucy Johnson on their 49th wedding anniversary.



Natalie’s father, Harry Johnson, with MacKaye in 1927. Of his lifelong friendship with Harry, MacKaye wrote: “Many people knew who Harry was. Not many knew what he was. He would not disclose it. If we named his species it would be ‘rough diamond’... If we bestowed on him a title it would be kingpin of generosity.”

Hello Baby William:

Welcome to you (“Out of the Nowhere into the Here”)!

“Nowhere” and “Here”—the two places are equally strange—and as strange to us as to you. We can hear your groping murmur—“*What r’hell?*”—what all this light and noise after that long snug ossification in eternity?” You just blink and gasp and grunt—and that’s all any of us do (except that we grown-ups *spell* our grunts). You’ve got lots to learn—of detail, but not a damn thing more of down-right fundamental wisdom on the mystery of life than what you comprehend today. I for one, after four years and three score, am still asking (with you)—What r’hell?

“And who are you?” asks you. Well, I’ll have to start at the beginning. It was in the good year ’87, precisely one third of the span back to ’76, that I found myself in a place you’ll hear of—Shirley Center, where I came across (most fortunately) your young, yet living “ancestors.” Then it was that “Frank and Ned and Ben” learned to swim in Mulphus Brook (by the “West Bridge”). When we heard a wagon approaching we beat it for the bushes—and yelled till it rolled by. Brook and bushes made our Garden of Eden, and we the Satyrs thereof—a nude and naughty Trinity. Such is the myth, and hardly a man is now alive who remembers that glorious reality.

Next appears the age of authentic history. In due future time there was born a child (even as you) bellowing his way “into the Here.” His name was Baby Harry. He was a sort of partho-gene-sisarian offspring of the Satyrs. Future historians will argue over the mystic relation of said offspring to us Trinity, but anyhow we adopted him as our own; and hereby *we* became his adopted vicarious “parents”.

A second age then started. During this era Baby Harry grew to manhood and met and married her who was called (once Baby now Lady) Lucy. Wherefore came to pass the wonderful Baby Natalie. Whereby I became an adopted “Grandfather.”

A third age started. After Natalie came Paul. They and parents returned to the old home in Shirley Center—to the “Empire” of the erstwhile Satyrs. And there came to pass an epoch of song and dance and mountain “expeditions” which went into history as the “Shirley Renaissance.” In this Natalie took her brilliant part, going and coming to College and Europe—and finally to meet and marry her Bill...Wherefore comes now Baby William—*you*...Whereby I become your adopted “Great Grandfather”... And *this* is who *I* am on this day of your coming into being!

With you the fourth age starts—the fourth generation of good neighbors on the old “Shirley Empire”—from the Satyrs of the ‘80s to you and your’n of the ‘40s. Welcome to our Empire and our World!

With the love of the four ages—
Ben (MacKaye)



Natalie and "Ben" ice skating.

BEN'S EMPIRE consisted of three adjacent homes in Shirley Center. The first was the Cottage, a small house where he had spent his childhood with Aunt Sadie, starting at age nine in 1888. When in Shirley Center, he usually slept there and wrote in the Sky Parlor, the upstairs back room. His second home was the Grove House, which had belonged to his sister Hazel. Neither of the MacKaye houses had electricity, telephone, or modern plumbing, but the Grove House was larger and warmer than the Cottage. In cold weather he might sleep there. The third part of his Empire was the Stone Homestead, the house and barn that belonged to my great-grandfather and became the home of my family, the Johnsons. Here Ben took his meals in the summer and here he spent the last ten years of his life. He lived and worked in many different places but always considered the Empire his true home.

When I was twelve, in 1930, we moved from Lunenburg to Shirley Center, where we lived at first for a few years in the old, red brick schoolhouse on Parker Road. Sometimes Ben stopped by to have a cup of coffee and talk about old times. He had gone to school there with my father's uncles, Frank and Ned Stone, and my father's cousins. Ben told me that he had known me when I was "marsupalia." That word sent me to the dictionary. Actually it was a made-up word relating to the young of the kangaroo—in the pouch. He meant in the womb, of course.

At the end of eighth grade we had a graduation ceremony and performance. Our teacher was a very energetic young woman who decided we should present a shortened version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the grove of trees behind the school. The weather cooperated, we knew our lines, and the performance was a great success. Ben, a lover of the classics, was delighted (he lived right across the street). So he wrote one of his customary letters to the *Fitchburg Sentinel* and the *Boston Evening Transcript*.

To the Editor of The Sentinel:

As a resident of a town located in the area of your circulation, I should like to give you some account of a recent local outdoor performance which seems to me significant in cultural matters, not only in our smaller region of "Montachusett" but in the larger domain of New England.

Every body who has ever despaired of maintaining the culture and dra-

matic powers of this domain should have been in a certain little grove of oaks and birches at twilight on Friday last, June 12, in Shirley Center—there to see (and feel) *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as presented by the children of the Center Grammar School. The performance came to pass because Miss Mildred Hayes of New Bedford, principal of the school, was able to vision the possibilities of an unusual setting in school grounds combined with the usual talents of active school children. Add a June night and we have the recipe complete for midsummer and a dream.

Eleven-year-old Melvin Longley, grandson of Melvin W. Longley, townsman and legislator, was Bottom himself—unconscious and unacted. Eleven-year-old Betsy Pifer was Titania—also "unacted." If in their little scene together these youngsters failed to make known Shakespeare's words to those of us on the backmost benches they succeeded in bringing out his art. For there stood the three stages of the world's long life: the primal life as seen in oak and birch; the crude product of the primal epitomized in Bottom's donkey head; and the final product evolved thus far in Titania's blithesome form.

Lysander's part was "acted," for "he" was taken by a "she"—Miss Marjorie Wheeler. And it was taken well. She-man became he-man and displayed well and thoroughly the fooleries of "all-men" (or humanity) during this present trying age when the simple old matter of male and female has become the complex problem of man and woman. Lysander was ably supported by the two resplendent thirteen-year-olds (one blonde the other brunette) Natalie Johnson as Hermia and Ellen Longley as Helena. Through these two little women, with their head-tossings and foot-stampings, Shakespeare's art as before required no sense of hearing. Meanwhile the tiny and agile Priscilla Jubb, as Puck, with her clever handsprings and antics on the background of the silent swaying birches, told what "fools" indeed we poor mortal human strivers be.

No attempt is made to comment on the other score of parts, all taken well, except to mention what might be called the spirit of the play itself embodied in Miss Eva Evans as Quince. This spirited minion of the summer forest, in the debonair handling of her fellow players made of the audience players also in that part of spontaneous laughter which makes the other half of all true works of comic drama.

We on the benches—of New England, Old England, and the human world—sat as our wisest and dream-most selves before these little children and this great man's mind. Here was a focusing of simple forces otherwise lost upon the air—flesh and blood and voices, whispering forest—whispering neighbors. No screen nor radio was needed to provide an imitation, for here was the life itself—an occasion, not a can opening. It meant work—creative happy work by child and teacher, parent and neighbor. Result a gathering and not a sitting: an audience of communers, not commuters.

New England culture is not dead while New Englanders can stay at home and dream. And if after all "we are the stuff that dreams are made on" then "we" are of the woods and fields and mother nature as well as of little girls in fairy wings and little boys in donkey heads. Such was the simple story told in the summer twilight by those girls and boys to their applauding parents and neighbors—and to all who have hopes for a new New England.

Benton MacKaye

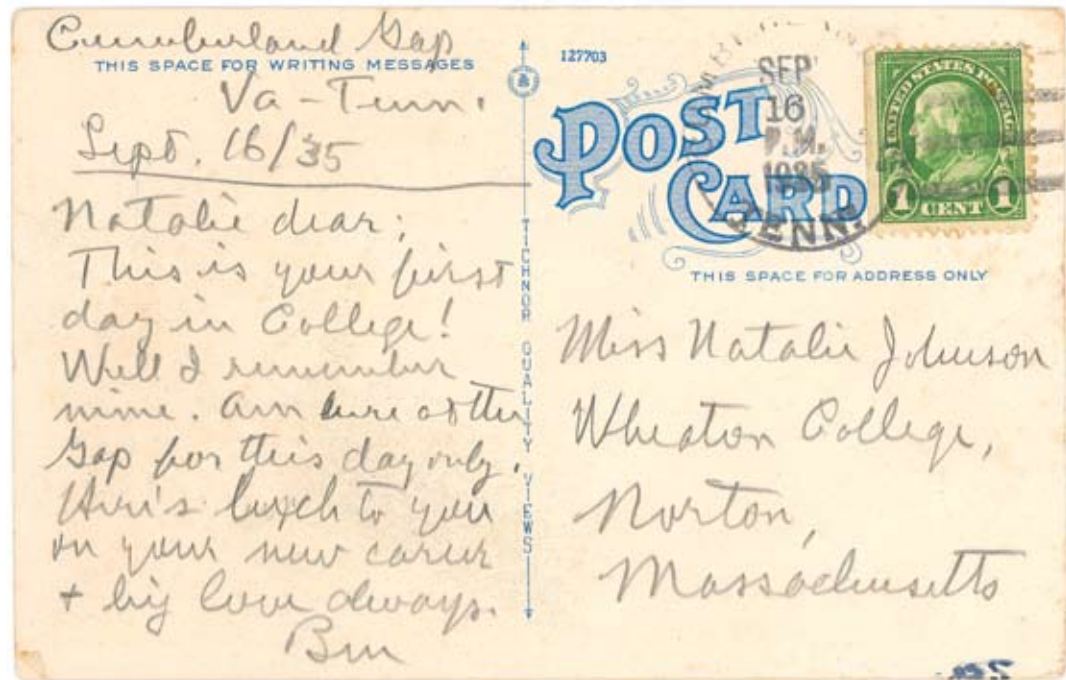
After the performance Ben brought me a bouquet of white peonies.

When describing MacKaye once in a research paper entitled "MacKayses of the Past and Present," Natalie wrote: "In appearance he reminds me of Abraham Lincoln. He is, like Lincoln, so very homely that he is good-looking."



*Ben told me that
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I was "marsupalia."
That word sent me
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On her first day of college,
Natalie received her first mail:
a post card from MacKaye.



Ben had a vocabulary
of special words.
'Pow-won' referred
to any gathering of friends
for conversation...
another favorite word
was 'salubrious'.

IN THE COTTAGE Ben had a typewriter. He lent it to me while I went to high school. I learned the touch system and used it regularly for all my papers. Similarly, he lent me his big *Webster's Dictionary* on condition that I learn a new word every day. I did this conscientiously for two or three years.

Ben had a vocabulary of special words. "Pow-wow" referred to any gathering of friends for conversation. "Expedition" meant a trip to make observations of the countryside. "Townless highway" referred to an interstate or expressway. A motorized old car frame, operated by teenagers, was a "spavined dinosaur." A "devil trap" is a way to make something happen: your ride is very slow coming; just sit down and read a book or start to write a letter—the ride will come right away. "Sa-laams" concluded friendly letters. Another favorite word was "salubrious."

Because of his special interests and various jobs, Ben had friends all over the United States. He kept in touch with penny postcards, especially on birthdays. He also used postcards for Solstice greetings instead of Christmas greetings. On my first day of college I received a postcard from him, my very first mail.

When I was a college freshman, the English professor assigned a research paper on any subject. I chose "MacKayes of the Past and Present." Here is part of my description of Benton:

Although as a child I thought him a rather queer looking man and never formed much of an opinion about his personality, he has since become my favorite MacKaye. His entire expression is one which would not encourage the friendship of a small child. He says himself that he likes children but not babies. I believe he does not like children either until they are old enough to be very intelligent. But when he smiles over a cup of black coffee accompanied by black toast (his favorite delicacy) and says deep down in his throat, "Ahhhh, this is great!" he has the most pleasant of faces.

After college and marriage I moved away from Shirley, but Ben and I continued our friendship because both of us regularly returned to Shirley. My three sons growing up knew him as a kind of uncle, an occasional and then full-time member of the Johnson household. One son was inspired to spend several months hiking the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Massachusetts, and later from Massachusetts through New Hampshire.

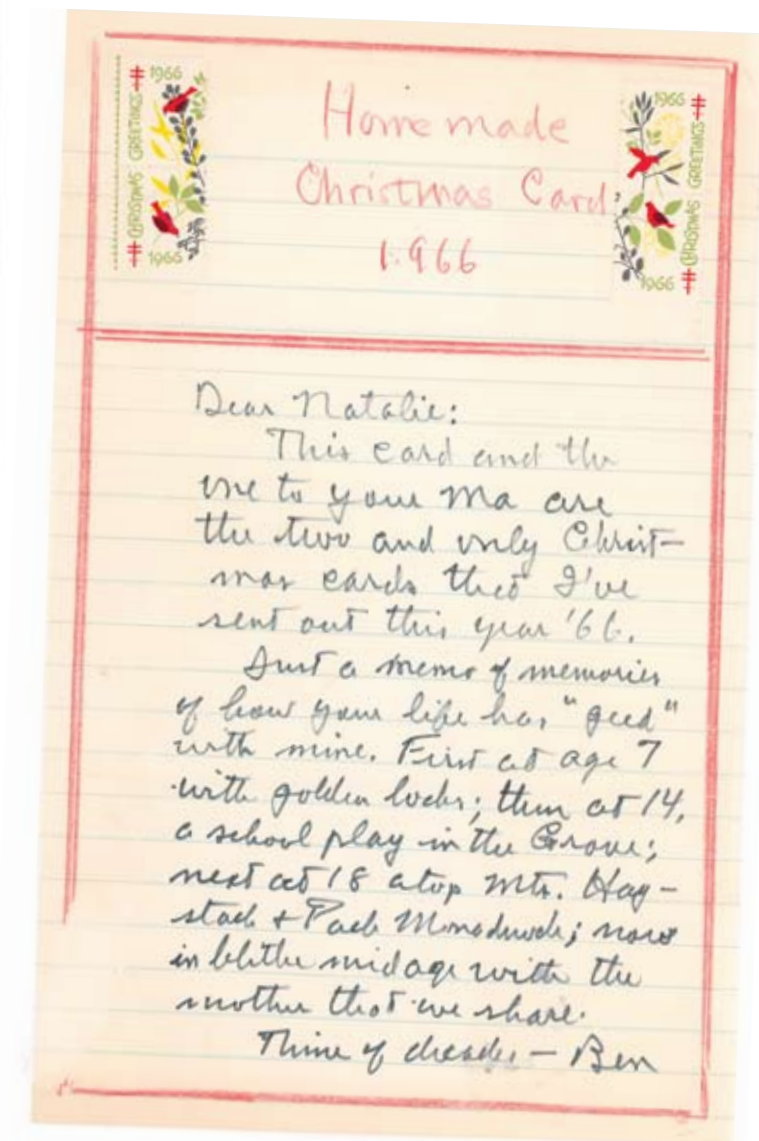


MacKaye and Lucy Johnson. Of her mother's care for him during his final years, Natalie wrote: "Many visitors came to see Ben. Some were old friends... others were strangers who wanted to meet the father of the Appalachian Trail. Lucy met all of them with gracious hospitality. They enlivened and enriched her life."

MY MOTHER, LUCY JOHNSON, a former school teacher, was a hard-working, energetic country woman noted for her cooking. During the 1940s and 1950s Ben sometimes came to our house for dinner when in Shirley. Later he spent summers as our lodger and lived winters at the Cosmos Club in Washington. In 1965 Ben settled into the Johnson household as a year-round resident. A year later my father died.

As he grew older, Ben's health declined, but not his mental faculties. For some time his eyesight had been failing due to macular degeneration. Lucy had to read his mail to him. A month or two before he died he was still dictating letters.

Ben died at home on December 11, 1975, soon after loudly announcing that he would not go to the hospital. Lucy and the town nurse were close by. He was nearly 97 years old. A memorial service was held in the old white church on the Center Common. Later his ashes were scattered in the field behind his Empire.



A homemade Christmas card which came in an envelope marked "Salubrious Christmas to Natalie from Ben."