

Skowhegan History House

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Archive Article

Skowhegan's Elise Fellows White

By Skowhegan History House Curator, Lee Granville

The small town of Skowhegan, Maine, has sent forth a number of its citizens to make their mark on our nation's cultural scene, more perhaps than would be expected from a community of its size. The story of Mary Elise Fellows, later known as Elise Fellows White, is one of the most intriguing I have come across here at Skowhegan History House.

Mary Elise was born in her grandfather Swan's home on Cedar Street on November 4, 1883. Her parents were James Fellows, a respected local banker and Deborah Thomas Fellows, who was descended from several generations of respected local families. Both were well educated and had traveled quite a bit.

Mary was soon given the nickname May or May Elise. In her diary written many years later, she remembers her early childhood. "My mother told me I could read the Boston newspapers at the age of three. Certainly I cannot remember a time when I could not read." May was a very quick study with abilities well beyond the average for her age. Her mother Deborah was determined that her daughter would be brought up properly. May remembered that, "my hair was cut short and shingled close to my head. I was dressed with the utmost simplicity in plain frocks and what were known as teirs or pinafores. I was never punished, never allowed to hear an ungrammatical or vulgar expression, and my playmates were carefully chosen."

May's father, James Fellows, played the violin. He had no formal training but as May said, "he had a good sense of tempo and rhythm that made my toes tingle to dance. He played old jigs and reels of bygone days. On one occasion he called me to his side and placed the violin beneath my chin, showing me how to draw the bow and where to place my fingers."

May's diary summed up her childhood passion for music in one paragraph.

"I have an early impression of music too beautiful to be borne. My mother, father and Uncle Frank used to sing hymns and old southern spirituals on Sunday evenings by the fireside. Their voices were harmonious and musical, my mothers clear as a bell, and my Uncle's a deep velvety Bass. My father was a tenor and, to the astonishment of the family, I began improvising an alto, then going into the next room and pressing my hands over my ears, unable to bear the ecstasy of that music."

In the summer of 1882, May took some basic lessons from Edward Fuller, a Colby College student and family friend who "Taught me the rudiments." Her mother would "Hold me on her lap and guide my small fingers. It was all very easy and pleasant for me and soon I began to like it. The pieces I played during those first few months were far beyond the ability of the average beginner. I played Pleyel's duets with my teacher, Dancla's arrangements of airs from Italian Operas, simple selections from Beethoven's symphonies and Shubert's songs--how I enjoyed them all!"

The next winter Deborah arranged for May to take lessons at Colby College in Waterville and then, "In the fall of 1883, when I was ten, my mother and I moved to Boston. I was to have one fall of lessons at the New England Conservatory. That one term turned out to be four years of steady improvement, and a lifetime of musical work and worry."

The Boston years

The Conservatory was located in Boston's South End in a huge rambling building that was formerly the St. James Hotel. Deborah Fellows, showing the force and drive that characterized her entire life, had somehow managed to become appointed as "Preceptor", a non paying position in which she exchanged her services for room and board as well as lessons for May. The younger students seemed to have had a great deal of personal freedom to explore the old building and play where they wished in their free time. May enjoyed herself during this period in her life and her traditional education did continue, if somewhat sporadically.

She recalls being taken one day to a small hall where she heard her first string quartet. She was haunted by the beauty of the music and the face of the first violin, twenty-one year old Franz Kneisel. "It was a sort of infantile love at first sight. In a few years he would become my teacher and I would live with his family."

Mary Elise started taking lessons from Timothee Adamowski, "A young pole and a gifted violinist, better than any other in Boston in his day."

Adamowski was the toast of Boston Society with constant invitations into the homes of "the four hundred" best families where he played and charmed everyone he met, especially the ladies. As his student, eleven year old May Elise quickly gained in proficiency and Adamowski began to "Exhibit me to his friends."

She soon began to travel alone to perform at formal affairs held in their lavish homes. At one she met Mrs. Winthrop Sargent, Aimee, who would soon become a major influence in her life.

The New England Conservatory experienced growing pains during this period, with the resident student population reaching two hundred and an additional five hundred attending classes on a daily basis. The result was a certain amount of chaos considered inappropriate for the younger students like Mary Elise. In response, a group of wealthy supporters of the arts formed the "Beneficent Society", committed to providing stable homes for promising young artists of limited means. Mary fitted this profile perfectly and her mother returned to Skowhegan leaving her in the care of the Baker family, of Baker Chocolate fame, in their luxurious home. Later, she moved to the Sargent Home on Commonwealth Avenue where Mrs. Sargent undertook the direction of her musical education and exposure to cultivated audiences. She took lessons from the best violinists Boston had to offer and performed often for famous people including a memorable event before Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. She attended the best concerts and met many influential people.

In 1884, Aimee Sargent made young Mary Elise the magnificent gift of a genuine Maggini violin, an instrument more than Two hundred fifty years old at that time. She wrote a poem at the time expressing her joy with the Maggini and nicknaming it her "little Magician".

Mary Elise was supported by the Sargents for the next six years, living with them most of the time but sometimes staying with the Bakers or coming back to Skowhegan for short visits at home. Toward the end of this time, the relationship began to cool somewhat and May, for the first time, started to express doubts about her early schooling and ability to become one of the best young woman violinists of her generation. As she matured she was no longer the child prodigy, always having been a better musician than others of her age. Now she was one of a select group but not necessarily the best. It was a sobering realization.

A Year in Vienna

In 1892, when May was eighteen, Aimee Sargent decided that for her to progress further she should go to Vienna, Austria, to take instruction from the best teachers in Europe. Accordingly, the Sargents gave her an outright "legacy" of two thousand dollars with the implication that she should use it wisely because there would be no more. It was their way of easing her out of their nest and also, for the first time, made her responsible for her own finances.

Mary Elise and her mother, Deborah, left Skowhegan for New York where they set sail on the German liner, Spree, destined for London. It was her first time at sea and May was desperately seasick for days into the voyage. After a whirlwind visit to London's attractions, mother and daughter embarked for Paris from Dover on a steamboat to Calais. "People around us began to look green—I looked at them with scorn—but when I looked over the side I was suddenly overcome. When we arrived in Calais and I crawled on deck more dead than alive, I found dear Mamma had not been sick at all!"

They took a train to Paris and after one day's visit, boarded the Orient Express for Vienna. Deborah and May were immediately entranced by the city. They arrived at the station on a Tuesday evening and engaged a "fiacre", a sort of horse drawn taxi. "We were driven through broad, brilliant streets, under granite archways into narrow lanes with room for only one carriage with vast palaces looming on either side, in short, through the quaintest, dearest old city I ever imagined, to our hotel."

May was ecstatic over the sights and sounds, the crowds of exotically dressed people and the hospitality with which they were treated by all. She gushed. "I like Vienna better than any place in the world except home!"

From working with Franz Kneisel and other German musicians back in Boston, May had learned to speak German, the language of Austria, quite well. Kneisel had given her a letter of introduction to a Dr. Frank who helped them find a pleasant room to rent, to connect with Professor Gund, her new teacher, and he also escorted them to theaters and restaurants. They soon were accepted as part of the social scene and May participated in musical events in private homes. One notable performance took place at the home of Colonel Grant, the son of president Ulysses S. Grant, who was the American Minister to Austria. Her performance was flawless and earned her excellent reviews in Vienna newspapers as well as accolades from Professor Gund.

Mother and daughter planned for a two year visit to Vienna during which Professor Gund would prepare her for a "Coming out" concert that would solidify her reputation as one of the world's top female violinists. There was one perpetual problem; as Deborah put it, "Money, money, money." They were going through May's legacy at an alarming rate as well as any funds that James could muster up at home back in Skowhegan. They tried obliquely to find more support from the Sergeants back in Boston but Aimee Sargent was ill and did not answer the letters until after the fateful decision was made to return home.

Reluctantly, after just one year in what seemed to them paradise, they came back to Skowhegan. Bitterly, a few days after arriving, a telegram from Mrs. Sargent was forwarded to them from Vienna. She said, "If money is your object, remain."

"Too late," May lamented, "Too late!"

It was a negative turning point in her life from which she may never have emotionally recovered. After Vienna, she said, Skowhegan "Looked like a back woods clearing to us!" After a few weeks mother and daughter returned to Boston and rented "A single dark room in the South End, and I was too disheartened to practice." One wonders how James Fellows felt about these comings and goings!

Gradually, things got better and May, for the first time in her life, started making money by giving lessons to students referred to her by Franz Kneisel. She renewed her friendship with Aimee Sargent but the relationship was very different. Now, treating May as an adult, Mrs. Sargent was critical of her social life and personal behavior.

May had one more career triumph in Boston. In January, 1895, she performed in the annual Cecilia Concert where she was called back several times for curtain calls and was personally applauded on stage by the Concert Director. She had no more successes in Boston and decided to move on.

The Rebecca McKenzie Concert tour

In the fall of 1895, May was engaged to join two other young women on a musical tour of the West. Rebecca "Sandy" McKenzie was a fine vocalist, May was to play the violin and Bertha O'Riley was to be their pianist. This was far removed from anything that May had done before. Starting in Duluth, MN, the whole tour was booked in small towns just a few days in advance, usually playing to small audiences of less than one hundred people. The tour followed the railroads, booking in small farming and mining towns a days journey from one another. The whole scene was very informal and while the townspeople may not have appreciated classical airs, they liked the sound of live music and the three attractive young women who played it. For the first time, May Elise interacted with men of all ages and backgrounds without parental supervision. She found several "Devilishly attractive" but the busy schedule kept her one jump ahead of them!

At last out from under the stern gaze of her mother, May began to act with more freedom than she had ever known. One time she took advantage of their driver's good nature and drove the wagon team from hotel to train station. She drove so fast that her hat blew off and was lost. She must have mentioned the incident to her mother who promptly wrote back with firm instructions.

"Dovie" she said, "please don't drive horses anymore, especially without your hat. Horses are no more to be trusted than dogs---or men. You will make those dear hands stiff, and it is too cold to drive bare handed or headed!"

Over a period of months, the tour wound its way "Twice around the Great Lakes and then West along the northern states and into southern Canada." The young artists were invited to tour recently opened silver mines in British Columbia; their host was a tall young mining engineer named Bruce White. He and Elise were mutually attracted. She soon found that Bruce was not only intelligent and articulate, he was also persistent. His letters followed her for the rest of the tour as they worked their way down the West Coast of the US and back at last to the Midwest. The tour ended rather abruptly in Nebraska when Rebecca McKenzie had to leave to care for her sister, who was terminally ill.. May and Bertha pooled their small amount of accumulated pay, gave it to "Sandy" and returned home, having gained valuable experience but very little money. She stayed in Ottawa with Bertha's family until her father could send her enough money to come home to Skowhegan.

For May, in many ways the tour was the happiest time of her life. She had no major concerns other than the daily details of the travel and concerts. Her domineering mother was safely at home in Skowhegan and could only scold her by mail. For the first time she met real everyday people and for the most part enjoyed their company. Those carefree days would provide her with pleasant memories for the rest of her life.

Courtship and marriage

In the summer of 1896, after the excitement of the tour, May came home to Skowhegan. She had attracted the attention of a number of men while on the road and had exchanged letters with several who proposed marriage. Of these none was more persistent than Bruce White. She probably now realized that she would never be able to earn enough money to comfortably support herself. As she said at the time, "I hoped to make a rich marriage and it looked as though I might succeed. I thought Bruce White was the one and wrote most frequently to him."

This situation continued through the winter of 1896-'97 while she moved to Hartford CT. and then, once again with her mother, moved on to New York City. In the fall of that year she came back to Maine and spent a year studying at Colby College in Waterville. After completing her studies in May of 1898, she immediately wrote to Bruce White and set a date for their marriage. They were married in November and set out on a honeymoon trip to Washington DC and New York City. Soon after, they started the trip to her new home in British Columbia.

The next nine years were a complete change of pace for Mary Elise White. First was a change of the name which she used for professional purposes. Still called May by friends and family, she chose Elise Fellows White

as her pen name on musical pieces and magazine articles. Nelson, B.C. was then and is now a beautiful town in one of the most scenic areas of Canada. Situated on the shore of a large lake, ringed with mountains and streams, Nelson still managed to be a very civilized place.

Bruce White found a very nice house to rent and did his best to make Elise feel at home. He traveled constantly to his mining properties and on prospecting trips. He also journeyed to major cities gathering technical and financial support for his businesses. Elise went with him sometimes but the pace was hectic and sometimes boring for her. She had little opportunity to play her violin or be involved with music in any way.

Her son Bruce was born in October, 1900. He was a happy baby and Elise quickly assumed the proud role of motherhood. During the next few years she settled into a routine, living in Nelson most of the time but returning to Skowhegan many a summer to stay with her family in Uncle Frank's camp on Wesserunsett Lake. Several serious illnesses ending in surgery afflicted Elise over the next few years. She and Bruce at first seemed happy but she could never reconcile herself to his continuing travels and long absences. In 1906, she sent her son Bruce to live with her mother in Skowhegan while she endured a difficult pregnancy in Nelson. Her second son, James, was born at the end of April, 1907.

Before the year was out, she and Bruce parted amicably by mutual agreement in a permanent separation. Elise came back to Skowhegan to live with her family while she sorted out her options.

Elise desperately wanted to resume her musical career in Boston, believing that she could support herself by teaching violin, composing music and writing for magazines and newspapers. She tried several times, both in Boston and New York, with a good deal of success in the writing department but less so in music. Many of her articles were published in prestigious music magazines but apparently they didn't pay very well. It seems that she had never regained her proficiency with the violin; perhaps the nine year lay off was simply too much to overcome. Later, she was treated harshly by music critics and decided she wanted to be known as a writer rather than a performer.

In 1918, Bruce White died suddenly and tragically from pneumonia, perhaps as a complication of a bout with the dreaded "Spanish Influenza" that was ravaging populations around the world at the time. He had been a good husband and father, supporting his wife and children as best he could, financially and otherwise.

Hard times fell upon Elise and her now ailing mother. In 1922, Elise made what must have been a supreme sacrifice, selling her precious Maggini violin for a paltry two hundred dollars. She lived for another thirty years, sometimes in Boston or New York but always returning to Skowhegan and eventually passing away here.

Fortunately, before her death, Elise Fellows White left a legacy of her professional possessions, many photographs and phonograph records of her music at Skowhegan History House. Recently, I discovered that her Grandson, Houghton White M.D., has salvaged her personal diaries and completed the enormous task of transcribing them. He most generously provided me with a full transcription to add to our collection.

Researchers are always welcome at Skowhegan History House to pursue this fascinating story and much more Skowhegan history.