

HISTORIC ROOTS

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THE WOMAN WHO SAVED STORIES

By DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

As a child Abby Maria Hemenway loved stories. On cold winter evenings her family would gather around the warmth of the fireplace in their farmhouse in Ludlow and listen to stories about the past. All four of Abby's grandparents had moved to Vermont in the 1790s. They enjoyed sharing their memories of the early days of white settlement. "When old men talk we love to listen," Abby later wrote.

When she was young Abby told stories to her younger brothers and sisters. She also loved to read, especially about history. In 1843, at the age of 15, she became a teacher. But it grew hard for her to find a good job that paid well. So ten years later, in 1853, Abby left Vermont and went west.

She went to the newly settled town of St. Clair, Michigan, and soon found work as a teacher. Her four years there were not happy ones. St. Clair was a busy town where people wanted to get rich fast. Few of them had much interest in books or learning. And because the place was so new, there was not much history.

Courtesy of David Hemenway



Abby Maria Hemenway

What people talked about most was how to make money.

Life among strangers in this new place made Abby long for Vermont. Ludlow, her hometown, had a history that went back almost to the Revolution. People there took time to recall the early days. Abby went back to Vermont.

In 1859 Abby read an article in a newspaper that urged Vermonters to write the histories of their towns. The article warned that as older folk died they would take their stories with them unless someone took the trouble to write them down. If these stories were not saved much of Vermont's rich past would be lost.

Abby thought about the stories she had heard as a child. She remembered her grandfather telling stories of the Revolution, her grandmother describing an old-fashioned wedding. She realized that the newspaper article was right. Without such stories, and without someone to save them, we really wouldn't know much about the past. Abby

Hemenway decided that she would collect as many stories as she could, from every town in the state. Then she would publish them.

This was a huge project for one woman to handle on her own. Abby knew she would need a lot of help to make it work. So she put one person in charge of each town's history. Their job was to collect stories about their own town's past. Abby wanted her historians to write about the important people and events in each town, but she also wanted to know about the everyday men and women who had built their towns out of the wilderness. She knew that their stories made history live for her readers and helped connect them to their own past. Abby worked on this history project for the next 30 years, until she died in 1890.

The five volumes of Abby Hemenway's *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*¹ are filled with tales that make life in Vermont in the 1700s and 1800s seem very real to us.

One story tells of Ephraim Sawyer, a Baptist preacher and an early settler in Charlotte. When Sawyer came in the 1790s most people there were poor. They could not pay Sawyer enough to support his wife and three children. To make ends meet, in addition to his church work, Sawyer hired himself out as a day laborer. Sometimes he had to walk as many as eight

¹ A gazetteer is a kind of dictionary. It gives information about the towns, rivers, and other features of a region.



Art Cohn, Lake Champlain Maritime Museum

Arnold's Bay on Lake Champlain, where Peter Ferris' house was.

miles to find work. At night he took his pay in grain and carried it home on his back. Like many Vermonters today, Sawyer needed more than one job to make a living.

Abby also wanted stories of everyday people who were local heroes. When John D. Smith sent her his history of Pantton for the *Gazetteer*, he left out the story of Peter Ferris. Abby insisted that Smith include him.

Ferris was an ordinary farmer who performed many acts of bravery during the Revolution. He opened his log house on the shore of Lake Champlain as a refuge² for American troops after their defeat by the British. He also helped rescue two neighbors who had been captured by the British. Ferris himself was captured in 1778 and spent the last two years of

² A refuge is a safe place.

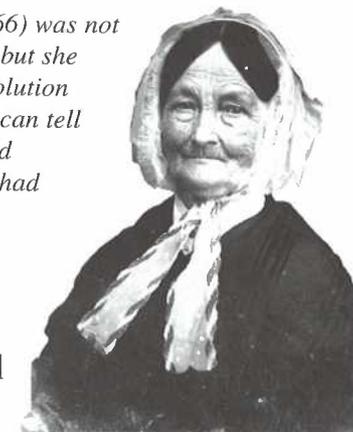
the war in British prisons. When he got out in 1782 he was 60 years old. He lived to be nearly 90. But the new American government ignored this hero and didn't pay him a pension. Even the town historian ignored him at first. When Abby insisted, John Smith added a short sketch of Ferris to his history of Panton.

Lucy Spencer's claim to fame was to live a long time. Today many people are over 90 years old. A hundred years ago such great age was rare. In 1870 Spencer was 97 years old, the oldest person in Brownington, Vermont. Just before she died S.R. Hall wrote about her for the *Gazetteer*. What impressed him most about Lucy Spencer was that she had lived through the whole life of the American nation. She was born before the Revolution began and was still alive after the Civil War. "No one can sit by her side without a feeling of awe," Hall wrote. Just being in the same room with Lucy Spencer made the distant past seem closer and more real to him.

Abby Hemenway saw such stories about everyday men and women as links in a chain that binds people in the present to the past. Such stories allow Vermonters to compare their own lives with those of their ancestors. It helps them learn from their ancestors' mistakes as well as their good deeds.

Abby worked for 30 years on the *Gazetteer*. She called it "a labor of love for our native

Mary Palmer Tyler (1775-1866) was not quite as old as Lucy Spencer, but she too lived from before the Revolution until after the Civil War. You can tell by her face she had a long and interesting life, and probably had many stories to tell too.



Vermont Historical Society

state." Its five fat volumes can still be found in libraries throughout Vermont. Thanks to Abby Hemenway we have these old stories to entertain and teach us about our past. Thanks to her they will continue to do so far into the future, when today is history too.

Rooting Around

What old stories do you know about your family or your town? What do they tell you about life in the past? How is it different from now? What has stayed the same?

If you have older friends or neighbors, ask them to tell you what life was like when they were young. Maybe they can tell you stories their grandparents told them.

If you have grandchildren or young friends, tell them stories about your life.