

NOW AND THEN

By John Bell

No wonder three men wanted to marry her. Spirited, good-looking, skilled in domestic arts (at the age of six she told her mother that "she needed to be alone in the kitchen" to bake a cake), college educated, **Nancy Paine** was quite a catch. Not to mention too that she was her father's darling, and **Joshua Paine** was a wealthy Provincetown businessman.

Nancy Paine wrote a small book as part of the 1920 Tercentenary celebration of the first landing of the Pilgrims here. "The Provincetown Book" interested me in its author, apparently an amateur writer with a charming sense of humor. So when **Helene and Albert Smith**, present owners of the Joshua Paine House at Tremont and Cottage Streets, loaned me Nancy's other book, "Our Heritage," I welcomed this second meeting with its author.

Someone should have tied me to the mast before I heard this siren song. It's a romanticized autobiographical novel full of salty phrases, unabashedly Puritan moralizing, delightful vignettes about a girl who could laugh at herself. Until I hauled myself back to the 20th century, I was almost in love with Nancy too.

Nancy Paine was no amateur writer. She had been writing all her young life, encouraged by her father to "keep her logbook." Before she married **Billy May Smith** in 1888, she had sold stories to **Youth's Companion**, a Boston magazine for girls. A letter to her from the editor, written shortly after her honeymoon with Billy May, says in part: "Your story 'Humpback Mercy' met our demands so well that now, wishing to procure an exceptionally good story for our Easter number of 1889, we turn to you."

This professionalism, however, colors the autobiography with fictional tints.

"Achsah Nickerson," the main character, seems usually to be Nancy—but occasionally her mother. (The Biblical first name comes from "that garden of names now grafted on helpless children..." by their Bible-reading parents.) Nancy's mother might have met and talked with Henry David Thoreau, as "Achsah" did, but Nancy herself was born only two years before Thoreau died in 1862.

Similarly, Nancy writes intimate details about a song-fest at which "Obadiah" was the pianist and **Ole Bull** the violinist. "Obadiah" is almost certainly **Morris and Stanley Snow's** great-grandfather, born in 1825; **Ole Bull**, the Norwegian violinist, lived between 1810 and 1880. Again it appears that Nancy's mother was the schoolgirl "Achsah" who participated in the concert, who told her daughter about it years later.

Cape Cod Thinking

But no matter. Whether remembered at first or second hand, Nancy Paine's "Our Heritage" reveals both how 19th century Provincetowners lived and what they thought of each other. Their views survive today among older citizens. Some I found were were outdated examples of racial bias, others endearing.

Achsah's father "Elkanah," is lecturing the new minister on how the townspeople take care of needy cases: "Are any shiftless? Give them a little at a time. Are any proud? Help them keep proud... Now there are Benjy and Tilly." (These were shiftless parents whose children looked so neglected that some "summer people" had called the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children to investigate.) "Benjy is always on hand to shovel whenever Sam Williams has a vesselload of coal at the wharf. Sam pays him in coal, but only half a ton at a time,

and Tilly makes that go. If she had two tons, it would not last any longer...

"Tomorrow the women will go up there and carry some victuals, clean up the kitchen and comb the young ones' heads, Sam will send up half a cord of wood. There will be some provisions put into the buttery, not too much, for it is too early for the regular donation party. Two donations and a sewing bee is about what Benjy and Tilly need to get them through the year and keep off the town."

Elkanah, as agent for the fishing boat **Chanticleer**, paid small dividends to a widow who owned a small share of the boat. He increased the dividend out of his own pocket when he heard that the widow was hard up. Meanwhile, a neighbor had supplied her with flour at almost no cost by telling **Widow Knowles** she had over-bought at a bargain and was selling her surplus before it could spoil.

But Elkanah's "dividend" made Mrs. Knowles suspicious. She demanded an explanation, since she didn't see the **Chanticleer** suddenly making bigger profits. Elkanah fabricated a story about a "new law" that made her a "preferred stockholder," and seeing her swallow that, hook, line and sinker, he went on lying. "Where you and Daniel was original owners, you would be getting a kind of double preferred, and you will get another dividend in January." The widow calls Elkanah an honest man, since she would not have known about "the new law" if he hadn't told her.

Elkanah to the new minister: "I know what the Good Book says about the lake of fire and brimstone for liars, but I guess the Lord and I can patch that up... Now tell me...what do they teach in your ministers' school about how to take care of widders?"

On Education

Achsah's father had strong ideas

about schooling and gave them to the school committee: "I don't think much of your plan to separate the scholars into different grades. It's a good idea to keep the winter boys' school separate; some of them, third mates home from sea and studying navigation, chew considerable tobacco and talk pretty rough. They need a sand box under their desk, and a master who can knock 'em down. But the rest of them better be together. The little ones learn from the older ones. There is my Achsah all for studying Greek because she sees the college class making funny letters on the black-board."

Home Economics

Shakespeare's Polonius advising Laertes ("Neither a borrower nor a lender be") finds its parallel in Nancy's words from a mother to her daughter: "Don't sell your house. Don't mortgage it. Keep it insured. Keep it painted. Keep the roof tight and the doorstep squared up. Nothing is so shiftless-

looking as a rickety doorstep. Don't sell your government bonds. Don't lend them. Don't tell how much you have got. Don't sign notes for anybody... Hang onto your government bonds, married or single; blow high or blow you, you hang onto your bonds. Cut the cowpons when cowpon day comes round. Put one half into the china teapot to live on, and the other half into the savings bank for extraordinary occasions."

Pride After Death

There's much more. If you want, you can read "Our Heritage" at the library, where a single copy remains among Rare Books, not to be taken out. Or you can settle for a closing story about St. Peter's explanation of why there are no Cape Codders in heaven:

"They come here and we do all we can to make them happy, but they all want to go back to the Cape."



The Joshua Paine House - 1980