

Our Story

I've been writing down my family stories for over ten years now and look at my list with satisfaction. The collection will be a place for my children and grand children to see into our past if they care to. The writing has been cathartic, teaching me valuable lessons in the simple, or not so simple act of capturing. Also I do local history research which I enjoy immensely. Burrowing through websites and books looking for the story is an interesting challenge. I've written down the lives of over a dozen Vermont characters who inhabited the hills around my home in East Montpelier in the 1800s. At 71 I join my peers in a period of reflection. So is it all set in stone now that I've written it down? Apparently not, according to my recent experience when my history and memoir habits intersected in a surprising way.

One of my long told stories is about my odd elementary school experience in Westchester County New York where I grew up. The sprinkling of kids in my rural area of Croton-on-Hudson went to the public school, which had split half day sessions at that point, or to Scarborough School 10 minutes away. My brother and sister went there, and so did I for two years, but Mum threw a fit when the teachers asked her about why I was such a precocious reader, and discouraged her from teaching me at home, so in second grade I changed schools. I spent the next seven years traveling 20 miles each way, by car the first year and then by train, five station stops south on the New York Central line along the Hudson River. My Dad, also a commuter took the 7:31 express train to New York City, and I took the 7:42 local. I commuted alone with the men in suits to the tiny, coed Hudson River Country Day School (HRCDS).

Miss Berney (74, principal) and Miss Ellen Warnock (69, teacher), unmarried sisters from Birmingham Alabama ran the school and lived in the large brick house. They had thick southern accents and were prim and proper, with carefully coiffed hair. They wore sweater sets, pearls, straight camel hair skirts and had their reading glasses always hanging on their bosoms. Floral scents drifted in their wakes, from perfume and face powder. Miss Ellen was short and round with white wavy hair, always wearing low heels on her tiny feet. Miss Berney was taller and thinner with short brown hair. They both had excellent posture. I used to imagine them sipping tea in a Victorian parlor with their parents in faraway Birmingham where everyone spoke in that drawl like them.

They were kind, but you had to toe the line, and my tomboy ways were frequently corrected. I remember being shut into a dark closet several times to ponder my transgressions. I learned to do an expert required curtsy with each firm but not too firm handshake, making good eye contact. We had to use fountain pens with peacock blue ink which did not work well for me as I was left handed. I always had blue stains on the outside of my writing hand even with regular use of a blotter.

Their curriculum focussed on solid three Rs, but we sang a lot, had regular art class and did an annual play, such as Oliver Twist. We even had debating. In eighth grade my subject was Queen Elizabeth I of England (7 September 1533 – 24 March 1603). We sang the French National Anthem *La Marseillaise* at every weekly assembly with no explanation of the meaning. I looked up the meaning of the words recently:

"Qu'un sang impur Abreuve nos sillons !" means "May impure blood Water our fields!"

"Contre nous de la tyrannie L'étendard sanglant est levé !" means "Against us tyranny's Bloody flag is raised!"

Many of the teachers at HRCDS had children who attended too. Parents put in volunteer work days to keep the school ship shape. Mum once scraped paint off the tiles in the bathroom with a razor blade after it was painted. So there was a kind of family feeling in the building - we watched the TV news about John F Kennedy's assassination in Miss Berney's bedroom with it's dressing table and powder puff. After a morning in class upstairs with the aroma of cooking drifting up, everyone ate sit-down hot lunch together. A fellow alum reminds me that the Warnocks called the cook and maid "the nigrus". There was no sports program other than a weekly trip to either a riding stable or ice rink. We kids ran around at recess on a paved back parking lot where I acquired plenty of skinned knees. Once one of the boys tried to wrestle me onto the ground and I bit him. "We will not tolerate our young ladies acting like wolves!" was Miss Berney's reprimand. With her help I did learn to be less ferocious.

I have been annoyed at Mum my whole life for her choice of HRCDS. This set-up kept me from having a normal social life since my school friends lived far away from my house in Croton. I loved weekday sleep overs after school with my class mates, but I didn't know my Croton neighborhood kids very well.

After I graduated the eighth grade and went to Miss Porters in Connecticut my attitude about HRCDS worsened. I had trouble breaking my curtsy habit. No one my age did that even at Miss Porter's. I started ninth grade having played no team sports at all. I only knew the quirky version of softball we played at my grandmother's summer home in the 1000 Islands with tennis balls and home made bats. I had no chance to catch up with soccer or lacrosse or basketball at that point. I felt like I had been educated in the 1800s, especially when it became obvious that I was unprepared for the curriculum at Miss Porters. It took me almost three years to work my way to Bs. It was a strange doily sprinkled experience in elementary and middle school with slightly out of place old southern spinsters running the show, living in their own Victorian eddy in the torrent that was now the modern world.

So that was my story, fixed and immutable until I randomly googled "Berney Warnock" on ancestry.com and newspapers.com. The Warnock story knocked the foundation from under my long held understanding of my years in their care. I found HEADLINES in all caps in the papers.

Their father Robert Warnock was chief deputy sheriff in Birmingham. In August of 1898 he was shot dead by a "negro" suspect who was later hanged for his crime after a trial, vividly recounted in long newspaper articles of the time.

Annie Warnock, his widow had been in poor health even before this and was understandably thrown into a deep depression with four children to raise. It was later reported that she had had an accident a few months later when a gun went off in her hand, but she was not injured. Almost exactly one year after her husband's murder she was at home in her bedroom while her three daughters Berney, Ellen and Annie played downstairs. Son Robert S., 18 was away at his job as a railroad clerk. The sound of a gunshot ripped through the quiet house and Berney, 15, rushed upstairs to find that her mother had blown her brains out. Berney ran outside screaming for help, and the girls were brought to a neighbor's. It was so difficult for me to read the lurid details.

Information about the family is a little sparse after that but I have found enough clues to create a timeline. In 1900 soon after the murder the youngest sisters, Ellen, eleven and Annie, eight were living as boarders with Tempe V. Hawkins, five years a widow herself and with four of her six children still at home. She also had two nephews and a cousin at the house. This family was probably friends of the Warnocks. There are notices in the papers about the Warnock property being sold, and that insurance now added to their financial security. During the next 30 years Annie, Ellen and Berney completed teacher training and worked in schools around the country. Annie and Ellen rose to be principals. By the 1940s the three sisters had moved to Dobbs Ferry, NY to work at the first location of my alma mater, Hudson River Country Day School, which was renting a house on the campus of the Masters School, started in 1877 by Eliza Bailey Masters and still operating today.

The other siblings died relatively young, but Miss Berney and Miss Ellen soldiered on. They were always working women and never married. They lived together for the rest of their lives, running their little school, and retired in their 70s. They died in 1984 within a month of each other. Miss Ellen was 96 and Miss Berney was 100. A classmate whose mother was a longtime teacher at HRCDS told me that when they retired his mother handled their needs in old age and even managed their estate - their school family caring for them to the end.

What is my story now? I had known these women for years, but with absolutely no knowledge of their background - their incredible courage and resilience. I can't imagine how dark the year between their father's murder and their mother's suicide must have been. And then they were orphans. Only Robert married, but none of the three sisters did and they had no children. The unspeakable tragedy in their youth changed the normal course of life for them, but it didn't destroy their spirit. They had their sense of purpose and created their own kind of family - their school family. I imagine that all the teachers whose kids were my school friends banded together with Miss Berney and Miss Ellen because it was a good place, for parents, teachers and children. I wonder who else back then knew about Miss Berney and Miss Ellen's past.

So now my focus on has shifted. My heart goes out to the traumatized family and to Berney who must have taken the role of protector for her sisters. I forgive them for the closet time. I think I was a bit of a handful. I love that they went against type and let us kids run amok during recess, letting go the reins. And that they let the eighth grade girls stay inside from recess to play bridge after we asked to. I love that we read Don Quixote when I was young enough to form vivid memories of the adventure, minus any peripheral symbolism. I love that we learned calligraphy so we could make our own pen and ink diplomas. I love that we had to memorize poems - "*Continuous as the stars that shine And twinkle on the milky way, They stretched in never-ending line Along the margin of a bay..*" - no I can't still recite "I wandered lonely as a cloud" by Wordsworth it but it resonates deep inside me.

I finally know their story and my own has obviously changed. It's a good thing to know this can happen, that life at all ages is not always, or ever, about simplicity and clarity. I think I will put Miss Ellen and Miss Berney into a very different place in my collection of knowledge about human beings. They are a new and welcomed comfort 5 decades after I last saw them. There is more than one way to tell a story. And if I'm ever in Birmingham I will visit the Oak Hill Cemetery. The Warnocks are finally back home there, together.



Hudson River Country Day School 1965



My Graduating Class of 1965 singing - all 6 of us!



Miss Berney Warnock (age 81) at 1965 graduation sharing some intimacy with me.
Dad chose to try and get this shot even with the bad lighting.
I don't remember what she was saying but it feels warm.



Miss Ellen Warnock (age 76) at 1965 graduation