

# WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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WHS Tercentennial Exhibit  
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See pages 36 to 40



Above: Marion Blanchard Farnsworth (left) and Helen Stanley Johnson, affectionately known as "the Aunts," May 30, 1942. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)

## The Aunts of Exmoor Farm



*1921 photos  
of Marion  
Farnsworth  
(left) and  
H e l e n  
J o h n s o n  
(right) in  
Exmoor,  
England.  
(Courtesy  
S a l l y  
Farnsworth  
Blackett)*

## ***Introduction***

Only a few people in town still remember two intrepid women who lived the most amazing lives on their farm at 751 Boston Post Road.

Gentlewomen farmers, business women, social workers, world travelers, foster parents, animal lovers, and philanthropists, Marion Farnsworth and Helen Johnson left a large legacy of generosity and service in Weston and in greater Boston. For over three decades, they occupied an enchanting enclave they called Exmoor Farm where they became known as “the Aunts,” two single ladies who took it upon themselves to shelter, nurture, and educate over a dozen children during their time there from 1922 to 1954.

Being determined, creative women of means, with a large staff to help implement their ideas and plans, the Aunts were also able to continue their social service work in Boston, start a successful egg business, become almost entirely self-sufficient in growing food on their own land, and build and rebuild numerous dwellings, occupied by happy staff and tenants who never wanted to leave. Between 1955 and 1958, Marion Farnsworth donated a total of 41.6 acres of Exmoor Farm to the Town of Weston for all to enjoy. Hers was one of the first two donations to the Town Forest, created in 1955. The Farnsworth land provided the nucleus for what is now known as Jericho Forest.

## ***How the Aunts Came to Weston***

In 1922, after a six month tour of Europe, two adventurous young women came to rural Weston and got themselves a farm. Having journeyed through England, France, Belgium, Holland, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, Italy and Gibraltar, they were ready to settle down. (1)

Helen Stanley Johnson, a 1907 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, was originally from Wayne, Pennsylvania. She had been at Verdun with the Red Cross American Field Service and had seen the horrors of World War I. Upon her return, she traveled to Cuba where her father, Richard H. Johnson, was living with his young second wife and children, before coming to Boston. (2)

After graduating from Radcliffe in 1912, Marion Blanchard Farnsworth spent five years volunteering part-time in the outpatient department of the Massachusetts General Hospital and living with her widowed father at their Cambridge home. In 1917, she joined the American Red Cross, Boston Metropolitan Chapter, as District Supervisor of the Home Service Department. She soon met Dr. Douglas Thom, who was starting a clinic for children called the Habit Clinic at the South End Settlement House, and was so impressed with his work that she became a life-long supporter. (3)

Following the remarriage of her father, Marion got her own apartment at 3 Concord Avenue overlooking the Cambridge Common. Her father, Charles H. Farnsworth, founder and president of First National Stores, did not want his only child living alone. So Jenny Kroll, who also worked at the Red Cross, became her companion. (4)

Marion met Helen in Boston in 1920 while working for the Red Cross. The two young, well-educated women had both lost their mothers, and each of their fathers had remarried. Both were deeply involved in social work and interested in social change.

In 1921, Marion and Helen quit their jobs to travel to Europe together. They spent several months in Exmoor, England, exploring the countryside on horseback. They were especially fond of the Exmoor ponies, a small but rugged native breed. Finally Charles Farnsworth inquired when his daughter and her friend were coming home. Marion replied "We'll come home when you buy us a farm!" (5) Mr. Farnsworth was quick to oblige.

On May 5, 1922 Marion became the new owner of the old Harrington Farm (also spelled Herrington) on what was then called Central Avenue. It consisted of a historic house, barn, outbuildings, and 48 acres of land with meadows, pine forest, and an apple orchard. The plan was to raise chickens and horses and to start an egg business. (6)

Because the young women had loved Exmoor in Devonshire so much, they decided to call their new home Exmoor Farm. They arranged to ship the two horses they had been riding in England. These were believed to be the first Exmoor ponies to arrive in America. In addition, Marion asked the groom, a widower named Walter Hurd, if he and his four-year-old daughter, May, would follow Starlight and her mate Ginger Nut to Weston. (7)

Hurd agreed, becoming the first superintendent of Exmoor Farm. In addition to caring for the animals, which also included cows, pigs, and numerous dogs, he also supervised the running of the farm.

Jenny Kroll recalls the delight with which little May Hurd was received at Exmoor. She was “a darling little curly haired person, knowing a lot about horses already, she lived in the big house with Marion and Helen.” (8) May Hurd was the first of many children that Marion and Helen took in and cared for at Exmoor.

### ***Many Young Women and One Young Man***

Soon there were two more, Jean Melville and Thelma K. Stevens. Jean, the daughter of Howard A. Melville, a professor from Montreal, lost her father in 1926, when she was just 10 years old. Her mother, a New York City ballerina, needed to keep working and could not take care of Jean herself, so consented to her daughter moving in with Marion and Helen. Jean had been staying with Helen’s relatives in Florida when the Aunts met her there on one of their trips south. She became such an outstanding equestrian that she competed in the National Horse Show at Madison Square Garden. (9)

Thelma Stevens came to stay at Exmoor in 1928 at age 10. Marion’s late mother, Henrietta Blanchard Farnsworth, was from St. Johnsbury, Vermont. Marion, who had no brothers or sisters of her own, was close to her many Stevens cousins on her mother’s side. After Marion and Helen acquired Exmoor Farm, the cousins from Vermont and their children often came to visit. On one such visit, it was decided that Thelma would come to stay with the Aunts and be company for Jean. Thelma’s younger sister Martha was a frequent visitor. Both sisters became accomplished horsewomen. (10) Years later, Martha wrote to Marion and Helen:

Do you remember us, two country girls, ages 10 and 8, who came to Boston with their Daddy, in their best bibs and tuckers, to see Cousin Marion and her family? . . . And Daddy went home, leaving us, for a few days, which . . . grew to be two weeks. And I was homesick, and all the maids and men were so good to us. “Mac” helping by getting us all excited about a “Big Blue Hen” . . . And the farmer’s children took us up in the loft of the cow barn to show their playhouse, all wired for flashlight bulbs and dry cells. The furniture, which we admired so much, made from orange boxes . . . And Starlight and Ginger Nut, and Walter’s “equitation lessons” and his patient suggestion that for a smooth ride at a trot, one must “pust” (post). (11)



*Thelma (left) and Martha Stevens were accomplished horsewomen.  
(Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett).*

The next young woman to move in was Elizabeth Dean Francis, known as “Lee.” Lee was the daughter of New York attorney George Blinn Francis, a former Congressman. Three years after the death of Lee’s mother, her father remarried and had more children. Lee was not happy living with her new stepmother. Her late mother was one of Marion’s best friends at Radcliffe, and Lee’s visits to the Aunts continued after her mother’s death. In 1932, at age 14, Lee joined their growing family and, like the other children, thrived there. (12)

The children called Marion “Embie” (for her initials M. B.) and Helen “Honey” or “Yonnie,” apparent references to her sweet nature and her last name, Johnson.

Helen’s niece Anna Jane DeCanizares, known as “Nancy,” had been a frequent visitor to Exmoor with her mother Jane, Helen’s older sister, who still lived in Wayne, Pennsylvania. In 1932 Nancy decided to move in with her Aunt Helen and “Aunt Marion.” (13) Also in 1932 Corita Arche, “Tiqui” came to Weston to attend Regis College. She was the niece of Helen’s stepmother and had met the Aunts on their trips to Cuba. Soon Corita, who often visited Exmoor, asked for permission to move in. (14)

The next year, this house full of beautiful young women was joined by Albert Barker Hunt, a young man from California who had attended Harvard Business School and was coming back East for a job that Marion had arranged for him. Known as the first man at Exmoor, Al Hunt recalled the experience of joining the

*Al Hunt, "the first man at Exmoor" was such a favorite of the Aunts that they built him a house, now 725 Boston Post Road. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

family in an account he wrote at Christmas 1941 for the "Exmoor Chronicle," which the extended clan had decided to put together as a present for the Aunts:



October 10, 1933. I just talked with a Miss Farnsworth about a possible job in Boston . . . Well, I had nothing on Miss F., she stuttered worse than I, and so I'm not much wiser about the prospects. I gather some company which makes gadgets needs new blood. Boy, that lady can talk . . .

November 15, 1933. For better or worse, here I am back in Boston; called on Miss Farnsworth today. . . . Drove way out to a town named Weston in Harry Beach's open car. God it was cold. I met Miss Farnsworth, a Miss Johnson, a bunch of young girls; it didn't matter much for they seemed awfully giggly and anyway a carload of young college men arrived – all looked alike – only name I got was Kellogg. Misses F. and J. seemed exceptionally nice. I sure watched my language and said the right things. Damned near upset a cup of tea on my best suit.

December 25, 1933 . . . Christmas in a mad house. I'm now Al. Miss F is Aunt Marion, Miss J is Aunt Helen. Then there's Corita, Thelma, Nancy Jane, Elizabeth Francis, and Jean. They don't know what to make of me, nor I them. I'm spending the holiday at Exmoor Farm in Weston, they sure know how to make you feel at home. . . . (15)

Al Hunt got the job Marion found for him at Rivett Lathe and Grinder and eventually became president of the company. The Aunts were so fond of him that they built a house for him next door at 725 Boston Post Road.

Margaret Crofton-Atkins, a girlfriend of Al's from Santa Barbara, became part of Exmoor by chasing him across the country. (16) She got married there a few years later, but not to Al.

## *The Animals of Exmoor*

Animals were a huge part of life at Exmoor Farm, especially horses and dogs. Most of the time, there were about eight of each. (17) In addition there were numerous farm animals in pens and barns all over the property.

Marion, Helen, and the girls enjoyed daily horseback and carriage rides along the many trails that ran from their back door through the meadows and pine woods. Fox hunting with the hounds at the many nearby hunt clubs was another favorite form of recreation. (18) The dogs had their own “super doghouse.” A friend and tenant of the Aunts gave this first-hand account:

They had all kinds, Great Danes down to tiny little terriers and they had one little dog that they trained to accept cookies if you said “This is from First National Stores.” Because this was where Embie’s father made his fortune. He was the founder . . . But if you said “A&P,” he would not take it. (19)

## *The Passing of Marion’s Father*

On February 12, 1933, Marion’s father died suddenly at his home in Brookline. Farnsworth was survived by his second wife, Florence Taylor Farnsworth. A great part of his considerable fortune went to the elderly poor in Boston. The Charles H. Farnsworth Trust continues to this day to distribute substantial sums for the building of affordable housing for the elderly. (20)

Marion’s father had started out with one grocery store in Somerville, which grew into the first chain of grocery stores in the United States. All First National stores were closed on the day of his funeral service, held at Old South Church. (21)



*On Christmas Day, 1933, Al Hunt wrote in his diary: “Then there’s dogs, not one or two dogs but hundreds of dogs, collie dogs, wire hair dogs, fox terrier dogs — none on speaking terms! If there is any boss of Exmoor, it’s the dogs. Today I opened stockings for dogs, I threw balls for dogs, I opened doors for dogs, yes I even pulled sleds for dogs.” Photo of Marion Farnsworth with some of her brood. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

Shortly after the death of her father, Marion purchased a second working farm, in Ashby, a small Massachusetts town near the New Hampshire border. "Ashby Pasture" was 1500 feet higher in elevation than Exmoor. Marion and Helen spent summers there with the children, dogs, and horses, to escape the heat and mosquitoes and to lead the simple village life they loved. (22)

*H e l e n  
J o h n s o n  
a n d M a r -  
i o n F a r m -  
s w o r t h  
sledding  
at Exmoor  
Farm in  
winter.  
(Courtesy  
S a l l y  
F a r n -  
s w o r t h  
Blackett)*



### *The Staff at Exmoor*

During the summers, a skeletal crew remained at Exmoor to care for the property and farm animals and to keep the egg business going. By that time the Aunts were shipping eggs throughout the region and were no longer "hands on." For the 1941 "Exmoor Chronicle" Thelma Stevens repeats Helen's story of the day a thief grabbed one of their suitcases from an unlocked car. When Helen and Marion appeared, the thief dropped it and ran. The suitcase flew open and there were eggs all over Boylston Street. (23)

Walter Kurth, a Finnish builder from Ashby, replaced Walter Hurd as supervisor of the farm. Also on the staff was John Lingley, a young man from Nova Scotia. In 1932 he began working for Kurth on the Pink Cottage, which was the beginning of Exmoor development. John lived at his own home in Weston rather than at Exmoor. In his 1941 recollections, Lingley describes a scene in the apple orchard on June 1, 1934:

Miss Farnsworth and Miss Johnson on horseback; Johnny on the ground. Johnny: "Miss Johnson, I was wondering whether I could have tomorrow afternoon off?" Miss Johnson: "Well, I don't know because we have made arrangements for one of the other men to be off. Do you have something special you wanted to do?" Johnny: "Yes, I am getting married tomorrow and it would be nice if I could be there." (I had Saturday afternoon, Sunday, and Monday off.) (24)

John Lingley vividly recalled September 22, 1938, the day of "the big blow," otherwise known as the Hurricane of 1938:

We were picking apples. It started to rain about two o'clock and then started to blow about 2:30. It increased steadily and the first tree to go down was an elm by the hen house. I came back to the cottage and met Gertrude who told me to look out in the apple orchard. There standing under an apple tree eating the apples as fast as the wind blew them off was Minerva. Do you know who she was? She was a 400-pound sow pig we had at the time, and we called her that name because she was so sweet and gentle. I found Strickland and we managed to get her back in the pen. I then went over to the main house and watched the big pines falling as though they were toys. There I stood, leaning against the wind, knowing history was being made, yet I was helpless against such a thing.

On my way back to the cottage who should I see but Minerva. She was out again eating apples as though nothing was happening. We put her away again and found where she got out and fixed the hole. The sight on the morning of September 23<sup>rd</sup> is one that I shall never forget. (25)

Mrs. Strickland worked in the laundry at Exmoor while her husband worked with Kurth and Lingley. They shared a small apartment in "Apple Flats," a former hen house that had been converted for use by the staff. In her 1941 recollections she wrote "It has been our duty for a number of years to move into the big house to care for it, in our simple way, while the family are in Ashby." (26)

Lauretta Fortune came from Nova Scotia to work for the Aunts. In her 1941 "Impressions of Exmoor," Lauretta Fortune recalled the atmosphere at the farm:

The elasticity of the house and the food. The surprise element of going to bed at night not knowing whether I am to be cook, chamber maid, or errand girl when I get up in the morning. The ease which countless young people fit themselves into the household and soon become part of it. (27)

In the summer of 1931, when Lauretta broke her hip falling off a horse, her sister Irene came down from Nova Scotia. A "wonderful Old New England cook," Irene Fortune was often introduced by the Aunts as "Miss Fortune." (28) At Christmas 1941 she wrote:



*In the kitchen, Hattie Parker, Isabel Reader MacLeod, Olive Reader, Ella Reader and Irene Fortune. Hattie and Irene were cooks, Isabel and Olive were maids, and their sister Ella was visiting. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

I had a fine trip home in February, March, and April of 1934 when Miss Farnsworth and Miss Johnson went to Europe with the girls. In March 1936 we moved back to the big house after it was moved, and the day before Coritas birthday they decided to have a party in the big house. So we hustled and got dishes over and I cooked the dinner for about sixteen. . . . On the 19th of April, 1936, Miss Robbins and Dermie came to stay, and Dermie went to watch the Marathon. (29)

Charlotte Matilda Robbins was “Cousin Lottie,” the elderly cousin of Marion’s father. She spent her remaining days in the happy environment of Exmoor Farm. Her nurse, Miss Mary McDermott, was known as “Dermie.” (30)

Also on the staff at Exmoor were the Reader sisters, Isabel and Olive, from Rock Island, Vermont. Isabel married “Mac” MacLeod who worked at Exmoor Farm. One horrible day Mac was gored to death by a bull. Marion told Isabel that she had a home at Exmoor for the rest of her life if she wished. (31)

Olive described her chores at Exmoor. In the morning she went out and gathered flowers for the house. Then she waited on table. Lauretta did the upstairs, Mrs. Strickland did the laundry. Irene and Hattie cooked. The men cleaned the entire downstairs before breakfast every morning. (32) Miss Johnson would come downstairs for breakfast at half past seven each morning. Miss Farnsworth had her breakfast upstairs, went into her office for a little while, and then disappeared, off to Boston. (33) Tea was served at four every afternoon, dinner at seven. (34)

Hattie R. Parker, who cooked with Irene Fortune, had been with Marion's family for many years. According to the 1910 U.S. Census, she was originally from Maryland and by 1910 was working as a servant for Marion's parents at their Cambridge home. At the time, Hattie was 28 and Marion, a student at Radcliffe, was 21. (35)

In addition to the household and farm staff, there were two secretaries. Marjorie Thompson Packard came to Exmoor in 1933. In her 1941 remembrance, "Some things a secretary should know" she made this list:

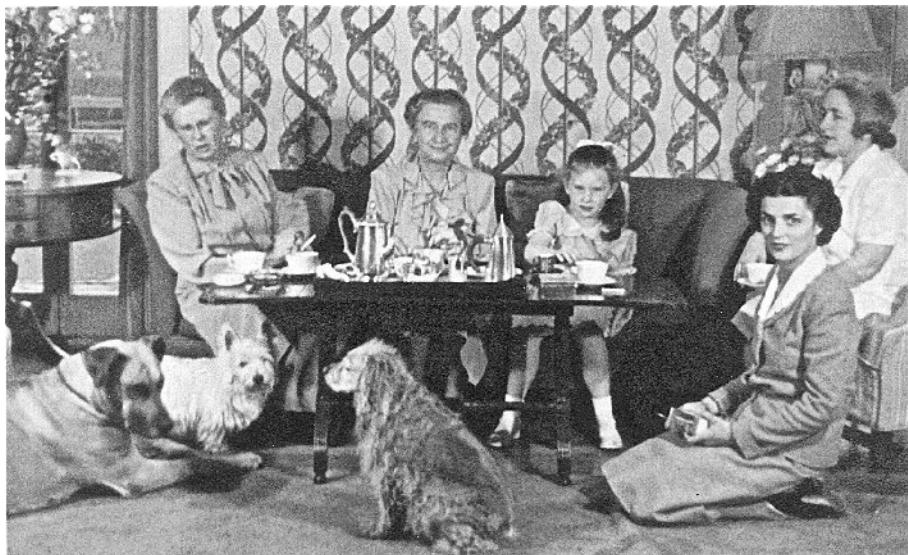
All about dogs and dog fights. What man to notify if a cow gets out on the Post Road. If someone asks for Franklin Roosevelt on the telephone, to look in the garage apartment before saying he isn't here. To expect one's lady bosses to come home at any moment after they leave, whether they have started for Boston or Europe. (36)

Old friend Jenny Kroll came to Exmoor in December 1937 to be the second live-in secretary. In her Christmas 1941 memoir "Indelible Ink," she recalled the tumultuous atmosphere at the main house in the years before it was moved and enlarged:

Budding romances; boys everywhere; Marion's pathetic and vain attempts to find an unoccupied corner for herself of a Sunday evening. Her eventual decision that if she ever was to have a room to call her own again, she'd have to build it. And so the whole house was moved and greatly enlarged and there were rooms enough for everybody. (37)



*The Aunts employed two live-in secretaries: Marjorie Packard (left) and Jenny Kroll (right). (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*



*Tea was served at four o'clock every afternoon. (l-r) Helen Johnson, Marion Farnsworth, Sally Farnsworth, her nanny, and Corita Arche ("Tiqui") kneeling. Dogs from left are Karen, Thistle, and Susan. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

### ***Moving the Big House***

Although the original farmhouse was big, it was not big enough to house all of the ever-growing family. In 1935 Marion hired noted Boston architect Eleanor Raymond to draw up plans for several additions to the rear of the historic house. But first she determined that it would have to be moved. She and Helen wanted to be near the pines, about 575 feet further back from the noisy traffic of the Post Road. Miss Raymond recalled her work for Miss Farnsworth in her Christmas 1941 "History of Exmoor:"

The most dramatic architectural event was the moving of the main house in 1935; chimneys, appended wings and all, up off its foundations by the side of the noisy road, high over the apple orchard where for days it appeared to hang in space – on through the orchard itself where full grown trees were moved out of its path and replanted with sun shades to protect them from the sun, until it alighted on a new cellar hole that had been prepared for it within the shadow of the pine-wooded slope which afforded a view of the distant north country. Here the old house regained the quiet farm setting which belonged to it and all was serene except for the fact that it was too small for the size of the Exmoor family. In fact it was only half big enough. The architect's job was to add as much again in terms of room inside but keep the old farmhouse looking just about the same outside. The job called for a "now you see it and now you don't" artist. It was great fun playing the part. (38)

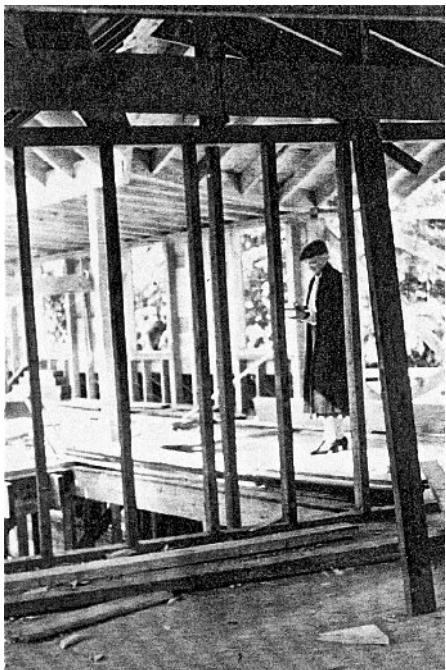
In the article "House Once Removed" in the magazine *House Beautiful*, author Ethel B. Power described how the move was accomplished:

"... a trestle was built to lift the house over the valley. On this it was rolled, a few yards a day. Propulsion was by a winch operated by the motor of a large truck. This trestle was not built like a bridge to span the distance; only enough of it was erected at a time to cover a small part of the journey. When the end of the day's run was reached, the part behind was taken down and built up again in front. Because there was so little of this supporting structure in place at any one time, the house had all the appearance of being poised in mid-air, or, when it reached the orchard, of perching on the tree-tops. (39)

Five new wings in the Colonial Revival style more than doubled its original size. To keep the new parts subordinate so that the original block of the house might still predominate, the architect placed the wings well to the rear and stepped them down. Very little of them is visible from the front. A broad grass terrace was added in front, bounded by a white picket fence and shaded by newly transplanted elms was made. According to the *House Beautiful* article, the cost of moving from foundation to foundation was \$3000.

In March, 1970 Marjorie Packard wrote an account of the buildings at Exmoor Farm for the Town of Weston Historical Commission, which reads in part:

...the house suffered no damage . . . except a crack in the scenic wallpaper in the dining room. . . . The long windows and shutters from the old George Lamson house in Weston (demolished in 1922) were incorporated into one of the new living rooms and a paneled fireplace wall and doors designed to harmonize. The spiral staircase in the new hall is a copy of the one at 40 Beacon Street, Boston. . . . The old hand hewn beams with quirk roll beading, and gunstock posts still remain, and the method of construction without ridgepole can be seen. (40)



*Eleanor Raymond was a successful woman architect at a time when the profession was dominated by men. She supervised the moving and enlargement of the Big House (seen here) and designed many Exmoor outbuildings. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

*The farmhouse at 751 Boston Post Road experienced many changes in its long history. In 1971, the Weston Historical Commission engaged Abbott Lowell Cummings, Director of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now Historic New England) to evaluate the house and determine an approximate date. Cummings, an expert in early Colonial house construction, opined that the east part of the house was built first, around the 1720s, as a “one over one” room with chimney bay, and was enlarged about a decade later into a “two over two” center chimney plan. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*



*Two photographs of the moving of 751 Boston Post Road in 1935. As described in the House Beautiful article, “The house rolled sedately on its way. . . , and so little disturbed that a watchman lived in it during the entire journey.” (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

## ***More Construction Projects***

Raymond's next job at Exmoor involved the moving and redesign in 1937 of the hen house, which was part of the original farm. It became a modern home with two apartments known as “Apple Flats.” In her memoirs, Raymond describes other construction projects: the “Red Houses,” the “House on the Old Foundation,” “The Cabin,” and the Gun Club building.

In the fall of 1938 came the hurricane and by the next spring there were so many piles of boards and beams at Exmoor sawed from the fallen trees that something had to be done with them. The result was the building of the two "Red Houses" now known as the "Hurricane Pines." Every inch of wood in these houses, almost literally, came from these trees by way of Kurth's saw. (41)

Latest, but not last, I hope, was the "House on the Old Foundation" . . . various versions of this house sketched up at various times since the old farmhouse rose up and left its nest. There were visions of a stone cottage and of many types of Colonial farm houses. . . Finally the decision fell on a replica of an old house in Barnstable on the Cape which was faithfully reproduced as far as the outside of the main part of the house is concerned.

The development of the Cabin . . . the turning of the Gun Club building into a house, the growing up (and down) of the Cottage, and the metamorphosis of the Driver house into a two-family dwelling were undertaken without benefit of much beyond the architect's blessing. But they play their part in the pattern of the architectural growth of Exmoor. Long may she live! (42)

The Red Houses, numbered 52 and 56 Gun Club Lane, were originally rental properties. The "House on the Old Foundation" is now 745 Boston Post Road. The Cabin, a favorite place for the Aunts to get away, was in the pines behind the big house and remains part of the 751 Boston Post Road property, as does the Cottage. The old Gun Club was converted to a residence at 68 Gun Club Lane. The house referred to as the Driver House is at 787 Boston Post Road.

### *The Growing Exmoor Community*

When their friend Mary Field saw the "House on the Old Foundation" (745 Boston Post Road) being built in 1941, she let the Aunts know right away that she wanted to rent it. Miss Field was the granddaughter of the Rev. Joseph Field, a long-time minister at First Parish Church. She had been living since her childhood at the old family homestead, 639 Boston Post Road, where she brought up her nephews Blake, Erlund, and Olsen following the death of their mother. Mary Field was a founding member of the Women's Community League and very active in town. For many years she taught a popular and reportedly lucrative dancing class at the Town Hall. (43) She lived at No. 745 until her death in 1958.

Already happily installed in the recently acquired Driver house at 787 Boston Post Road were teachers Phil and Chic Bassett. For years they drove the Exmoor girls to and from Beaver Country Day School in Chestnut Hill. (44)

The Aunts had visitors constantly, as did the girls. "Don't ask me where anyone is," Marion used to say, "I have no idea who's here and who isn't." (45)

They also traveled extensively with the girls, taking them to Europe, Cuba, the Bahamas, and all over the United States.

By 1938 Exmoor Farm became the setting for a series of wonderful weddings. All the girls except Thelma Stevens were married in rapid succession, as was Al Hunt. (46)

### *The Aunts Adopt a Baby*

In May 1940, Marion Farnsworth legally adopted a baby girl whom she called Sarah Anne Farnsworth, known as Sally. She was able to do this with the help of her old friend Dr. Thom, with whom she had started the Habit Clinic at the South End Settlement House back in the 1920s. When Marion and Helen decided they would like to adopt a little girl, Dr. Thom found them a lovely newborn baby whose parents were living in Boston and were unable to care for her. (47)

A few months earlier, in January 1940, Cousin Lottie had passed away. Her nurse Mary McDermott stayed on to care for Sally, first at Exmoor, then at "Blue Gates" a small house the Aunts purchased in New Ipswich, New Hampshire, in anticipation of the arrival of the English children. (48)

Sally Farnsworth was especially attached to her Aunt Helen, who was sweet, loving, and fun to be with. Later there was also a live-in nanny, a rigid disciplinarian, of whom she was not at all fond. (49)



*Baby Sally Farnsworth with the English children, taken around the fall of 1940. From left: June Sylvaine, baby Sally, James Pennington, and Doreen Doggett. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

## ***World War II: the Aunts Step Up***

In 1939 Germany invaded Poland and once again the world became engulfed in the flames of global war. In 1940 a call went out for American families to shelter and care for British children, to save them from the London blitz. The Aunts were quick to respond. Miss Farnsworth cabled a friend in London: "Send me six children. Will be responsible for everything." (50)

Soon the English school children arrived. Anne (age 8) and James Pennington (age 6), brother and sister, were the youngest. Then came Norman McKinnon (age 11) and John Inskip (age 10), whose mother Effie returned to England without him. June Sylvaine (age 12) and Doreen Doggett (age 13) were the oldest of the children who came to Exmoor Farm and Ashby Pasture.

Enid Henn accompanied Anne and James Pennington to America, along with her own son Desmond and daughter Rosalind, who were to stay in New Haven. Henn was one of thousands of desperate British mothers seeking shelter for their children. In "Desmond," a memoir about her late son privately printed in 1967, Enid Henn recalls the experience of meeting the welcoming Aunts at Ashby Pasture early in August 1940. She describes the response when she looked bewildered at the extensive sleeping arrangements:

Miss Farnsworth laughed and came to my rescue. "You see, Helen and I are very used to young people. When she and I decided to live together after the last war, we made up our minds we weren't going to grow into two selfish women with nothing but ourselves to think about. So we started at Exmoor Farm with hundreds of chickens, and gradually acquired five adopted daughters. Some were related to us or else were the children of old friends and some, well, they just needed help." She finished almost apologetically.

"And do you mean to say that you have taken on six British children in addition to all those?" "Oh, no," was the emphatic reply. "As you saw at supper last night, we have only got Corita and Elizabeth left now." Corita (Tiki) (sic) was Cuban, dark and slim with fine features and large lustrous eyes. Elizabeth very evidently was literary, and on the verge of taking a job in New York. "Thelma is in New York too," went on the soft voice of Miss Farnsworth at my side, "but Jean and Nancy were married two summers ago. And Margaret, of course, though she was only with us four years. She came for a week and just stayed on," laughed Miss Johnson, her eyes twinkling with amusement, her whole person radiating geniality and enjoyment of life.

"Three marriages in one year," sighed Miss Farnsworth, smiling ruefully at her friend and partner. "We were both absolutely exhausted by the end," and they laughed in a way that made the idea of exhaustion seem a joke in itself. (51)

*Five beautiful girls: Elizabeth "Lee" Francis, Nancy Jane DeCanizares, Corita "Tique" Arche, Jean Melville, and Thelma K. Stevens.* (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)



In "Desmond," Henn provides insight into the Aunts' view of child raising:

Miss Farnsworth went from diet and vitamins to education, psychology, exercise and amusement in a way that made me feel not only that she regarded the bringing-up of the young as a job that demanded the best of one's brains as well a great deal of time and love, but that already she had acquired much wisdom and experience. (52)

I learned that there was another very precious member of the family circle who had not been mentioned, Sally-Ann aged seven months, an American baby whom they had adopted in the full legal sense some six months earlier. "We've got a little house called Blue Gates up on the hill and we've kept her and the nurse up there until we'd made quite sure the English children hadn't brought any germs. Then later, we thought Anne and James could join her for a time in a nursery sort of life." "She is the sweetest thing," interpolated Miss Johnson, shaking her head slowly from side to side to emphasize what she was saying, and smiling a smile I felt sure must have healed many a childish hurt.

Thus did these two create an atmosphere of harmony and peace, of security and collective happiness. (53)

## *The English Children*

Philip D. Bassett and his wife Chic, both teachers at Beaver Country Day School in Chestnut Hill, were for many years friends and neighbors of the Aunts both in Weston and at Ashby. In 1983, when interviewed for Weston's oral history project, he recalled their first meeting:

We met in the 1940's because Chic and I had a place in New Ipswich, New Hampshire, just three miles from Ashby Pasture . . . we spent that entire summer of 1940 there . . .

Mr. Smith, the headmaster, wrote and asked us if we would go over and interview some English girls Miss Farnsworth wanted to send to Beaver. The English girls had already arrived . . . and these were the two oldest girls. . . . So we went over on a nice, sunny afternoon to Ashby Pasture and met with the English girls and they were delightful.

These girls were thirteen and fourteen years old. And that day we met Miss Farnsworth and Miss Johnson, and I think it was one of those occasions of instant like on both sides, because they liked us and we liked them, and Miss Johnson, in the course of the afternoon, asked us if we ever thought of living in Weston. We said we had thought about it and looked, but we were living in Newton Center at the time. She said "Miss Farnsworth and I have just taken over the old Driver house on the Boston Post Road, just beyond Exmoor Farm, and we're turning it into apartments and would you be interested in maybe renting one of the apartments?" We said, "Well we might be." And she said "Why don't you come down and look at them?" So I think the next Saturday we did go down.

Miss Johnson was there and showed us the apartment and we loved it and said we'd like to live there . . . so we had the first floor and Marjory (sic) Packard, who was one of the secretaries at the time, had the second floor . . . It was very charming, a beautiful house. So that was how we met them, and we moved to Weston in the fall of 1940 and that was the beginning of a very, well I say a mountaintop experience in terms of acquaintanceships and family relationships with Miss Farnsworth and Miss Johnson whom I call interchangeably "The Aunts." (54)

Two of the boys, Norman McKinnon and John Inskip went to Rivers, which was also in Chestnut Hill at the time. The youngest English children, Anne and James Pennington, went to Meadowbrook School in Weston. (55)

Bassett tells of many other English children in town, including their own "little English baby who came to us at the age of eighteen months . . . and stayed with us for three and a half years." Baby Caroline had arrived with her mother, Betty,



*The English children (l - r) Norman McKinnon, Anne Pennington, James Pennington, Doreen Doggett, Miss Mary McDermott (the nurse), June Sylvaine, and John Inskip. In December 1938 on his wedding day, Al Hunt wrote in his diary “. . . time and world revolution have wrought a mighty change on Exmoor. Whereas the little gals of ‘33 and I are busy creating our own Exmoors, The Farm has reverted to youth. Again one can see the pet goat, trim young girls in riding habit, unsteady skating on the pond. . . Behind the high pitch of young voices and confusion of youthful forgetfulness, the controlling hand of genius brings order out of apparent chaos. . . May there always be an Exmoor.” (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett.)*

who then returned to England because “her husband, a very good doctor in London, wanted her home.” (56) Bassett described the nursery school the Aunts established at Exmoor:

They established a nursery school for a couple of years for Sally Ann at Exmoor and our little girl, Caroline, went to that nursery school, and some other children from the neighborhood went there too . . . Helen took care of the farm and all the other things done outside while Marion had charge of the household. (57)

## *Social Life at Exmoor*

Much was always happening at Exmoor, yet it was so insular that many longtime Weston residents were never aware of the place at all. Visitors were an almost constant presence. Birthdays, holidays and especially Christmas were celebrated in a big way. Al Hunt played Santa Claus every year to the delight of all. (58)

Martha Stevens recalls the “queen of parties” held on April 6, 1938, at the Hotel Somerset in Boston, for the birthdays of her sister Thelma and of Margie Crofton-Atkins. A program survives, printed on pink paper, listing the guests and the menu, written in French, “par Les Tantes,” (by the Aunts). (59)

Phil Bassett remembers the parties and dinners with as many as twenty people. “A great deal of fun, games and music and singing - a lot of fun.” Phil and Jenny were both great piano players, and everybody joined in singing Christmas carols and popular songs. But along with the fun, Bassett explains, a lot of work was getting done, with the help of the secretaries.

Miss Johnson used them for her business, of course, and Miss Farnsworth used them for her business. She was much involved in the Habit Clinic with Dr. Thom. She was one of the founders of that and supported it financially, so she had a lot of business. Jenny will tell you . . . she doesn’t know how she ever got things done. (60)



During the war, life at Exmoor and Ashby went on as usual for the Aunts and the children. Although there were national food shortages and rations, there was always plenty to eat on these two working farms. The Aunts even had their own gas station at Exmoor.

*Nancy Jane DeCanizares and Corita “Tiqui” Arche, c. 1934. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

Bassett recalls the war years:

[The war] affected us very little because everything was supplied – a little enclave all to itself. I always felt that about Exmoor, that here is a self-contained entity, really, because they didn't have to depend on anybody else except for staples, maybe flour and sugar. They raised all their own cattle, they slaughtered their own beef, they slaughtered their own pigs . . . poultry, eggs, milk, vegetables . . . (61)

### ***The War is Over***

As World War II drew to a close, the English children started to return to their families in Great Britain. Jenny Kroll remembers “And when they finally had to go back, the children didn’t realize how much they missed Exmoor, and we heard later that they were so homesick they could hardly stand it.” (62) Doreen Doggett came back to stay for a while and got a job with the Aunts’ veterinarian. June Sylvaine came to visit a few years later with her father, playwright Vernon Sylvaine, when a farce of his was staged in Boston. (63)

In 1948, when Sally Farnsworth was eight years old, “Mother decided that I should go to Concord Academy as a boarder.” This was very much against her will. Although she has fond memories of the school, where she graduated in 1958, she was not at all happy to be exiled from Exmoor during the school year, except for holidays. It seems ironic that Sally did not enjoy the same loving hospitality as the other children previously in residence at Exmoor Farm. Whatever the reason, it was difficult for the young child to understand and accept her mother’s decision. Nevertheless, she was ultimately very happy boarding at the Concord home of a favorite teacher at the Academy. (64)

### ***Exmoor Farm is Sold***

In 1954, Marion sold most of Exmoor Farm to Frank B. Carter Jr. of Weston, owner of Coombs Motor Company in Watertown. For many years Carter had provided most of the vehicles at Exmoor, from Ford trucks to Packards. Some of the cars had the initials MBF on the passenger door and HSJ on the driver’s door. (65) Jenny Kroll recalls that the Aunts “had bought practically all their cars from him and had great admiration and respect for him – and somewhat to their surprise he expressed an interest in buying Exmoor Farm. And so that is what eventually came about.” (66)

The big house, the cottage, and “Apple Flats,” all located at 751 Boston Post Road, were sold to Carter, along with about 48 acres. Carter, who was married the following year, named his farm “Woodleigh.” It remains a working farm still

owned by his widow, Lucy B. Carter, who now lives in the cottage. Mrs. Carter remembers having Sally Farnsworth and Jill Kellogg (Jean's daughter) in her Brownie Troop. The big house has been divided into four apartments. (67)

Forty-one acres of land, for centuries known as the Jericho swamp, were given to the Town of Weston and renamed Jericho Town Forest. Marion retained the rest of the property, including the house at 745 Boston Post Road, which was still being rented by Mary Field.

### *The End of an Era*

Marion and Helen both moved to Boston, each to her own apartment in the Back Bay. Marion took a large apartment on Beacon Street overlooking the Charles River and brought Irene Fortune with her. Helen took an apartment in the same neighborhood. She took Elizabeth Wallace with her, also for what turned out to be a long time. (68)

Then in 1958, at age 69, Marion Farnsworth surprised everybody and married Alvah Richardson Boynton of Duxbury. A stockbroker, Boynton was Marion's financial advisor. (69) She had known him since childhood and remembered that as a little girl she used to push him around Cambridge in his baby carriage. (70) Jenny Kroll recalled: "Alvah, who was a childhood friend of Marion, and whose wife died after a very long illness, began to come more and more on the scene, and we got a little bit suspicious and finally they announced their engagement." (71)

The wedding took place on October 1, 1958, at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Weston. Marion moved to Alvah's home on Cranberry Lane in Duxbury but kept



*Aerial view of the main house at Exmoor Farm showing the additions made after the house was moved back from Boston Post Road. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)*

her Boston apartment at 274 Beacon Street and her remaining property in Weston and Ashby.

In 1958 Marion gave Helen Johnson a life estate at 745 Boston Post Road, where death had recently ended Mary Field's long and happy tenancy. Helen made a few improvements and moved in with Elizabeth Wallace as her housekeeper.

What happened? According to her adopted daughter, Sally Farnsworth Blackett, "No one had ever made love to Mother before. When he stayed overnight, he used to sleep in her bed. Helen did not care for that at all."

This begs the question, what was the nature of Marion's relationship with Helen? They shared a wonderful life for 38 years and cared for over a dozen children together. Their long and intimate friendship seemed to be the very definition of a "Boston marriage." Yet both Marion's daughter Sally and her daughter-in-law Kay Boynton expressed doubt that they were ever lovers. (72)

One friend of the family recalled that, for some forgotten reason, Marion and Helen had a falling out. "This is when Marion made the decision to marry—a big mistake." (73) Although she said little about it, "Helen took it pretty hard." (74)

In any event, when Helen returned to Weston she became more active in town affairs. She had previously joined the "Cracker Barrel" a private, civic-minded group that started meeting shortly after a student torched the high school in 1948, leading to much discussion about a new school. She enjoyed hosting her Weston neighbors in her new home. Helen became the first woman on the vestry at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, where she and Marion had worshipped for many years.

In the early 1970's, Helen Johnson had a stroke that left her incapacitated. Elizabeth Wallace continued to care for her until her passing at age 89 on April 28, 1972. Helen is buried with four friends at Linwood Cemetery on a hillside lot marked by a granite boulder from the Weston farm. One word "EXMOOR" is chiseled into the rock. (76)

Marion's health deteriorated gradually after her move to Duxbury with Alvah Boynton. She had trouble remembering things and found it increasingly more difficult to function. Then in November 1968, she had a stroke. She became a resident of nearby Newfield House. Jenny Kroll was one of the staff at Exmoor who used to visit her there. (77) Sally Farnsworth Blackett visited her every week. She reports that Alvah was never there. (78)

Several of her friends and family felt that Alvah had married Marion for her money and had taken advantage of her. (79) Others remember her as being very happy in Duxbury, laughing and rocking Alvah's infant grandson and her namesake, William Farnsworth Boynton, in her rocking chair. (80)



Helen Johnson (left) and Marion Farnsworth, c. 1953. (Courtesy Sally Farnsworth Blackett)

car full of Exmoor girls. This made her particularly intriguing to Al, who became all the more determined to win her, according to their daughter Frances vonMertens. Helen Johnson, Frances's godmother, was very close to Al and Peg, who lived at Exmoor for many years in the house that Marion built for Al at 725 Boston Post Road. (81)

Each of the Exmoor girls also led happy, productive lives and some went on to do truly exemplary things as well. Jean Melville studied with Walter Gropius at the Cambridge School of Architecture and worked as an architect throughout her life. She was involved in the Williamsburg restoration and the weather station atop Mount Washington. Jean married Stanley Kellogg, a Weston man whom she had met at age 14 when he broke his ankle tobogganing. Jean carried him up the hill to the waiting ambulance. With their children, they lived in or near Exmoor all their lives and also bought a place near the Aunts' farm in Ashby. (82)

Thelma Stevens, an avid gardener and aspiring writer, moved to New York City and wrote articles on gardening for the *New York Times*. Sally Farnsworth remembers her as being "just wonderful." In 1958 when Sally graduated from Concord Academy, Thelma took her and two friends across country by car to

Marion Farnsworth Boynton died on February 26, 1978. Alvah predeceased her in 1974. She is buried in the Farnsworth family lot at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge.

### ***The Legacy of Exmoor***

The spirit of Exmoor, the spirit of goodwill and service to others, survived the passing of the Aunts and lived on in the young people who had been part of that special place.

Al Hunt married the girl next door, Peg Parson, originally from Youngstown, Ohio. She had been staying at Nora Donovan's boarding house at 761 Boston Post Road. Peg backed out of her first date with Al when he showed up with a

visit Nancy Jane De Canizares in Oregon. The girls learned to drive on the trip. (83)

Lee Francis graduated from Radcliffe in 1940, served as a civilian in military intelligence in World War II, had a brief unsuccessful first marriage, and became an associate editor of *Vogue* magazine. In 1951, she married Lawrence Copley Thaw, a world famous explorer and member of the New York Stock Exchange. She became a celebrated philanthropist, supporting many progressive causes and raising large sums for refugees around the world. In 1968 she hosted a fundraiser for the N.A.A.C.P. at her Park Avenue apartment. Miss Ella Fitzgerald sang for the guests. (84)

Nancy Jane De Canizares graduated from Radcliffe in 1938. She moved with her husband, Alfred Hoyt Corbett, to his native Oregon and raised five children, while he practiced law and served in the state senate. In the 1970's they moved to Washington D.C. when he became director of the Office of Legal Services in the Office of Economic Opportunity. (85) Margie Crofton-Atkins also settled in Oregon with her husband, Dr. Samuel Latta Dyack. She worked there as a nurse. (86)

Corita Arche graduated from Regis College in 1935. She married Christopher Baird Sykes of New York City, a Harvard graduate who started out in finance and "chucked it to become a dairy farmer in Ashburnham, Massachusetts." (87)

Sally Farnsworth Blackett, who came to Exmoor as a baby, had two babies of her own, became a skilled photographer, and ran her own business in Newport, Rhode Island, where she has lived for many years. Sally inherited real estate in Ashby from Helen and in Weston from Marion. Over the years, she has kept in touch with many in the Exmoor community. (88)

The public continues to benefit from the good work of the institutions which the Aunts led, served, supported, and endowed. Helen was vice-president of the Family Service Association of Greater Boston, chairman of Home Services for the American Red Cross in Boston, and treasurer of the Boston YWCA. In 1962, Helen Johnson was cited by the Red Cross for her distinguished service; and in 1963, she received the Charles M. Rogerson Award from United Community Services of Greater Boston "for many years of distinguished service to the citizens of metropolitan Boston." (89)

The Habit Clinic which Marion Farnsworth helped to found with Dr. Douglas Thom in 1921 and supported all her life is now Thom Child & Family Services, with branches "promoting the healthy development of young children throughout Massachusetts." (90) For many years, Marion was on the board of the Boston Floating Hospital for Infants and Children, now at Tufts. (91)

The spirit of Exmoor can still be experienced in the loveliness of the Jericho Town Forest. The land bordering the old Boston and Maine railroad bed, which

Marion gave to the Town in the 1950s, has been appreciated and enjoyed by people of all ages, along with their dogs and horses, ever since. Farnsworth's generosity inspired other Weston landowners who followed her example in saving and sharing the land for all time.

*by Isabella Jancourtz*

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Photographs courtesy of Sally Farnsworth Blackett*

## Acknowledgements

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*Madeleine W. Mullin, the Weston Public Library's local history librarian gave me a great deal of invaluable assistance in researching many of the people in the Exmoor community. The oral histories of Jenny Kroll, Phil Bassett, Olive Reader and Erlund Field, part of a joint project by the Weston Public Library and the Weston Historical Society in the early 1980's, were especially helpful in evoking that time and place. Librarian Linda Leahy at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, was a great help in locating archives on Exmoor's Radcliffe graduates.*

*My editor, Pamela W. Fox, president of the Weston Historical Society, showed me how to turn my stacks of jumbled facts into something like a story and helped me sort out all those houses on the Post Road. Many thanks are also due to all who shared what they knew of Exmoor with me, including Lucy B. Carter, Stephen Carter, Kay Boynton, Patricia Boynton, William Farnsworth Boynton, Carolyn Rowland, Frances H. vonMertens, Henry Moulton, Jean Moulton, Doreen Doggett Kynaston, and Charlie Hunt.*

## Footnotes

- (1) U.S. Passport Applications, 1921, Marion B. Farnsworth and Helen S. Johnson; Jenny Kroll oral history, April 27, 1983, Weston Public Library Local History Room.
- (2) Sally Farnsworth Blackett interviews, Newport, Rhode Island, December, 2011.
- (3) *Ibid.*
- (4) Kroll oral history, *op.cit.*
- (5) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.*
- (6) Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, Book 543, Page 63, Certificate #82613. Also Book 4512 page 391 [Victorine Blanchard to Marion B. Farnsworth, May 4, 1922 and Plan Book 305 page 32, describing two parcels of 39.86 and 8.66 acres].
- (7) Kroll oral history, *op.cit.*
- (8) *Ibid.*
- (9) Blackett interviews, *op. cit.*
- (10) *Ibid.*
- (11) Martha Stevens Furth for the "Exmoor Chronicle," an unpublished book of memories of the family, friends and staff presented to the Aunts at Christmas 1941, courtesy of Sally Farnsworth Blackett.
- (12) Blackett interviews, *op. cit.*
- (13) *Ibid.*
- (14) *Ibid.*
- (15) Al Hunt for the "Exmoor Chronicle."
- (16) Blackett interviews,

*op.cit.* (17) Kroll oral history, *op.cit.* (18) Philip D. Bassett oral history, July 11, 1983, Weston Library Local History Room. (19) *Ibid.* (20) *Boston Globe*, “A Place to Retire in Chinatown,” August 4, 2011. (21) *New York Times*, Charles H. Farnsworth obituary, February 13, 1933. (22) Henry Moulton telephone interview, July 31, 2012. (23) Thelma K. Stevens for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” (24) John Lingley for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” (25) *Ibid.* (26) Mrs. Strickland for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” (27) Lauretta Fortune Kangas for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” Lauretta went on to marry Waino Kangas, a volunteer fireman in Ashby. (28) Frances H. vonMertens, telephone interview, January 5, 2012. (29) Irene Fortune for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” (30) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (31) Olive Reader oral history, January 16, 1984, Weston Library Local History Room. (32) *Ibid.* (33) *Ibid.* (34) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (35) United States Census (1910). (36) Marjorie Thompson Packard for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” (37) Jenny Kroll for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” (38) Eleanor Raymond for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” (39) “House Once Removed” by Ethel B. Power, *House Beautiful*, late 1939 or early 1940. (40) Packard, “Exmoor Chronicles,” *op. cit.* (41)Eleanor Raymond for the “Exmoor Chronicle.” (42) *Ibid.* (43) Erlund Field oral history, May 26, 1982, Weston Library Local History Room. (44) Bassett oral history, *op.cit.* (45) Kroll oral history, *op.cit.* (46) *Weston Town Report* records the following marriages: Jean Melville and Stanley Kellogg, November 26, 1938; Margaret Crofton-Atkins and Samuel Latta Dyack, February 11, 1939; Anna Jane DeCanizares and Alfred Hoyt Corbett, June 24, 1939; Corita Arche and Christopher Baird Sykes, September 19, 1942. Al Hunt was married to Frances Parson on December 10, 1938 at Pinehurst, N.C. (47) Blackett interviews, *op. cit.* (48) 1940 *Weston Town Report*. (49) Blackett interviews, *op. cit.* (50) Enid Henn, “Desmond,” a privately printed memoir (1967), courtesy of Sally Farnsworth Blackett. (51) *Ibid.* (52) *Ibid.* (53) Bassett oral history, *op. cit.* (55) *Ibid.* (56) *Ibid.* (57) *Ibid.* (58) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (59) Furth for “Exmoor Chronicle;” *op.cit.*; menu “Un Diner Offert en l’Honneur de Mademoiselle Thelma Stevens et Mademoiselle Margaret Crofton-Atkins par Les Tantes, Hotel Somerset, Le 6 Avril 1938.” The Aunts invited the following guests: Miss Corita Arche, Mr. Harold Baptiste, Dr. Reeve Betts, Mr. Lemuel Bowden, Jr., Mr. Frank Carter, Mr. Stephen Fairbanks, Miss Elizabeth Francis, Mr. Frank Furth, Miss Mary Hamblet, Mr. Albert Hunt, Mr. Stanley Kellogg, Miss Jean Melville, Mrs. and Mr. Francis Moulton, Mr. John Prophet, Miss Charlotte Robbins, Miss Martha Stevens, Mr. Christopher Sykes, Mrs. and Mr. John Trommald. (60) Bassett oral history, *op. cit.* (61) *Ibid.* (62) *Ibid.* (63) Kroll oral history., *op. cit.* (64) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (65) Lucy B. Carter interview December 14, 2011 at Woodleigh Farm, formerly Exmoor. (66) Kroll oral history, *op. cit.* (67) Carter interview, *op.cit.* (68) Kroll oral history, *op.cit.* (69) Carter interview, *op.cit.* (70) Kay Boynton telephone interview, December 3, 2011. (71) Kroll oral history, *op.cit.* (72) Blackett interviews; Boynton telephone interview, *op.cit.* (73) Henry Moulton telephone interview, *op.cit.* (74) Jean Moulton telephone interview, July 31, 2012. (75) Bassett oral history, *op. cit.* (76) Buried with Helen Johnson at the Exmoor plot are Elizabeth Wallace, Philip Bassett, Mercedes Bassett, and Helaine Todd. (77) Kroll oral history, *op.cit.* (78) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (79) *Ibid.* (80) Boynton telephone interview, *op.cit.* (81) vonMertens telephone interview, *op.cit.* (82) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (83) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (84) *New York Times* “Ella Fitzgerald Concert to Aid N.A.A.C.P. Fund,” April 14, 1968. (85) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (86) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (87) vonMertens telephone interview, *op.cit.* (88) Blackett interviews, *op.cit.* (89) *Boston Globe*, Helen S. Johnson obituary, April 29, 1972. (90) Thom Child & Family Services website [www.thomchild.org](http://www.thomchild.org). (91) *Boston Globe*, Marion Boynton obituary, February 28, 1978.



*Al Hunt and Helen Johnson, taken April 16, 1966 at the wedding of Hunt's son, Charles, at the Sunnybrook Club in Philadelphia. (Courtesy Charlie Hunt)*

## **Exmoor Farm and 725 Boston Post Road Recollections**

*[Editor's note: The following history of Exmoor Farm was written by Albert B. Hunt in 1993. Many thanks to Hunt's son, Charles, for making it available.]*

Charles Herbert Farnsworth was to have considerable influence on my future. In 1932 or 1933 I dined with him and Cousin Lottie, who was living with him in Brookline several times. I don't believe his wife was living. I enjoyed listening to his experiences, such as his daily check of the incoming butter. My interest must have made an impression and I believe we developed a mutual feeling of simpatico. I know I tucked away in the further reaches of my mind the possibility of a job when schooling ended. Mr. Farnsworth had one child, a daughter, Marion B. Farnsworth.

Mr. Farnsworth was president of the First National Stores, then the largest chain of grocery stores in New England. He started as a farmer's son in Lancaster, taking weekly produce to the Boston market on weekends. He ultimately put together several grocery chains, forming the First National Stores.

Marion Farnsworth, known as Embee, was C. H. Farnsworth's only child. When I met her she was unmarried, living with Helen Johnson, known as Yonnie. . . . They opened their home to a group of girls of somewhat similar age and for various reasons. The girls lived at Exmoor Farm and at times Ashby Pasture through college and to marriage or job. When I was introduced to the establishment, beyond Embee and Yonnie there were Nancy Jane de Canizares (niece of Yonnie); Thelma Stevens (niece of Embee); Elizabeth "Lee" Francis (daughter of a widowed father known to Embee); Jean Melville, whose mother worked for the English Speaking Union; and Corita "Tiqui" Arche, a Cuban-born beauty, probably known through Yonnie's father in Varadero, Cuba. To keep it all together was Johnny Lingley, who gardened and drove; Irene Fortune in the kitchen; Loretta and Olive serving and cleaning; Marjorie Packard and Jenny Kroll, both secretaries; MacLeod and wife Isabelle—he tended the horses and she assisted in the house; and then another older couple (name forgotten) who tended cows and chickens. Some moved to Ashby Pasture in the summer to join Gene Wright and wife who cared for the horses, cows, and farm in general. Walter Kurth, an Ashby Fin, was on hand when there was any building, which usually was in process.

I first joined my new family-to-be when Johnny Lingley, driving Miss Farnsworth's open Packard, picked me up at the Harvard Club and delivered me to Exmoor Farm in Weston on Thanksgiving Day in 1933. The driveway circled past a large barn to a brick walkway running across the front of the house. A centered entrance opened on to the usual colonial New England hall, with rising stairway to the rooms above. Doors opened to the right and left into a parlor and library and straight ahead to a dining room with windows across the far end. I describe this layout in some detail, as it would soon become my second home.

There was some confusion as I was greeted by Miss Farnsworth and introduced to Miss Johnson and a number of young girls. There were also a number of boys crowded in the entry area all of the same name, I later learned was Kellogg. Also an odd lot of dogs were underfoot: black, white, pedigreed, and mongrel. Miss Farnsworth became Embee, Miss Johnson became Yonnie, and the four boys became the Kellogg brothers: Moulton, Stanley, John, and Alex. The girls I have mentioned before: Thelma Stevens, Nancy Jane de Canizares, Elizabeth Francis, Jean Melville and Corita "Tiqui" Arche. I guess we had a typical Thanksgiving dinner: Yonnie at one end standing and carving the turkey and Embee at the other — I was tucked in somewhere among the young ladies, all in their late teens. That's the way I remember the setting, which I was to share for the next several years.



*Helen Johnson (left) with Sally Ann Farnsworth on the day of her christening in November 1941. (Courtesy Charlie Hunt)*

The next invitation to Exmoor was Christmas, one I shall long remember. Grouped with all my new friends, I heard sleigh bells and looking out the window I saw Santa with a huge pack approaching across the snow from the nearby barn. He entered the house and with jolly ho ho ho's withdrew the gifts from his pack and passed them to each good child. I felt as such, seeing my first real Santa in red suit and white whiskers. In my excitement, I received skis and other related gear and even claimed more than what was intended for me, to the amusement and laughter of the group. In the years to follow, I replaced MacLeod in the Santa suit and

produced the ho ho ho's.

I can't recall whether it was the summer of '34 or '35 that I was first invited to spend the summer months at Exmoor, but I did become a permanent boarder in September of 1934. I was furnished a room, bath, and sleeping porch in the farmer's cottage occupied by Isabelle MacLeod. Her husband had tragically been gored by a bull within a box stall of the big barn. I paid Embee \$30 a month for room and \$25 as a boarder. So I started my Exmoor Farm life, the only man with at one time thirteen ladies ranging from late teens to late eighties. I became known as "the white haired boy" and I really have never known just what it meant. Before I became permanent, it was decided to move the two-storied main house, located next to the big barn and close to the Post Road, to a new location far back from the road. The house! chimneys and all !was jacked up, placed on huge beams and rolled over the apple orchard to its new site. Eleanor Raymond, architect and friend of the Aunts, designed the additions, which more than tripled the area. The old quarters remained unchanged and the move was so perfectly performed that the floral antique landscape wallpaper of the dining room was not damaged. Edith Cochran, partner of Miss Raymond's, designed the surrounding gardens; and Walter Kurth supervised the construction. Walter and I

became good buddies, often visiting the dogs in Revere [Editor's note: Wonderland Greyhound Park race track]. He was later to build my house at 725 Boston Post Rd. There was now room for everyone, those that were there, those to come, and all the dogs.

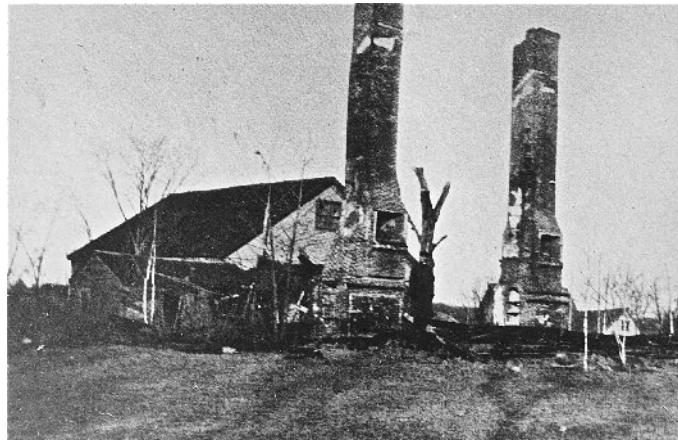
As I became one of the household, the girls were busy struggling and enjoying college: Jean with Gropius in architecture, Tiqui at Regis, and the rest at Radcliffe.

Yonnie, raised a Quaker in Wayne, PA., was the prominent church attendee of the group, every Sunday off to the Episcopal church. Tiqui accepted an occasional invitation; she was a beautiful dancer and I think we did a bit of that. At one point she teamed up with a pro and gave dancing exhibits. She attracted others, and finally there was Christopher Sykes, who won the beauty.

The Aunts were all into providing and arranging to broaden the interests of their adoptees. There was tennis in Ashby, later a swimming pool and horses to ride. Both Aunts rode, Yonnie was most accomplished and had a thoroughbred named Lark. She alone rode Lark until Margie Crofton Atkins appeared on the scene.



*Sally Ann Farnsworth's christening, November 1941, taken by Peg Hunt. From left: Mary Hamblet, Helen Johnson, Miss Jones, James Pennington (boy), Marion Farnsworth (in white), Lee Francis (behind Miss Farnsworth), Miss Charlotte Perkins (behind Chris Sykes), Chris Sykes (man with baby Sally Ann), "Pickie" (Marjorie Thompson Packard, behind Sally Ann), Jenny Kroll (upper right), Corita "Tiqui" Arche (lower right in white) (Courtesy Charlie Hunt)*



*The Flagg Tavern burned to the ground in 1902, but the two charred brick chimneys weren't demolished until decades later. In the interim, the chimneys served as a landmark for early motorists traveling by automobile to New York. (Courtesy Weston Historical Society)*

They had a many hand heavy Irish hunter named Cinders they allowed me to ride along the trails in the woods behind Exmoor; I believe they called it hacking.

On one such Sunday aboard Cinders, the single line [of horses] at a walk approached a downed log across the trail. As usual I followed in the rear and watched my companions step their steeds over the log; however my mighty hunter decided to make more of the obstacle. I'm told he made a mighty leap from a standing start. The next I knew, Tiqui was leaning over me and peering as I lay in Embee's linen sheets. I learned that Dr. Paul, who always seemed to be attending Embee or someone of the group, had checked me out. My lack of riding ability and Cinder's sudden leap apparently threw me to the trail. I was told I remounted and continued with the group but acted strange enough to call for Dr. Paul and bed.

In 1937, Embee purchased some additional land adjoining her on the Boston Post Road to the east. Immediately next to the pasture that contained her horses and Jersey cows was an area acquired that contained an Exxon (then Standard Oil) station, numerous sheds or shacks, and a cellar hole with two rising brick chimneys which had once been the Flagg Tavern. It burned down in 1902 and dated back to the eighteenth century — another place where Washington had slept. It had been owned by a Mr. Emerson, a recluse and son of a prominent Boston family, who lived in the squalor of numerous shacks, moving from one to the next as the stench urged a change.

I describe this property in some detail because it was proposed by the Aunts that it was time I moved out of my cellar bed and bath and lived in the sunlight. Embee offered to build a house suitable for a bachelor and rent it to me at a nominal interest on her investment. A site was chosen behind the gas station under lease to



725 Boston Post Rd. The photograph shows the cellar hole of the former Flagg Tavern, with the newly constructed Hunt house in the rear. Workmen are in process of replacing the old tavern foundation with a swimming pool. Albert Hunt is the second person from the right, with his back turned. (Courtesy Charlie Hunt)

a Mr. Coburn, with some years to run. Jean Melville, as mentioned, one of the Exmoor gals and an architectural student with Gropius, was given her first design job. Needless to say, I had agreed to everything and influenced Jean's design. I suggested a California ranch style with combination of brick and wide clapboard, and a relatively large vaulted living room with huge fireplace. The final design included what I had suggested plus a one-car garage attached to the vaulted living room, small dining area, bath, kitchen, and bedroom. Walter Kurth took over, first bulldozing the numerous shacks, filling old cellar holes excluding that of the Flagg Tavern, and then starting on my future home. This was in early 1938.

I participated in the house site location, at the northerly edge of the decline away from the Post Road and some sixty feet back from the sharp drop-off to the swamp below feeding into Foote's Pond. The northerly view cleared the small intervening pines to the Jesuit College on the distant horizon some mile or more away.

In the summer of 1938, Peg Parson began to show interest in the progress of the new home being built at 725 Boston Post Road, and when our engagement became a fact, changes were made in the design. . . .

Eleanor Raymond came aboard to assist Jean Melville. The single-car garage was converted into an entry, a two-car garage with connecting breezeway was added to the west, and three rooms with bath were added to the east. Two of the rooms were for sleeping, while the third, with a fireplace that always smoked, was for dressing. The drive, which came straight in from the Post Road directed at the former one-car garage, was curved westerly in back of the gas station to an area sufficient to turn into the westerly facing doors of the new garage. The first planting was between this new driveway and the gas station; one spruce and two arborvitae still remain some fifty-five years later. The gas station was tended by Mr. Coburn until his lease expired in 1944. The station house, pumps, and tank were removed and our entering drive was revised. The westerly entrance to the station was retained and became our new entrance on the Post Road, and the original drive was removed and planted to grass. So the present turn-around came into being and access to the existing garage at that time went through the area where the garage is now located, being moved there in 1954.

Miss Farnsworth who owned the land paid all costs of design, construction of the original house and addition, and original landscaping. We paid rent at \$100 a month until December 1944, when she sold us the house and 2.4 acres of land for \$15,000. Some years later she sold me an additional 2.78 acres for \$7,542 . . .

With war devastating Europe, the Aunts decided to add to their family by giving refuge to British young fleeing the air raids over London. Effy Inskip with her son, John, Norman McKinnon, Doreen Doggett and June Sylvaine arrived by way of Canada. A farm cottage was made over for Effy and John, Norman was handed over to us, and the two girls moved into the main Exmoor house. So our first child was thirteen-year-old Norman, quite a proud teenaged Britisher. We were somewhat relieved when the Aunts placed him in a boarding school. . . They all returned to England before the war ended but after the air bombing of London had ceased. . .

*By Albert B. Hunt, 1993*

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