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Grandma Moses and West Virginia

By Frank Johnston

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Throughout the late 1940s there was an occurrence in the world of art that some have called a phenomenal development. A grandmother who had spent all her life of about ninety years as a farmwife in two different states, then living northeast of Troy, New York, in a farming community named Eagle Bridge, she became a household name through the marketing efforts of Hallmark Cards.¹

This grandmother had established herself as America's best known

primitive artist, although she had never studied art, in fact never had taken a lesson in how to paint. Her paintings had already been exhibited in various countries. She had been honored as Woman of the Year In the Arts for 1948 by the Women's National Press Club.

While in Washington, D.C., to receive this award she and President Harry Truman established a friendship which continued until her death in 1961. Her painting *July Fourth* was purchased by President Truman and this painting still hangs in the White House. It was also used on the commemorative stamp that was released during a ceremony on May 1, 1989, to mark the beginning of Senior Citizens' Month.²

The Hallmark Company sold greeting cards throughout the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons featuring certain paintings of Grandma Moses which showed what were

considered to be traditional rural scenes of winter family activities common during the latter part of the nineteenth century. These paintings were claimed to provide comforting escapes into the times that supposedly existed before there were two world wars and then came the subsequent Cold War which had people living in constant fear of a nuclear holocaust.³

The phenomenal development was that this farmwife, who decided to start applying paints to hardboard to give her something to do after the death of her husband, had not started painting until in her late seventies. She had left home at the age of twelve years to become a live-in hired girl for elderly employees, did not marry until the age of twenty seven, had lived on six different farms in two different states with her husband, Thomas Salmon Moses. She went through ten full term pregnancies within a period of about fourteen years [four resulted in still births and one baby lived for about six weeks].⁴

Grandma Moses was the first artist to become a multi media personality.

Through newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and advertising, the name of Grandma Moses came to represent the comforting memories associated with living in rural America in the last half of the nineteenth century. Up to that time no American artist had received such broad based fame. The persona which was created for her established the foundation for a major marketing of goods which still exists today.⁵

The last minutes of her televised interview with Edward R. Murrow, on his program, *See It Now*, was included in his CBS memoirs as one of the momentous events in his broadcasting history. This supposed uneducated rural farm-wife, in her early nineties, started interviewing Mr. Murrow as she was also working on a painting, while she was appearing live on a nation-wide television broadcast.⁶

Throughout all this international acclaim Grandma wondered what was the fuss all about. Her paintings were the results of her hobby, mostly it a way to produce gifts for family and friends. She could not reconcile herself to accept with comfort those checks which she received as payment for her paintings in the early stages of her developing fame. She once kept several checks in a desk drawer for several weeks, not depositing them with her bank because she was convinced they were mistakes and she would have to return them.⁷

Anna Mary "Grandma" Moses created over 1600 paintings most of which depicted New England winter scenes. But, she did not spend all her life in New England. Eighteen years of her life were lived, very profitably, in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, in Augusta County, Virginia. For six years, Beginning in 1889 and then continuing through 1894 she made and sold butter to the resort that is today known as The Greenbrier.⁸ Then, in late 1902 or early 1903 and until she and her family moved back to New York State in December, 1905, she went into the production of potato chips and according to her memory, "was

shipping barrels of them from the White Sulphur Springs to Charlottesville”.⁹

The income from her butter sales would have put her into the upper middle class for the 1890s. The White Sulphur resort was buying 160 pounds per week at the price of fifty cents per pound.¹⁰ This was during times when the average annual income for farmers was often a loss. Average annual wages for industrial workers was about \$600. With just two months of good production, gross revenue from the butter sales of Anna Moses would have exceeded what a factory worker received for an entire year’s effort. Added to her earnings were what her husband Thomas earned trucking produce to the Staunton, VA, market and any money that came in from the sale of grain that was grown on the 450 acre dairy which they rented near Crimora, VA.

Recent research is providing new facts about the life of Anna and Thomas Moses in the Shenandoah Valley. These facts are providing insights into how the pursuit of business overcame the enmity that existed after the Civil War. Three people who were influential in establishing the successful exploitation of the *Yankee Butter* of Anna Moses had all been confirmed members of the Confederate states of America.

W.A. Stuart, then the owner of what is now The Greenbrier, had been the major supplier of salt to the Confederate States. His half brother was the famous General J.E.B. Stuart, Superintendent of the White Sulphur Springs resort was Benjamin Franklin Eakle.¹¹ As Major Eakle he had led the

14th Virginia Cavalry at Gettysburg, He ended the war as a POW in Fort Delaware after being wounded three times; at Gettysburg, Monocacy, and Cedarville. His coat hangs in the Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.¹²

The Staunton, VA, merchant who first recognized the locally unequalled quality of Anna Moses’ butter was Jared Wellington Spitler.¹³ He had enlisted in the 14th VA Cavalry in July, 1861, a fourteen year old warrior. Captured during the skirmish at Sinking Creek Valley in Greenbrier County, November 26, 1862, he was sent to Wheeling, then Camp Chase, Ohio, and finally to Alton, IL.¹⁴

Mr. Spitler was the merchant to whom Thomas Moses took some of Anna’s freshly churned butter on a warm May morning in 1888. The intent was to trade the butter for groceries, which is what happened initially. The allowance in trade was twelve cents per pound and Thomas took it all in sugar. The allowance for locally produced butter was about eight cents per pound. A neighbor of Anna Moses told her that the market was flooded with local butter and she was wasting her time trying to sell her butter. After J.W. Spitler had tasted Anna’s butter, he said that he would take it home with him so that his family could taste some *Yankee Butter*.¹⁵

Selection of this particular merchant was such a propitious event that it may have been planned by a farm couple who appear in retrospect to have been savvy business people. Thomas Moses traveled over eight miles from the farm near Swoope, VA, to downtown Staunton, passing-by the

establishments of several other merchants, and entered the establishment of a man whose uncle by marriage, Major Benjamin F. Eakle, was superintendent of the White Sulphur Springs resort. His brother-in-law, also named Benjamin F. Eakle, owned a 450 acre dairy farm on South River northeast of Staunton and this same brother-in-law was very prominent in the wholesale and retail grocery business.¹⁶

Within four months after the initial event at which Anna's butter was bartered for groceries at the allowance of twelve cents per pound, Anna and Thomas saw the offered price rise to fifty cents per pound, for all the butter she could make during the next year. To take advantage of this opportunity they had to move to the Eakle Farm named *Belvidere*.¹⁷

From November, 1888 until February, 1895, Anna and Thomas Moses lived on Belvidere Farm and prospered, largely compliments of the resort at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. It would have been a life of constant labor. Production of butter was known as the most labor intensive work of all farming activities. Making butter at the consistent level of quality to meet the taste expectations of the resort guests, Anna Moses would have to convert the butterfat into butter, when the butterfat was at the appropriate stage. This stage was dependent time after milking and also upon variations in the ambient temperature found in the spring house. Chemical changes within the raw materials dictated time of production. Anna Moses had perfected the art for

making flavorful butter, but her production scheduling was still at the mercy of the forces of nature. One hundred sixty pounds of butter per week, each week, over a period of six years would have imposed a daily routine that may explain why four pregnancies ended in still-born babies.

Thomas' sister and brother-in-law came from New York to help run the farm. But, at some point they moved to Clifton Forge, VA, during what was a boom-time there. Three of the Moses children who survived were born at Belvidere Farm.¹⁸

Life at Belvidere Farm and the commercial production of butter ended in February, 1895. A major economic depression that started around 1893 caused the farm to be sold at public auction. Benjamin Eakle had used the farm to secure loans but defaulted on the first payments. Mr. Eakle and J.W. Spitler had become partners in The Staunton Grocery Company and it was declared "failed at busness".¹⁹

Mr. Spitler's home in Staunton was also sold at public auction in 1896, purchased at said auction by Major Eakle. He immediately conveyed the home to his niece and her daughter, Spitler's wife Sarah Frances [Eakle] and daughter Helena.²⁰

Major Eakle owned what was known as the Hoofnagle Farm outside Lewisburg, Greenbrier County. He died in 1898 and was buried in the cemetery of the Old Stone Presbyterian Church, Lewisburg. In his will he left his farm and all its belongings to a niece living in Augusta County,

Virginia.²¹ Annie Eakle, daughter of Henry Eakle, was shown in the 1920 United States Census living in Lewisburg.

The connection of J.W. Spitler and Major Benjamin Franklin Eakle to West Virginia does continue. As mentioned previously in this article, Mr. Spitler, then a private in the 14th VA Cavalry, was captured at the Sinking Creek Valley affair which occurred November 26, 1862. Captain Eakle, [later elected to Major, 2/22/63]²² was one of the officers who surrendered the regiment to an advanced party of 21 men of the Second West Virginia Cavalry led by Major William H. Powell.

Major Powell and his men had been detached by Col. John C. Paxton, 2nd WV Cavalry to scout the Confederate encampment which as it turned out was only about five miles distant from the Federal force of 475 whose movements were being hampered by blizzard conditions that existed on the summit of Cold Knob Mountain. Powell's men captured two Confederate scouts and gained valuable information from them as to strength and location of the Confederate unit. Major Powell located the main part of the 14th VA Cavalry at Lewis' Mill on Sinking Creek. After studying the Confederate encampment through binoculars he decided it might be an appropriate time to attack with his 21 men, rather than wait for the main Federal force which he feared may not be able to arrive until too late in the day.

It was early in the day and the weather conditions for the previous thirty six hours had been snow and freezing rain. Only a few Confederate

soldiers were up and about. Firearms of the encampment were not loaded due to the inclement weather. Powell and his band of twenty one cavalymen charged out of the morning mists and attacked the camp of approximately 500 Confederates. The Confederates surrendered, thinking that they were being attacked by a superior force. Later when the main force of the 2nd WV Cavalry arrived a skirmish erupted. Two Confederates were killed, and two were wounded. One hundred thirteen officers and men were captured.²³ Among the captured was Private Jared Wellington Spitler. Somehow, Captain Benjamin F. Eakle escaped being captured.

One Confederate unit involved at the Sinking Creek event was a company named the Braxton Dragoons. This unit had been recruited the previous month, October 8, during a recruiting encampment at the community of Little Birch, Braxton County. Approximately sixty men and boys were signed-up during this encampment.²⁴

One of these enlistees was a certain Alfred H. Frame. He was captured at the Sinking Creek brouhaha and was a POW along with J.W. Spitler at Alton, IL.²⁵ It is this bit of knowledge that leads the writer of this article to now delve into how small the world can become when one starts snooping into the Civil War in West Virginia.

I am not a transplanted West Virginian now living in Staunton, Virginia. I call myself a temporarily misplaced West Virginian. Alfred H. Frame, Hanse, was the second husband of my Great Grandmother Nancy Jane Johnston. I had heard about this man all my life but until October, 2005, I knew nothing about his war exploits.

My involvement with the history of Grandma Moses in the Augusta County occurred strictly by accident. The first farm [Mount Airy] to be owned by Anna and Thomas Moses is now part of a larger tract of land that is being developed into an industrial park. Back around sometime in the year 2000 or so, an article appeared in the Staunton News Leader that said the Augusta County Board of Supervisors had voted to demolish the Grandma Moses house. Rationale was that it detracted from the value of the project.

A small group of citizens formed a non-profit foundation and gradually got a lease signed to save and restore Mount Airy, which is featured in at least two of Grandma Moses' paintings. I became the researcher into finding all the farms on which the Moses family lived during their eighteen year residency. I entered the Augusta County Courthouse knowing two things; *Grandma Moses* and she was a famous artist. It has been a long trail of research which gradually brought me home.

The Little Birch encampment would probably have occurred in the large field which is formed where Two Lick Run empties into Little Birch River. Part of this bottom land is now occupied by the Little Birch Middle School. Old US Route 19 goes by this spot, which during the Civil War was the Weston-Gauley Bridge Turnpike. The 14th VA Cavalry would have traveled this turnpike when the unit left for its encampment at Sinking Creek.

If J.W. Spitler and Capt. B.F. Eakle

were present at the Little Birch encampment, then they for a short time occupied the site where I attended the first and second grades. They were on land which belonged to my Great-Great Grandfather Jesse Jackson who owned a grist mill where the turnpike crossed Little Birch River.

What was the significance of the resort now named The Greenbrier in the history of one of the world's best known primitive artists? In February, 1895, after the Eakle farm, Belvidere, was sold at public auction, Anna and Thomas Moses signed a lease for one year rental of what is still called *The Dudley Farm*. The amount to which they committed was \$700²⁶ in advance. In the midst of a major economic depression, in the dead of winter, this couple who knew only farming and had no assurance for any income over the next year, they spent what was about the average annual income for that time. Consider what would be the equivalent amount today. They had that much cash on hand because guests at the West Virginia resort liked the butter of Anna Moses. And, this butter it was brought to them by previous members of the Confederate Army who knew that commerce must override enmity. Of course, life at the Dudley Farm did see establishment of another business. Thomas started a milk route in the area of what is today Verona, VA. Anna was washing about 100 bottles per day, then filling them and capping the tops.²⁷

Anna and Thomas Moses left the Dudley Farm in September, 1901. This time they purchased their first farm, which she named Mount Airy. This

farm was purchased from the Daingerfields, Greers and Alfrends.²⁸ Leroy Daingerfield, another Confederate veteran, was one of the first Civil War amputees. He had lost a leg at the Battle of Philippi.²⁹

Little is known about the potato chip business that Anna Moses started when they lived on their last farm [September 1902-December 1905] which was on the northern edge of Staunton. It was a small farm of 19+ acres and she had little to do because four of her five children were in school and Thomas was managing a nearby farm for a friend. Her mention of it is brief in her autobiography, *My Life's History*. She did say that she used "her grocer man" as the initial customer. This may have been J.W. Spitler. He and Eakle were back into business in downtown Staunton and presumably they would have revived the old butter distribution network. How much money the business brought in, she did not say.³⁰

Grandma Moses, in many respects lived a life full of serendipity. There were events of coincidence which happened without planning, and these events were significant in making her into an international personality. In fact, she and her husband, newly married about three days, came to Staunton, VA, by mistake. They had caught the wrong train out of Washington, D.C. in November, 1887. Tired, they detoured to rest-up overnight because they were on their way to North Carolina where Thomas was to manage a horse ranch. The people they met at a Staunton rooming house and a Staunton druggist convinced them that they need not go any farther. And they stayed and

prospered. Upon their arrival their joint life's savings amounted to \$630. When they departed Staunton, eighteen years later, they rented a railroad car to transport their belongings to Eagle Bridge, New York.

What if they had continued on to North Carolina? Could Anna Moses have sold her butter there for fifty cents per pound? How significant was that West Virginia resort in making Anna Moses into the person that became Grandma Moses?

Endnotes

Abbreviations assigned to certain resource materials

- *MLH* is: *Grandma Moses, My Life's History*; Harper and Brothers 1948
- *GMC21* is: *Grandma Moses in the 21st Century*, Jane Kallir; Yale University Press 2001
- *GMABM* is: *Grandma Moses, Artist Behind the Myth*; Jane Kallir; Clarkson N. Potter, Inc 1982
- *VC* is: *14th Virginia Cavalry*, Robert J. Driver, Jr.; H.E. HOWARD, Inc. 1988

1. *GMABM*: pp. 18-20
GMC: pp12, 21-25
2. *Grandma Moses*: Otto Kallir, pp.199,200; Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1973
3. *GMC21*; p57, 60
4. This represents period of time starting with birth of the eldest child Winona, Dec 2, 1888
and the last born was Hugh, last half of the year 1901.
5. *GMC21*: pp.56-60

6. *Grandma Moses*: Otto Kallir, pp.169-175; Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1973
7. *Ibid.* p 103
8. *MLH*: pp 69
Barefoot in the Grass, The Story of Grandma Moses, p.72, William H. Armstrong; Doubleday and Co. 1970
9. *MLH*: p.91
10. *Ibid.* p.64, 69; *Barefoot in the Grass, The Story of Grandma Moses*, p.72, William H. Armstrong; Doubleday and Co. 1970
11. *The History of the Greenbrier, America's Resort*, p.69, Robert S. Conte, Pictorial Histories Publishing Co, 4103 Virginia Ave. SE, Charleston, WV 25304
12. *VC*; p119
13. *MLH*: p64
 Grandma Moses remembered that the merchant was a Mr. Spitler, and he was the brother in-law of Ed Eakle. Actually, the family bible of Christian E. and Margaret J. Eakle kept by the New Hope Methodist Church, New Hope, VA, shows that Jared Wellington Spitler married Sarah Frances Eakle, daughter of Christian and Margaret. In two publications there are illustrations which pinpoint the location of the store.
 - *Historical Atlas of Augusta County 1885*, p. 9. Jedediah Hotchkiss and Joseph Waddell
 - *STAUNTON, VIRGINIA, Its Past Present and future*:
 B. Frank Eakle had previously purchased a tract of 150 acres of Belvidere from John C. Eakle, September 1, 1885 [Augusta County DB 103, p313]. This same tract had been sold by Christian and Margaret to John C. Eakle in March, 1882. Therefore,

- A promotional booklet published for the Staunton Development Co, 1893 (New York: South Publishing Company, 1893), 70, 72.
14. *VC*: p178
 His enlistment date is July 16, 1861. On his gravestone in Thornrose Cemetery, Staunton, VA
 March 12, 1847 - October 10, 1934
15. *MLH*: p64
16. *MLH*: p64. *The Eakle Family Bible*, ref .in endnote 13. Also, genealogy records from several sources show that the Benjamin F. Eakle who became Major Eakle was brother of Christian E. Eakle. *The Eakle Bible* shows also that Christian and Margaret Eakle had a son named Benjamin Franklin Eakle. This Benjamin F. Eakle was partner in Eakle and Bowling, Wholesale Grocers. In 1893, this B.F.Eakle built the Eakleton Hotel, New Street, Staunton.
16. *MLH* p64. Grandma Moses remembered that it was a 600 acre farm and it was owned by "Ed Eakle ." Christian E. "Ed". Eakle received the deed to Lots 2,3,9 [604.85 acres] of Belvidere Farm, June 17, 1881 [Augusta County DB 97, p59]. However, their share of the farm, then 455 acres, had been conveyed by Christian and Margaret to their son B. Frank Eakle [Augusta County Deed Book 105, p. 530, in exchange for payment of several debts owed by Christian Eakle.

when Anna and Moses moved to Belvidere, November, 1888, all of Eakle shares in Belvidere Farm were owned by B. Frank Eakle, son of Christian Eakle.

17. Note. As a favor to anyone who pursues research in regards to the farms on which Anna and

Thomas Moses lived during their life in Augusta County, be aware there was another prominent farm about three miles downriver that is still named Belvedere, ancestral home, of and still owned by, the McCue family. This is not the same farm. Grandma Moses produced at least nine paintings with Belvidere in the title. These paintings are all of the Eakle Farm, which had been part of a farm named Belvidere.

18. *MLH: pp85,86: Charlie and Mattie Prebble, brother in law and sister of Thomas Moses came to Virginia to help in the running of the Belvidere Farm. Grandma Moses remembered that during the short time the Prebbles lived in Clifton Forge, Charlie worked in a mill. He also put his money into speculation on tracts of land that were quickly subdivided into lots. Speculators who got into these schemes too late, lost their investment. An interesting note about this boom and bust in Clifton Forge is that Major Benjamin F. Eakle, of Lewisburg, had also invested in the same schemes. In his estate settlement there were several lots in Clifton Forge, declared by the estate executor to be of little if any value.*

19. *Staunton City Deed Book 12, p291. Everything owned by Staunton Development Company was sold-off by court order. This included two mules.*

20. *Staunton City Deed Book 14, p.32. On same page, Major B.F. Eakle buys the Spitler home at public auction and then conveys the property to his niece and her daughter.. The auction caused by J.W.*

Spitler defaulting on a note owed to Major Eakle.

21. *Note: The last will and testament of Major Benjamin Franklin Eakle is on file at the Greenbrier County Court House, Lewisburg, WV, and also at the Augusta County Court House, Staunton, VA*

22. *VC p.119*

23. *The Civil War in Greenbrier County, West Virginia, pp.240-242, Tim McKinney : Quarrier Press (2004), Charleston, WV. Distributed by Pictorial Histories Distribution, 1125 Central Ave. Charleston, WV 24302*

24. *VC, pp.96 to 193, 210 to 220*

25. *Ibid.p.123*

26. *Augusta County Deed Book 123, p.102*

27. *MLH, p.77*

28. *Augusta County Deed Book 133, p.332*

29. *Mr. Daingerfield was awarded \$30 per year and an artificial limb from the State of Virginia. These benefits were authorized by an act approved February 14, 1882. It became part of the Virginia Code of 1873, Chapter 76, Section 17. There is a local legend in the Verona area about Private Daingerfield and his best friend Bill Van Fassen. Daingerfield had lost his right leg and Van Fassen lost his left leg. Naturally, on alternate years one would buy a new pair of boots and give the other appropriate one to his buddy. Years later living in New York, two of Grandma Moses sons, Loyd and Forrest had vivid memories of these two aged warriors who were accorded the honor of*

being genuine village characters.

30. *MLH*, pp.90, 91. Grandma Moses remembered that the grocer gave her twenty cents per pound in trade for groceries. Next the grocer requested five pounds. Soon it was ten pounds per week and the price was thirty cents per pound. Thomas made her a slicer. Thomas expected that the market would decline, but it kept growing. As Grandma Moses remembered, she was soon shipping barrels of chips. As she wrote when remembering her childhood activities: "- just like climbing the house in my childhood days, I wanted to be the big toad."

Archives and History lost one of their friends and colleagues when Patricia K. Pleska died on February 28. Pat had managed the West Virginia Veterans Memorial Archives since 1999 and led the annual "Hoot Owl" overnight workshop in conjunction with the Mining Your History Foundation of which she was a founding member. Pat's work on the Veterans Memorial Archives was recognized by Governor Joe Manchin when she was named a Distinguished West Virginian in 2005. Pat is survived by her husband, P. Michael Pleska, son Michael and daughters Christine, Denise, Theresa and Victoria.

PAT PLESKA 1943-2006

Researchers and frequent visitors to the Department of

WEST VIRGINIA ENCYCLOPEDIA ON
THE SHELVES

The West Virginia Humanities Council has announced that the *West Virginia Encyclopedia* is now available. The book, which took almost nine years to produce, contains over 2000 entries written by several hundred contributors. The book is available by mail by contacting the Council at (304) 346-8500 or www.wvhumanities.org.