

Rose Standish Nichols Sixty Years Ago She Organized The Beacon Hill Reading Club (1896)

*An article as it appeared in the **Boston Sunday
Globe**, September 16, 1956.*

By George Taloumis

"It was the spirit of the Puritans to try to broaden their interests towards wide horizons, and that same spirit I've tried to keep alive in everything I've done." With these few words, Miss Rose Standish Nichols of Beacon Hill, well-known traveler, landscape architect and champion of global thinking, summed up what has motivated her long and colorful life spent both in this country and abroad.

Tall, stately, regal in bearing, with an inquiring twinkle in her eye, Miss Nichols today is still the embodiment of intellectual curiosity about everything - countries, people, things, ideas. Early in life her father taught her to question and reason, and during her long lifetime, she has kept alive the wonderfully adventuresome spirit that has made her a true pioneer.

And pioneer she has been in many things.

She was the organizer and founder of the Beacon Hill Reading Club, started over sixty years ago. "Its purpose was to create a feeling of neighborliness on the Hill," she explained. "I also had my mother in mind and the older people, who in America tend to slip into the background. My idea was to keep them in touch with the younger generation and what they were thinking."

The Beacon Hill Reading Club met weekly at the homes of the various members. Each time the hostess selected the literature, she read to the group, after which the members discussed the ideas and engaged in lively conversation. It was at Miss Nichols' house that Mrs. Thomas

Bailey Aldrich read chapters from her *Crowding Years* before the manuscript was published.

In the past there have also been stimulating evenings when a few listened to Louise Homer sing with her husband at the piano; and when the great religious leader, Abdul-Baha, son of the founder of the Bahai faith, urged racial friendship and equality between men and women.

Among others who met at her house were Norman Angell, Professor G. Salvemini, Professor McGovern, Jane Addams, Mrs. Florence Kelley and Mrs. Malmburg, a member of the Finnish Parliament. Also welcome there were early supporters of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

After the reading club came a discussion club in Cornish, N.H., with Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, Mrs. Winston Churchill and Mrs. Maxfield Parrish, called the League of Small Nations. Started with the cooperation of Mr. Porter Sargent and Mr. Horace Kallem of the New York School of Economics, its purpose was to create interest at the time of the first World War in the small nations, such as Finland. At the weekly meetings, many prominent figures were asked to speak and advocate different sides of a vital question. The name of this club was later changed to the Foreign Policy Association, now found all over the country.

Miss Nichols, with her cosmopolitan manner, ready wit and rare sense of humor, is perhaps best known as a landscape architect and writer of garden books. "My active interest in garden making began," she said, "when as a child, under the guidance of my grandfather, Thomas Johnston Homer, I cultivated a tiny posy bed on his Roxbury estate. Many years later I studied horticulture with Mrs. Benjamin Watson and became interested in the so-called 'formal' style in gardens, revived in England and opposed to the sinuosities of the romantic school.

"Accordingly, I wished to study layout from an architect's point of view, so took lessons with my Cornish neighbor, Mr. Charles Platt. Later I studied architecture

in the office of the distinguished architect, Thomas Hastings, in New York City, where I lived with my aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

"Then I went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and took a special course with Professor Desire Despradelle and learned to apply architectural principles to the plans of gardens. Next, in Paris, I studied with Professor Despuis of the Beaux Arts School of Architecture and in London with F. Inigo Triggs, the author of *The English Formal Garden*. All over Europe, I supplemented my academic studies by visiting the gardens for which it is famous."

Among the principles that were emphasized by these professionals were scale, proportion and the relation of the main axis to the subsidiary axes. Her first attempt to put theory into practice was her own walled garden, planned as an outdoor living room at Cornish.

Miss Ellen F. Mason happened to ask her to design her flower garden at Newport, R.I. This successful achievement, her first professional assignment, led to many other commissions, among them the gardens of Mrs. J. A. Spoor near Pittsfield, and Edward L. Ryerson at Lake Forest, Illinois. "This was a very beautiful garden," added Miss Nichols, "laid out in four quarters. Accents were provided by pyramidal evergreens and with standard heliotropes and roses. Along with a definite color scheme, emphasis was placed on contrasts of sunlight and shadow."

Other ornamental pleasure grounds were laid out for Mrs. Francis Peabody of Milton, Miss Florence L. Pond near Tucson, Arizona, Mrs. Esther Hammond at Santa Barbara, California, and Mrs. A. S. Bourne of Augusta, Georgia.

Miss Nichols is well known for her three outstanding books on European gardens: *English Pleasure Gardens*, (published in 1902, reissued in 1925); *Spanish and Portuguese Gardens*, (1924); and *Italian Pleasure Gardens*, (1928). Before the books, she wrote several magazine articles on gardening. Writing these led to the realization that there was no really comprehensive book

on English gardens. So to England she went and visited practically every well-known garden for her first volume.

In England Miss Nichols made arrangements with Dame Edith Littleton for members of the Garden Club of America to visit English gardens. Up to that time, only the great houses in England had been opened to the public. One of Miss Nichols' purposes was to help improve international relations, using the gardens and their owners as a medium. This movement was successful and spread later to the Continent as well as this country. From England this adventuresome pioneer went to Italy, Spain and Portugal, to study gardens there.

Garden making has been only one of Miss Nichols' many interests. Another has been embroidery, which she does herself to this day. At one time she made a study of the most beautiful periods of embroidery, concluding that the Queen Anne crewel work which sublimated flowers into baroque forms, was the outstanding. Wood carving has been another major pursuit, and she has copied Jacobean chairs, tables and other pieces of furniture.

With Jane Addams, Miss Nichols attended peace conferences in Europe, where they met and talked to the women of the enemy countries. Their purpose was to improve international relations and to bring about better understanding by an exchange of ideas.

Along these lines, this leader has always shown the keenest interest. Her Sunday afternoon teas, held during the winter months at her Bulfinch house, with its graceful spiral stairway, at 55 Mt. Vernon Street, bring together people of diverse races and religions from all parts of the world - leading professional men and women, as well as students from foreign and American universities - often for the purpose of discussing religious, political, international and other provocative questions.

Among frequent visitors were Dr. Godfrey L. Cabot, head of one of New England's oldest families; Professor Pitirim Sorokin, sociologist of Harvard University, who discussed the achievements of the Institute of Creative Altruism, and Colonel Laurence Bunker, one of General

MacArthur's chief advisors in Tokyo.

This interest in the friendly exchange of ideas in order to create a better understanding among peoples continues to be the ruling passion of Miss Nichols' life. It is what she calls the "Puritan point of view." As the Puritans in their homes with their friends and acquaintances encircled the fireplace to exchange ideas, so this veteran thinker, after more than 30 trips to Europe, continues to use her home as a center, where all kinds of people may meet to get to know one another better.

In fact, she concluded, "For where else can the art of friendly living be practiced better than around the hearth of the home?"

Rose Standish Nichols

Born: January 11, 1872, eldest daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur H. Nichols (Elizabeth Fisher Homer)

Died: January 27, 1960.

Rose Standish Nichols

By Polly Thayer Starr

During the summers of my youth, Mother's friends came and went with the regularity of clockwork. Except for a *bête noire* or two, and a favorite godmother, they tended to blur in my mind. Not so with Rose Nichols; she was a standout. During her visits, the duplicate bridge parties, the ladies' luncheons and the croquet games were in abeyance: she neither drank nor smoked but, rooted to the sofa, and occupied with her embroidery, kept up a continuous flow of conversation that was alive with names of exotic places, heads of state, generals, and crowned heads.

She neither cooed over me nor ignored me, nor gave me extravagant attention, as did the others, but accepted me, deciding I would "do" (evidently I did not fall into the category of "kitten women" to which she sometimes referred and which was obviously not to her taste, this constituting the only whiff of prejudice of which she was ever guilty, in my experience.)

She invited me in my twenties to accompany her on a trip to gather material for her books on Portuguese cloisters and Italian gardens. I had been struck by the lines in a certain drawing-room comedy: "Aren't you home much earlier than expected from your trip to Europe?" "Yes, I discovered I had gone with the wrong person." "Oh, didn't you know? One always goes with the wrong person?"

Though I recognized the truth of this, Rose was the perfect travelling companion. She disproved even the axiom that three things are necessary to the good traveller: a strong stomach, a well-lined purse, and stout boots. She had only the last. She could afford but modest accommodations, operating on the principle that if she took care of the pennies, the pounds would take care of themselves, and sometimes after a tiring day a boiled egg and simple pasta soothed a colitis that must have given her much pain, but to which she never referred.

She was interested in everybody and everything. For her there was "neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free," the laborer was as rewarding as the Prime Minister. She gave letters of introduction to a friend sailing for Europe, which included Bernard Berenson, the art connoisseur, the daughter of the Queen of Romania, and the head of the French Communist Party. Wherever we went, whoever we met, it was only minutes before Rose was discussing their condition, their politics, and their circumstances.

She warned me, however, of the exception: the traveling English who, due to the British caste system, run the risk of suffering embarrassment if confronted on their native soil by an American who has been accepted abroad (an American being, for the Britisher in general, socially unclassifiable). If, however, the ice has been broken for any reason, they may, in turn, prove an embarrassment to the American who, should he invite the Englishman to visit him, may find the latter settling in for weeks, or even months, in expectation of a hospitality he is accustomed to extend as well as receive.

I had not long to wait for an illustration of the soundness of her advice. We set out on a long day's excursion by bus to visit cloisters in the remote town of Poblet in Portugal. We had jolted for hours while I scrupulously avoided having any word with the attractive Englishman sitting beside me, when approaching the outskirts of Poblet, our driver suddenly veered into a ditch by the side of the road, overturning the bus. It appeared he had been confronted by a yoke of oxen frozen in the middle of the road in terror of such a monstrous vehicle as our bus.

Skillfully avoiding carnage the driver gave his passengers only a bad shaking up. Hurling violently against each other as we were, the Englishman spoke, but quickly explained in self-defense that he would never have done so had the circumstances been less dire. After discussion of what was to be done in the emergency, conversation expanded, and before long, he had invited us to spend a month with him in England, which unfortunately time did not permit.

Rose was as voluble and as much at home in any language needed on our travels as she was confidently unconcerned with any standards of pronunciation other than her own. I am sure her accent in Chinese or Hungarian (and I don't doubt she spoke the latter) would have been as astonishing as it was in French or Italian, but she had a kind of joyous relish in it that vaulted all hurdles of communication. Even the French, generally so impatient with misuse of their cherished tongue, felt the contagion and cheerfully made whatever effort was necessary to interpret her unfamiliar sounds.

I can only think that the key to it was the saying that nothing so predisposes to understanding as the feeling of being understood. It was Rose's abiding good will, and her acceptance of and real delight in her fellow man, in grace or disgrace, that made her contact so sure. I remember her saying: "What matters to me is not what a person is or has been, but what he or she *would like* to be."

Tall, gaunt, patrician, with an individual style that made no concession to changing fashion, Rose was a commanding figure in any milieu. Even her hats, that looked like velvet puddings, were profoundly and satisfyingly *right*, and when I came to paint her portrait, her red velvet jacket, lace, and baroque earrings could have adorned a sitter of Goya or Holbein. There was a certain grandeur about her.

On that trip to Poblet, it was late at night before the bus was able to return us to Lisbon. Poblet was too small for any restaurant, but Rose found a farmhouse where the owner's wife introduced us to her children and fed us omelettes, famished as we were, for which she refused any money, obviously believing in Rose's genuine interest in her sons and in the possibility of realizing, through this stranger, the dream of sending them to America, a belief, knowing Rose's word to be as good as her bond, I shared. If it could be done, she would know how. One is told that every traveller is an ambassador for his country, and it was heartening to be with one whose good will was no idle unction.

I have often wondered what would have happened to my wedding plans if it had not been for Rose. A friend of my brother's had decided to build himself a boat and sail with a few friends around the world for two years. Before he left, in spite of its being Friday the thirteenth, I had engaged myself to marry him on his return. A year and a half later, I received a cable that read: "Leaving Singapore in the *Johann van Oldenbarnevelt*. Meet me in Genoa to marry there."

In short order, accompanied by my long-suffering mother and Rose, as the companion for all seasons and crises, we checked into a hotel in Genoa to await my fiancé. Upon arrival, he briskly set about arrangements for our marriage, only to run into roadblocks. A civil marriage was impossible because we were not citizens, a church ceremony was equally out of the question, as we were not Catholics. Besides which, it was pointed out, the authorities could not be asked to marry us because they had no means of knowing that we were not already married to others - this looked like a clincher, my lawyer fiancé being well aware of the difficulty of proving a negative.

It is depressing to think of what might have happened in this deadlock had not Rose offered her services as *dea ex machina* and explained that money would be the *open sesame*. Once cash was provided, all difficulties dissolved as if by magic. A precedent was discovered that had somehow been overlooked, of a Turk who had been married to an Argentinian, so the wedding was set for the next day. We woke to the startling aftermath of a heavy snowstorm that had fallen during the night: the palms were weighted to the ground with their unaccustomed load of snow, traffic was paralyzed by such a rarity and—there it was again—the calendar read: Friday the 13th!

Rose somehow produced a cab and we slithered perilously down the hill on which our hotel was perched to a large office building where we were met by a lugubrious character, who was to act as the witness required by law, and whom Rose had managed to dig up. I use the verb advisedly as, with purple festoons under his

eyes and lavender suede gloves, our lemon merchant, as he proved to be, was more funereal than hymeneal.

Rose had what might be called a kind of international "street-smarts" that could cope with situations at any level. The four of us crowded into a minute cubicle, while a genial white-haired official behind a desk pronounced a short abracadabra, and then handed my husband, which by then I assumed he must be, a little green book certifying the ceremony and carrying spaces for a great many entries - there must have been thirty of them - which, once outside, Rose explained were blanks for recording births, and that the official jocularity accompanying their issuance had been the equivalent of "may all your troubles be little ones."

Having served as general manager, Maid of Honor, and Best Man, Rose might be said to have engineered the tying of a knot that has held securely for over half a century and transformed Friday the thirteenth into a personally lucky day. There was nothing flimsy or impermanent about anything to which Rose applied her strong mind.

I saw Rose thereafter chiefly socially. She had already provided me with some perspective on Boston society in my teens. I remembered her concern for the beautiful daughter of an old friend of hers, the publisher Ferris Greenslet. Magdalena made her debut when I did, and had performed this rite of passage brilliantly from the point of view of her peers. Her dark beauty, sweetness, and intelligence made her the darling of the *jeunesse dorée* of Harvard's Porcellian and A.D. clubs, one member, the later eminent classicist and teacher, John Finley, carrying off the prize.

But Rose saw things differently. Deploring what she considered the social straightjacket of a Boston debut, she undertook to introduce Magdalena to a less homogeneous cast of characters, and indeed the sophisticated Italian count, the voluble Dutch Communist, and the seductive Turk at her party did indeed present a widening of horizons and a giddy contrast to the lords of the stag-line for whom we debutantes languished, and who nightly "rushed" Magdalena off her

feet at the Somerset and Copley Plaza balls.

I became a regular attendant at Rose's teas and luncheons for visiting lions and local luminaries - unique occasions where a mixture of nationalities would often arrive as strangers and depart as "instant" friends deep in discussion of whatever was of greatest interest to them. The pattern might be that, after a short introduction in which the guests could talk with whoever was nearest, Rose would call for general conversation, form a circle, and throw out some stimulating question, such as "what is your idea of Heaven?" Every one had to participate (she allowed no aloofness) and play the game. Even the twitter of any determinedly witty Britisher would be transformed, in the heat of enthusiasm, into a genuine and enlightening search for common ground.

Remembering Marcus Aurelius' list of indebtednesses: (. . . from Diognetus I learned to endure freedom of speech) I learned from Rose the true uses of travel. Although she followed more beaten tracks than those of the dauntless Isabelle Burton and Ladies Stanhope and Montague, they would have recognized in her a kindred courage, resourcefulness and strength of character.

Indeed Horace Walpole writing of Lady Wortley Montague could not more exactly have described Rose: "A brilliant, vital, bluntly forthright, clever woman, very much worth meeting." Her wit and imagination, her vast delight in opposing opinions created about her a unique atmosphere of intellectual freedom and excitement, and though her ruling passion was the exchange of ideas to create better understanding among people, she was the gadfly of all cant or hypocrisy.

I learned from Rose that ideals need be in no way compromised by the widest tolerance. She exemplified the so-called aristocrats' motto: *quod aliis licet, non tibi licet*. ("That which is permitted to others is not permitted to you.") In her own words "it was the spirit of the Puritans to try to broaden their interest towards wide horizons, and that same spirit I have tried to keep alive in everything I have done" and in this she succeeded.

November, 1985