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Worth Their Salt Too

Colleen Whitley

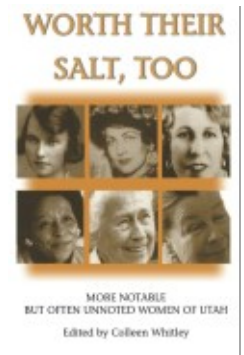
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ELLA GILMER SMYTH PEACOCK

Spring City's Resident Saint

Edited by Susan Mumford

Susan Larson Mumford, native of Eugene, Oregon, holds a bachelor's degree in English and Spanish from Brigham Young University and has done undergraduate study at the University of Mexico and graduate work in creative writing and library science at the University of Oregon. A gifted artist herself,¹ she currently operates Frameplace in Salt Lake City, where she does custom framing of objects ranging from flat prints to family heirlooms. In the process of restoring a farmhouse in Sanpete County, Mumford met Ella Peacock and was inspired by her "example as an artist and an independent woman." Here she presents Peacock's own reminiscences of her ancestry and her own life from an interview with Sharon Gray of the Springville Museum of Art.² The interview itself is lively, but, as interviews often do, wanders occasionally. As it is presented here, it has been sequenced chronologically, annotated, and supplemented by an introduction and an afterword.

In 1970, Bill and Ella Peacock left Salt Lake and headed south for a Sunday drive of 120 miles. Just past Provo, they turned east through the Spanish Fork Canyon where Father Escalante and his party first stood to view the valley of Utah Lake, the Jordan River Narrows, and the Great Salt Lake. A prominence with a cross marks the spot. They turned south again and followed Highway 89, the north-south highway through the middle of the state that follows the Manti-La Sal mountain range and National Forest. The highway is the main street of small towns: Thistle (destroyed by a mud slide and flood in 1983),

Birdseye, Fairview, Mount Pleasant. Then the Peacocks turned east five miles further on a side road that leads into a place time seems to have forgotten.

Old faces, old places, and rickety old signs,
Life here resembles a much gentler time.³

The whole of Spring City, as this town is called, is a national historic district, with houses and barns that have not been much altered since their original construction in the 1860s and 1870s. Canal Creek and natural springs provided water to support settlers. After being driven out twice by the Native American populations, the settlers returned in 1859 and established the town. Spring City now consists of a few substantial homes, some small businesses, and a pioneer chapel built of oolite stone, quarried south of town. The raising of substantial crops historically made this area thrive, but the Peacocks wanted to see Spring City because they had heard it was an artists' colony, and they "decided we liked it well enough to stay there."⁴ The local citizens decided they liked the Peacocks well enough, too. One man has called Ella "our resident saint."⁵

Autobiography of Ella Peacock

I was born in Germantown, Philadelphia, in 1905. . . . My mother's father, Leander W. Mennhall, was a Methodist minister—kind of an evangelist, I guess. He was quite a lively person, a handful as a boy, so I hear. Once his mother punished him by taking his clothes away when he went swimming against orders. This did not matter to him; he went home without them. He was in thirty-three battles of the Civil War. He started as a drummer boy and became an adjutant lieutenant. He also did blacksmithing, said he shod all the kicking mules. Later he became a dentist because he could forge his own instruments. Then he became a minister—got his degree for that. I was very fond of him. He was an excellent swimmer, wanted to swim the Hellespont like Leander of old, but the ship's captain would not allow it. He traveled extensively. My grandmother, his wife, attended college as a girl. This was rare in those days. Shortly before my grandfather's death at

nearly ninety-one, he went to California to preach for Aimee Semple McPherson! I'll never know why.

Grandfather's parents were David Mennhall and Abigail Rue Moore. His father died and his mother took the family from Indianapolis in a covered wagon. One time they were down to ten cents and had a family conference as to how to use this. They decided on beans. His father David had cosigned a note for a friend and lost all of his money. They went to Iowa, where Abigail married again to a man named Isaac Phipps.

My Aunt Dibbie (Elizabeth Mennhall) took care of Grandfather after Grandmother died. She never married and was like a second mother to me. I lived with her for six months when I was five years old. Mother was having a baby; Father had a nervous breakdown; my brother and sister had pneumonia, and I had just poured water down the piano keys, so they were glad to unload me for a while.

I had a double curvature of the spine. Could not stand school until the second grade. We were all sent to Germantown Friends School [Quaker] because the public schools then were very bad. Friends School had a high scholastic standing. Most colleges accepted their graduates on certificate, no college entrance exams required. For several years my most unfortunate job was getting my back straightened. I went to a special gym in the city to do an exercise routine. School was of second importance; however, I made it somehow.

My father [George Albert Smyth] was a lawyer, and he became what he wanted, too—a corporation lawyer—he did not like or wish to practice criminal law. I loved my father and I think he was partial to me, maybe because I needed his regard more than the others. He called me "Bunting." I was shy and lacked confidence. My parents always wished I was more like Mary. Mary was Mary Shivies. Mary was given authority over me—I had tantrums a lot. She could hold me motionless, which only enraged me more. She has lately told me that she used to encourage these outbreaks; it was fun.

Our family were fine Christian people. Grandfather Trunhall (I never knew the Smyth ones) knew his Bible from front to back and used to disagree strongly with the ministers of the day. He could quote passages of the Bible which were in direct opposition to each other as written. We always had a family prayer at his house. We also had prayers at home. I guess I was a rebel. I remember hearing an interesting happening

about Cousin Georgie Short (a woman). I believe she lived in New York. Buffalo Bill's Wild West show was coming to town and was badly in need of financial help. Cousin Georgie had plenty of what was needed and came to the rescue. She was repaid with a barrel containing the first gate receipts just as collected. Mostly silver as I have heard.

Our family had a cottage in Lavallette, New Jersey, a very small settlement. We had a sneak box [sail boat] which we sailed all over Barnegat Bay. The Willburn family—ten children—also spent their summers there.⁶ We used to join the yacht club sailboat races in their boat. We always took care of scraping and painting our boats and painting and repairing our cottages. In Germantown, we always had one maid, sometimes two, but not at the shore.

In Lavallette I had quite an admiration for one of the Willburn boys, Donald. I was used to hearing a certain amount of fun being directed at my nose, which was much longer than necessary. Donald said if anyone had anything to say about my nose, let them come to him! I thought he was wonderful to stand up for me. . . .

In Lavallette, on the Barnegat Bay and the oceanfront, we used to go crabbing in our sailboat. If we were not wet on our arrival home, we would jump overboard. Could not come back dry! We also upset the sneak box more than once. My father would always bring meat with him when he came down because it was unavailable at the shore. Also, we got our milk every day at the railroad station, the milk train. No facilities in those days for keeping things cold in Lavallette. We used to buy fish fresh caught at the fish pond at the edge of town. Ocean-caught, of course, and we cleaned our own.

We all learned to swim at an early age. During northeast storms we used to swim in the ocean and ride the big breakers in—sometimes with the benefit of a piece of board and sometimes just us! Those were very good days. We had a bathtub with a hand pump at the end. The same “plumbing” was in the kitchen. Our “White House” in the back yard served as the rest of our bathroom. We had had a large hole dug in the yard for a septic tank. There was no plumbing except a waterline then. Later, the town put in facilities so that we all could have plumbing. This did not make Lavallette any more attractive to us.

One weekend when my father was there, my Uncle Billy [Henry Field Smyth], his brother, asked him to take him up the coast to help his son, Henry, who was having trouble. My father said to Mother then

that he did not want to go, but of course he went. He was hit by a train at a crossing. My uncle was not hurt, but Father was pinned and the Ford caught fire. He died in the hospital later that day. This was 3 August 1919. Mother really had a terrible time being left with five children, the youngest a baby. I was thirteen at the time.⁷ There was plenty of money, no worries on that end. Mother tried after that to make up to my two younger sisters for not having a father. I think they were quite spoiled. I felt that she did not love me much, but I am sure that was only in my mind. I think I was not much help to her.

A few years later my mother lost the largest part of her money. This was before the Great Depression. The family business, Young Smyth Field, was a wholesale import and export business located on Arch Street in Philadelphia. They had exported a large amount of goods to South America. Our government declared a moratorium, saying that South America did not have to pay its bills at that time. My father had been the lawyer for the firm. My Uncle Calvin was vice-president and uncle Isaac was president. This put the firm in the hands of the receivers as more than a million dollars was owing, and maybe a lot more than that, I don't know. Anyway, the family lost out, and the largest part of mother's money was in the firm.

I had left Friends School to attend a private school in Chestnut Hill, Springside. Mother took me out of there the end of my second year of high school and sent me to Germantown High School. I hated that. I had had three years of Latin and six years of French at that time but could not keep up with high school at the second year Latin level. They were all using "fonies" for translating, I found out later. I did not know what a "fonie" was.⁸ I was most happy to quit in the middle of my senior year and go to art school, one year in Baltimore, then to the School of Design for three years in Philadelphia.⁹ Mother's good friend, Mrs. Ballinger, the wife of a successful architect, furnished me with what she called her "private scholarship." I worked as a camp counselor teaching swimming, life saving, and canoeing in the summer to pay for my materials. My third and fourth years in art school were on a senatorial scholarship. I won the sculpture prize on graduation. . . .

Back at art school my mother thought I should study music more (after about ten years of music lessons). I tried at Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore and decided I still wanted art school. Mother's friend Mrs. Ballinger had helped Mother a lot. She financed the remodeling of

some of our house in Germantown to make two apartments for renting. She wanted to help in other ways, but Mother did not want to accept all of that.

One episode in art school days I forgot to mention: I had always wanted to “hop a freight train” like the hoboes. In Baltimore I accomplished this. Not a very long ride, but a sample! On graduation from art school I won the sculpture prize. Sam Murray, a close associate of Thomas Eakins, awarded this (our sculpture instructor). I had met a girl at school, Frances Watson, who specialized in animal illustration.

After graduation I took charge of organized play at Springside School and also taught some clay modeling. While teaching at Springside School, I stayed at a farm in Bucks County—an illegal “still” during those days. My friend Frances Watson was buying it, and her mother was living there with her. This was during the Depression of the thirties. She got a job as supervisor of art in the public schools of Pleasantville, New Jersey. Had to stay there during the week, so I stayed with her mother in the old stove house.

New Jersey then started paying their teachers with “scrip.” “No money available,” Watson explained to the real estate agent. He told her that the owner would wait for the scrip to be redeemable. All of a sudden he appeared at the farm. I was there, said he came to see about the rent. The real estate agent said we had best get Watson’s valuable antiques and stuff moved out or he was going to claim them. This we did. While we were leaving, we saw his (the owner’s) racing gig being taken away as well and other items which he was supposed to have taken a long time before. We were later arrested for the theft and for destruction of property. After a trial (they had me in jail overnight until bailed out the next A.M.) we were acquitted, and our lawyer sued the owner for all expenses. Lots of fun—my “night in jail.” Of course the parents of the school children did not want me teaching there anymore. I was ready to quit that job anyway.

Then Watson and I went into partnership on doing basement recreation rooms, mostly for the Jewish population in Philadelphia. During the Depression of the thirties, it was hard to get people to work for you. Everyone was happily being on welfare and preferred not to work. Watson knew all that was necessary about carpentry, and she taught me so that we were able to build bars, cabinets, and line the walls, et cetera. The workers were mostly all on relief (welfare) and that

was easier than working. One basement was the interior of a spaceship (Flash Gordon style). Murals were views from the windows. Another was an adobe interior, and another, Mexican.

We then took on the remodeling of rooms for apartments for homeowners.¹⁰ This is where I met Bill, my husband. He had been working during the Depression at carpentry jobs and house painting. Plenty of work to do at not too high pay, but better than the dole! Bill had come to this country after World War I, in which he served four and one half years in the British Army. He enlisted at the age of fifteen (lied about his age, of course). Well, not too long after this, Bill and I decided to be married. He was nearly forty and I was thirty-four. When I finished art school, I had the opportunity of spending an entire year in Florence, Italy. I was to live with a cousin who had married an Italian count (Palavechino is as near as I can come to their name). I had met her and a daughter years earlier when they visited this country. I was very busy with a so-called career then, and I should have been tied up and made to go then. I certainly have regretted not taking this opportunity ever since. I could have furthered my education as well as seen the world, which I have not been able to do since. . . .

I had various and assorted jobs after art school—painted “hand painted” lamp shades for piece work,¹¹ tried teaching at art leagues and even at Eastern University in Philadelphia. I hated it and was a very poor teacher. Mrs. Paula Balano, an instructor at the School of Design, had me working for her, painting and waxing up, cementing, and firing stained-glass windows. She made windows for several churches in Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware, and did the designing for the chapel at Valley Forge, working for Nicola D’Asuzo (spelling?) [Peacock’s note] at the time. She was the first woman to win the foreign scholarship from the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

Also, I worked for mural painter and illustrator George Harding. Then I got a bit sidetracked, took a short drafting course, and had numerous drafting jobs, became a senior draftsman and engineering technician.¹² I liked the work, but should have quit sooner and gone back to painting. I did pressure-vessel, architectural, and electrical drafting, designed and drew up changes to a warehouse for the purpose of manufacturing the Poseidon missile body. Worked on electrical diagram for the sea-going *Voice of America*. Was offered a job by Bell Laboratories to work on the communications satellite. Jewelry designing

for J. E. Caldwell in Philadelphia was another job: beautiful antique jewelry would be sent in by customers to have the stones reset in platinum settings, thus ruining the piece to my mind. (This was J. E. Caldwell Jewelers et cetera in Philadelphia.) George Harding was commissioned to oversee and do all the art work for the season (as far as I know it was all of it, but I'm not absolutely certain). I worked for him on this along with others, of course, while I was still in art school.

Charming as Ella's autobiography is, she has not included everything. She remembered and followed the advice her father gave her when she was very young: "Think carefully about what you want to do, then get the best education you can."¹³ She lived in Philadelphia until she was thirty-four, when she married Bill Peacock; they had one son, Bailey. Together they bought and ran a dairy farm in Pennsylvania. While living there, the family joined the LDS Church and decided to move to Utah. They sold the farm in 1964 and moved to Salt Lake City. Ella continued to work as a draftsman, although she had never really given up painting. She started painting steadily again when she retired, and she and Bill moved to Spring City in 1970. When she worked, she wore a sweater, sweats tucked into her boots, and a flapper-style scarf, or sometimes one of Bill's old ties, around her head.¹⁴

After the move to Spring City, Bill and Ella bought an Airstream trailer and began to take painting and fishing trips together throughout the West. Most of Ella's inspiration for painting, however, has come from the area around Spring City. "The subject matter of most of her paintings is taken from the scenery within a ten-mile radius of her home."¹⁵ Her grey Chevy Nova became a familiar sight on the local roads or parked beside ditches, occasionally in ditches, "where she [painted] until rescued by one of her Spring City neighbors."¹⁶ She usually sketched the landscape and then finished it in her studio.

Her studio was the dining room of the pioneer home she and Bill bought after his retirement. Upon moving in, she painted over the flowered wallpaper in the living and dining rooms, making the walls a flat grey with a waist-high frieze of desert symbols. The colors were the same as those of her landscape palette—turquoise, coral, ochre, greyed-out blues, and greens; yellow light streaked across umber fields, and skies full of shifting shapes and color. The room held several of her own paintings, a portrait of a local cowboy, "Curly," done in 1972, a self-portrait,

and a portrait of a woman in traditional European style. She painted the woman in art school and kept the portrait in her studio because it was one of Bill's favorites. She has painted several self-portraits, one of which hangs in the Fairview Museum. Many of her paintings were promised to her son Bailey, but she sold many others from the living room of her Spring City home. A great many people would like to own a Peacock painting.

Over the last twenty years, she exhibited in several galleries in Utah and neighboring states, winning numerous prizes and awards. Snow College and the Springville and Fairview Museums bought her work. Brigham Young University is a major collector, owning over sixty paintings; in 1981 BYU staged a one-woman show of her work. In 1994 Art Access Gallery in Salt Lake City displayed about eighty of her works; that collection then became part of the Utah Arts Council's *Traveling Arts Exhibition*.¹⁷

Ella has achieved considerable regional recognition, although Osril Allred, her neighbor in Spring City and a professor of art at Snow College, says she avoided juried shows, not wanting to see her art as a competition. Allred also comments that Ella's subjects themselves were chosen to express mood or emotion and are representative of the time in which she lived. He believes she painted about things as they were, not embellished: old buildings, untended landscapes, the effect of age itself.¹⁸ Dawn Pheysey, a curator at BYU, sees in Ella's work the expression of "a very independent woman who has worked hard all her life. She is, however, very modest about her accomplishments and her paintings."¹⁹

Modest though she was, Ella seemed to have quiet faith in herself, in her ability to see, and in her capacity to love her friends. Ron Staker, director and curator of art for the Fairview Museum, says, "Caring about her work seems so natural and ties into her own unassuming and natural caring. The comfort she felt in expressing herself in paint told well who she was, not what she did." Staker adds that he believes Ella's paintings express an experience of serenity.²⁰

One of the hallmarks of Ella's paintings is their frames. Earlier in life when she couldn't afford frames for her work, she bought a used carving set from a Philadelphia pawn shop for eighteen dollars. She began to carve grooves in sugar pine or basswood frames that she could have made at a reasonable price and painted the grooves and corner

designs with scrapings from her palette.²¹ The frames became an integral part of her art, and other Sanpete County artists have modeled their frames after hers.

Following an unsuccessful cataract operation, Ella lost her sight in one eye—a severe handicap for an artist—but she still continued to paint, and her good eye was lively as she told the story of her long life. After her husband Bill died, Ella lived alone in Spring City for another ten years with the company of her two cats, looked in on by numerous friends and neighbors. In 1998 her son Bailey persuaded her to move into his home in Connecticut to live with him. Her Spring City house was sold to a gallery owner in Salt Lake City long before she moved, but he wanted her to live there as long as she could.

On 24 June 1999, the matriarch of Utah artists died at the age of ninety-three. Her body was returned to Utah for a funeral in the Spring City chapel and burial in the historic cemetery next to Bill.²² So the resident saint has departed, but she leaves the great legacy of her art. She lived fully her father's advice and always did what she wanted to do, maintaining an interest in life for more than ninety years. She was always modest and self-deprecating about her own art but had strong opinions about public art education. She believed art was not for everyone, and that those who felt drawn to this difficult and demanding discipline should seek out the education for themselves. She followed her own path in life in a unique and inimitable way. Her paintings are a legacy for others who want to follow her path of visionary expression to the beauty of landscapes and faces familiar and loved.