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A GRAM OF CONVERSATION

(Tommy & Tumpy & Will)

BY STEPHEN V. WALKER

In honor of New York Folklore's 80th anniversary celebration, I would like to share with you an incredible personal story, which touches upon founder Harold W. Thompson, folksinger Peter Yarrow, my mother Mary Moore Walker, and her grandson, William Walker, who is a current member of the New York Folklore Board. My mother and her grandson had only seven precious months together before her death from cancer at age 64. However, as you will read in the story, the power of folklore and family traditions can make connections through the generations even beyond death.

Despite the vividness of sweet memory, how fleeting the particulars! As time passes, how many unanswered questions arise when looking back on the dear people whose love set in motion the gift of life for us. This is the story of a question answered, in a synapse across time, a transcendent conversation.

Once upon a time there were three sisters who, you might say, lived in a hat. That is, their mother was a milliner, and their whole world revolved around the hats that their mother made, as well as the interesting folks who worked in and frequented Moore's Hat Shop, which adjoined the family home on Franklin

Avenue in Millbrook, New York. The sisters basked in the warm atmosphere of the shop, adored by the young ladies who worked for their mom (and sewed up their every torn bit of clothing). They loved trying on the hats, which were destined to beautify the elegant ladies of the town, but their mother had even bigger ideas for the heads of her three girls.

In the Moore household, education was the key to a successful and fulfilling life. Mother Moore, herself a dressmaking student at Pratt Institute in bygone days when a woman couldn't even cast her own vote, once replied to her daughter Mary, in a discussion



Moore's Hat Shop on Millbrook's main street, Franklin Avenue, with the author's grandmother standing in the doorway. All photos courtesy of the author.

over crooked teeth, “Well, you can either have your teeth straightened, or I can afford to pay for your room and board when you go to college!”—betting that her youngest daughter would be able to see which of those choices would truly make her the more beautiful.

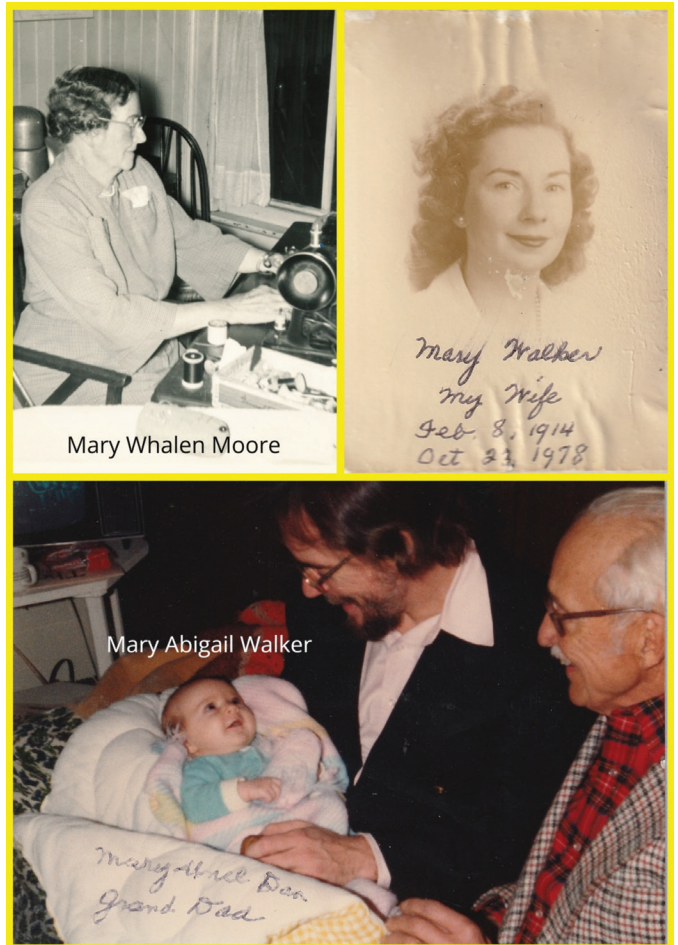
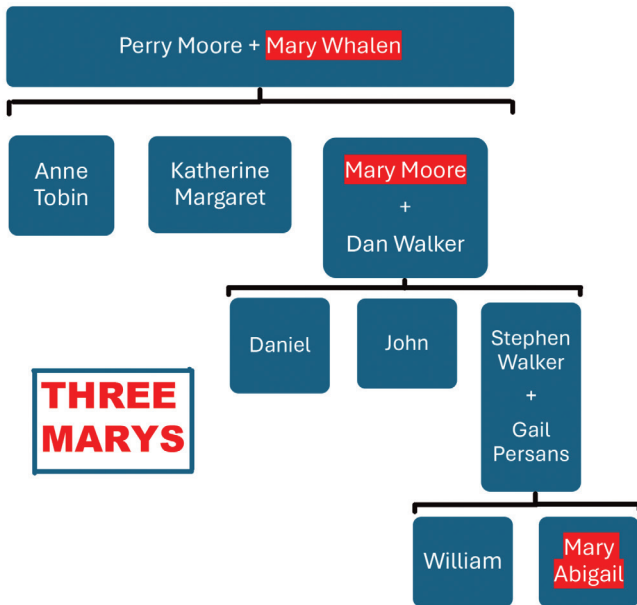
As with all tag-a-longs, Mary was eager to be the equal of her two bright and pleasing older siblings. Unlike Anne Tobin and Katherine Margaret, the third daughter had not been born with a middle name. So when she followed her sisters off to college at Albany State, Mary just made up one for herself: Joanne (a nod to Louisa May Alcott’s tomboy-turned teacher, Jo). Not that little Mary wanted for appellations. She had been given the nickname, “Sweet Lump,” as a baby, which then evolved to “Tumpy,” a name which she



Grandma Moore in the Hat Shop.



“The proudest day of all for Mother and Dad. I had just graduated from college at Albany, and Anne and Katherine had donned their caps and gowns for the family portrait (They had graduated in 1930 and 1933). It always hung near the front door in the living room.”—Mary Moore Walker. [Mary, in the center, is surrounded by her parents and her two sisters. Parents Mary and Perry Moore valued education so highly that they borrowed graduation gowns for sisters Kack and Anne, so they could pose in a permanent record that showed that all three of their girls graduated from college. This photo was framed and proudly displayed in my grandparent’s living room as long as I can remember.—Stephen Walker]



A family genealogy and photo collage with “three Mary’s”: Grandmother Mary Whalen Moore; Mary Walker, mother of the author; and Mary Abigail Walker, daughter of the author and his wife Gail.

held throughout her days along with her own creation, “Mary Jo.”

With a lovable dreamer for a father and a can-do mother of inestimable talents, it was inevitable that all three Moore girls would jump at the chance of spreading their wings at Albany State Teachers College. And despite the national depression taking hold of our country, Perry and Mary Moore continued to believe in education, first and foremost. At State College, the sisters poured themselves into literature, theatre, history, athletics, and just plain fun. They loved making friends and meeting new professors, as they set their sights on becoming educators themselves. Their favorite professors, the ones who made life an interesting adventure, the ones who showed them what a beautiful and varied collection of souls we all are, made indelible impressions on them.

This narrative, like life, jumps forward and backward, in connections all around us, across bridges to the past, which we walk upon if we are careful enough to hear the voices of undimmed spirits...

Seventy-six years after the last Moore sister graduated from Albany State, an interesting conversation began to unfold between that graduate’s son and grandson, heirs to the Moore worldview in which education is stimulating, fun, and essential. On St. Stephen’s Day 2010, in the glowing aftermath of a beautiful Christmas, while perusing the liner notes of *Carry It On*, the Peter, Paul and Mary CD box set that we’d given to our daughter Mary, this author noticed that Peter Yarrow had gone to Cornell University. I duly reported this to her brother, William, a Cornell graduate of the Class of 2000. Reading on, I read aloud that Peter Yarrow’s career-defining moment came in an English class, which focused on American folklore during his senior year. The professor of this class, Dr. Harold Thompson, invited him to play his guitar and to be his musical assistant. In the process of helping teach the class, Peter Yarrow found direction for his life and decided, then and there, to devote the rest of his life to engaging others with song.

At this point, our narrative must jump back 32 years. Mary Jo “Tumpy” Moore had indeed become a teacher, as had both of her sisters. She married Dan Walker, and they raised my two brothers and myself—Daniel, John, and Stephen. Filling her teaching career with vivid days, she opened new vistas for her lucky students, and one of those bright-eyed young readers, Gail Persans, even came to marry me, her youngest son. In 1978, while we lived across the street from my parents, Gail gave birth to our first child, William. With great hoopla, my mom’s teaching pals celebrated the birth of Mary Jo’s first grandchild in a big way by getting together and throwing a grand party, which she called, “My Oscar,” in her reminiscences.

Grandmother and grandson delighted in their good fortune of being neighbors directly across the street from one another. However, the 64-year-old Grandma Tumpy’s health was deteriorating due to cancer, and Will and his Gram only got to spend seven precious months together before the Lord called her to a higher place of knowledge.



Baby Will with his Grandmother.

following year, Dr. Jones became the director of the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, and in 1964, he founded the Cooperstown Graduate Program where William Walker has been a professor since 2008.

Then came the question....

“You know, Dad, I always wondered if my Grandma ever knew of, or studied with, Harold Thompson, because I know she went to Albany State, and Harold Thompson taught there before Cornell...”

Then came a startled look, and a mad dash upstairs to find an album of my mother’s writings. For just recently, I had been looking at my mother’s old letters and papers, hoping to find a morsel of writing that could explain

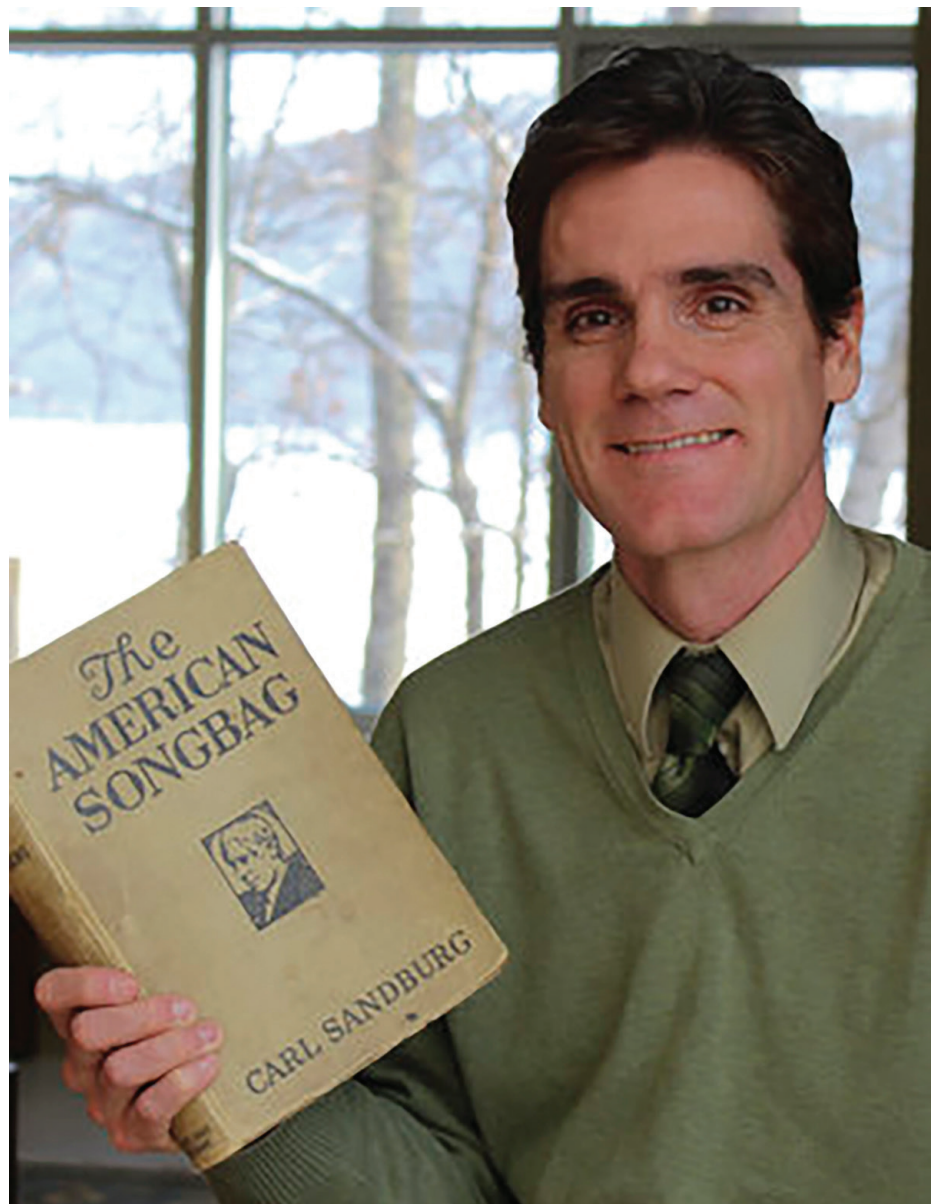
to her grandchildren what a wonderful writer and thinker she was.

And there it was!!! A copy of a 1945 letter my mom had written to Samuel Hopkins Adams, the author of a book about Alexander Woolcott, which I then shared with Will:

Dear Mr. Adams,

Your honest book, “A Woolcott – His Life and His World” is fine! I am finding it a tart appetizer as well as meat and potatoes after a diet of uninspired codfish cakes.

I never knew Mr. Woolcott personally but I have always found him one of the real person-ages of our day. We first met in Dr. Tommy’s class (Harold W. Thompson) in American Lit at State College in Albany. There we plunged wholeheartedly into Tommy’s enthusiasm for the



Will Walker with the *American Songbag* that his grandmother, Mary Moore Walker, used in “Dr. Tommy’s” (Harold Thompson’s) class.

Will and his younger sister Mary (named for their grandmother), eventually grew up and set off to college themselves, both of them becoming teachers like their two parents and their grandmother. Mary is currently a school music teacher, and William is a college history professor.

That St. Stephen’s Day conversation became quite a bit more interesting when Will said to me that he had actually heard of Harold Thompson, for he was a mentor to Louis C. Jones, the founder of the Cooperstown Graduate Program (SUNY–Oneonta graduate division), at which Will teaches history! Louis Jones had been inspired to delve deeply into the world of American folklore by his charismatic colleague in the English Department at Albany State, Harold Thompson.

In 1944, Harold W. Thompson and Louis Clark Jones co-founded the New York Folklore Society and its quarterly publication, “Folk Lore” [*New York Folklore Quarterly*]. The



HAROLD WILLIAM THOMPSON, Ph.B., A.M., Ph.D.,
D.Litt., F.R.S.E., F.S.A.Scot., ΦBK, ΛΦΓ

Professor of English. Ph.B., Hamilton, 1912; A.M., Harvard, 1913; Ph.D., Harvard, 1915; D.Litt., Edinburgh University, 1929; Research Fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation and Research Student of Edinburgh University, 1925-1927; Life Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1926; Member of Scottish History Society; Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, 1932. Visiting Instructor at Cornell University, 1932, 1933.

The photo and signature of Harold Thompson is from my mom's personal copy of Albany State's 1934 *Pedagogue* yearbook.

bulging Hamiltonian with the red fez and dirty bathrobe lolling on the porch of Theta Delta fraternity house. He told us how the brothers moved him to the veranda of a rival fraternity so that the eager beavers of the freshman class would assume he belonged there.

The author wrote back:

Dear Miss Walker,

Many thanks for your courteous letter of the 20th. I have just answered a letter from your old teacher, Harold Thompson, and mentioned to him that had heard from you. He's a great lad, and his new magazine, "Folk Lore" is a lively publication. Perhaps you've seen it."

In addition to this serendipitous connection between one of Tumpy's favorite college professors (one or two who autographed her 1934 *Pedagogue*) and the college program in which her grandson now teaches, a further "conversation" unfolded between Will and his Gram. For on April 28, 2010, William's wife, Kristin, had given birth to their firstborn, Eleanor, named for Eleanor Roosevelt, whom they greatly admire, as well as for Elaine Persans, Gail's deceased mom.

In the aforementioned letter, Tumpy continued on about her own mother's feelings about the Roosevelts, Franklin and Eleanor:

You have done a good sound job of interpreting this chameleon-like figure who was straight as a die the closer you were drawn to him. I feel in passing on this book to friend or foe, something of the way Mother did when Roosevelt had just died and the air waves were filled with wonderful

eulogies. Then and there Mother said in turning up the volume as Quentin Reynolds, Archbishop Spellman, Henry Wallace spoke, "And to think that all these years I've had to turn off Roosevelt's voices when the customers objected." She has a little hat business in Millbrook, N.Y. which has through their patronage, perish forbid, been able to support three gangling daughters through a college education.

And speaking of Roosevelt, how true to form that Bomoseen Bistro when he took Eleanor to his heart but couldn't quite embrace the President, except politically, because the latter could toss off an even better yarn than he could.

I feel better now that I've told you."

And so it was that a grandmother and a grandson, whose time together on earth was extremely short and precious, had a wonderfully serendipitous "chat" about Harold Thompson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and other things. Conversations such as these can always happen to those who stay open, inquisitive, and connected. Thankfully, brilliant teacher, historian, and folklorist, Harold W. Thompson always kept his sense of wonder at the world around him and passed it on through generations of students, making it possible for a letter saved to become a loving family dialogue across the chasm of time.

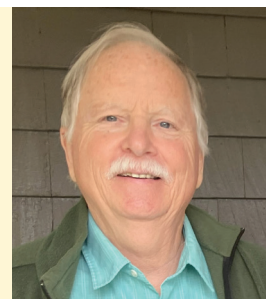
"Dr. Tommy" once wrote,

"For a long time I have suspected that American Literature has something to do with Art,--or with the Arts. In my classes I have tried to show the connections between American painting, sculpture, architecture, music, drama, and literature.

While the experiment would have been more successful if I had known something about the three arts first mentioned, I have had a pleasant adventure and I have kept the departments of Music and Art in that agreeable state of astonishment always induced when somebody recognizes their existence." [*State College Summertime*, July 26, 1929]

Incredibly, this story concludes with an amazing delivery on the next Father's Day: A copy of A Dissertation on Riddles, a 1934 research paper written by Mary Moore for Harold Thompson's American Literature class at Albany State, which was delivered to me by my son Will. The paper had been filed in the Harold Thompson Collection at the New York State Historical Library on the campus of the Cooperstown Graduate Program. ▼

Stephen V. Walker is a retired music teacher from Oyster Bay, Long Island. He is the compiler/editor of *What Kind of a Noise Annoys an Oyster?* (An Oyster Songster) for the Oyster Bay Historical Society, as well as the founder/director of the "Sagamore Hill Band & Roosevelt Songbirds," a musical ensemble that presents authentic marches, songs, and novelties dedicated to our 26th president. Photo courtesy of the author.



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