

Editor
Laura Weber

Design and Typesetting
Percolator

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Stories told by elders

My lifelong love of history was sparked in second grade, when my mother brought home a children's novel called *Heaven to Betsy*. Our tiny neighborhood branch of the Hennepin County library had set third grade as the milestone kids needed to reach to get their own library card. Mom's serendipitous pick introduced me to Betsy Ray—and the alluring interplay of time and place.

Heaven to Betsy marks the midpoint of Maud Hart Lovelace's 10-book Betsy-Tacy series. Today, almost 40 years after Lovelace's death in 1980, her papers are available in the MNHS collections (see page 156). Lovelace based the series on her happy childhood and teenage years in Mankato at the turn of the twentieth century. Her skill as a writer, undergirded by her diligent historical research, drew me into Betsy's milieu—with an added dimension I didn't then realize.



Betsy lived in Minnesota and wanted to be a writer, as did I. (We even shared a gap between our front teeth!) Though she had ambition, which was thrilling to see in a female lead character in a book set in 1906, she was equally concerned with her social life. And for me, the fact that Betsy's world of "Latin and algebra, ouija boards and cross-country hikes, fudge after school, sings around the piano, and parties—endless parties" was so far removed from my 1960s reality of Top 40 radio, *Laugh-In*, and Walter Cronkite bringing the Vietnam War into our living room only added to the series' huge appeal.

As my education progressed, I came to realize that in addition to wonderful characters and affecting stories, I had imbibed a fairly accurate social and cultural history of white, middle-class Protestant life in southern Minnesota—not my culture (as I wrote about in the last issue), yet the one I lived within.

This included not-so-benign portrayals of historical events, such as Betsy's friend Tom's "Grandma Slade" recounting her experiences as a settler during the US-Dakota War of 1862 (not the term used in the book), which occurred only thirty years before Lovelace herself was born in the very area. Though I see today it was a somewhat distorted view, this was my first exposure to the seminal event in Minnesota history.

Like Betsy (and obviously, Maud herself), most of us have heard stories from our elders about currents of the past that continue to affect our communities. In my case, the neon palette of the 1960s was diluted by darker hued stories I heard about the anti-Semitism that was so strong here in the 1930s, the topic of Sarah Atwood's article, "This List Not Complete': Minnesota's Jewish Resistance to the Silver Legion of America, 1936–1940." This is the second of three Legacy-funded articles by young scholars illuminating underrepresented Minnesota stories.

—Laura Weber

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