



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Abbie Moore's Poetic Life

Abbie Moore lived a forgotten life and died in middle age. She left no descendants and achieved nothing of lasting fame. But somehow she had the knack of endearing herself to the people around her—one of whom became a poet of renown.

Abbie was never the best friend of Katharine Lee Bates. Hattie Gifford had that role all sewn up, and Abbie was two years younger anyway. But both of the older girls were fond of her. When Abbie fell sick in the winter of 1870 and missed several weeks at the village school, Katie stole time at her third desk in the “girls right row” to write to her.

*Dear queen of the May,
I thought that today,
I could not do better,
Than write you a letter.*

*You must come and see me,
I long to see thee.
I think of you often,
And my heart it doth soften.*

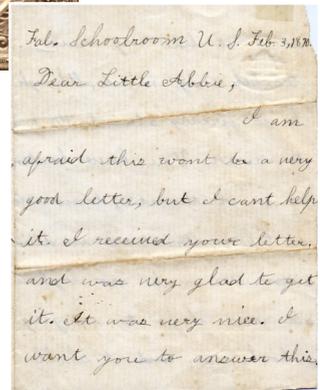
*If your ma thinks you'd better,
Do answer this letter,
I can't write much more now,
For I do not no how.*

*I send love to you,
And also to Sue,
And for you here's a kiss,
My sweet little Miss.*



Above: Katharine Lee Bates, ca. 1865.

Right: First page of a letter from Katie to Abbie, written from her classroom while she was supposed to be studying.



The Prince G. Moore homestead at 766 Palmer Avenue in 1920. Abbie grew up here and eventually died here.

Now you are my debtor,
For quite a long letter.
Pleas excuse all mistakes,
For kind mercy's sakes.

And now I must drop a tear,
And say goodbye my pretty dear.

Katie Lee Bates

Katie also wrote a letter intended to cheer up the sick girl.

Fal. Schoolroom U.S. Feb. 3, 1870

Dear Little Abbie,

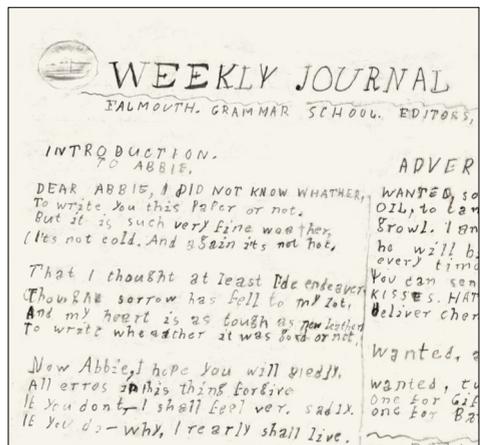
I am afraid this won't be a very good letter, but I can't help it. I received your letter, and was very glad to get it. It was very nice. I want you to answer this soon. I like my new teacher very much, although he is pretty strict. We have to mind. You have beaten us in Arithmetic, tomorrow we take "contractions" in division. We make no loghouses now. I go to singing school, and I shall be a wonderful croaker, when I see you again, I suppose. I wish you could be here when our [illegible] class recites. Hattie will write on the next page. Of course I must close with "when this you see, remember me, the same old girl I used to be." Your friend till death, Katie

Hattie chimed in with more enthusiasm about the singing school, inviting Abbie to go with her when she was able. When Hattie and Katie produced the *Weekly Journal*, their own private newsletter, another poem to Abbie was featured on its front page.

Dear Abbie, I did not know whether
To write you this paper or not
But it is such very fine weather
It's not cold. And again it's not hot.

That I thought at least I'd endeavor
Though sorrow has fell to my lot
And my heart is as tough as new leather
To write wheather it was good or not

Now Abbie, I hope you will gladly
All errors in this thing forgive
If you don't—I shall feel very sadly
If you do—why, I rearly shall live.



Though the poem is unsigned, we can safely assume that Katie wrote it, errors and all. So whatever became of the girl who was Katie's earliest muse?

By what we can tell, Abbie led a quiet but happy life. The youngest of twelve children of Prince Gifford Moore and his wife Charity Swift, she grew up in the family



Above: Moore family gathering, ca 1900. Abbie is standing in back, on the right.



Right: Abbie, shown in detail from the picture above.

homestead on Palmer Avenue, near the railroad grade crossing at Sippewissett. In her childhood, “Wild cherry trees, daffodils, mayflowers, and pond lilies abounded . . . The fields used to be white with mayflowers each spring and . . . in summer whole tubfuls of pink pond lilies could be gathered from a pond behind the farm” which later dried up. Her parents were Quakers with a devotion to education and public service. Abbie probably did go to a singing school at some point. Her father was known to be fond of music and singing—a little too fond for some other Quakers’ tastes. They once asked him why he wouldn’t join a walkout protest at the meetinghouse, when music was first intro-

duced there. Prince replied that he wasn’t going to let anyone run him out of meeting. He didn’t mention that he kept an organ at home.

Abbie’s siblings made their marks in various ways. Her sister Susan taught in the Falmouth schools, then served as a preceptress at the Moses Brown School in Providence. Her brother Samuel manufactured jewelry in Providence for over forty years. He invented a bead making machine that was displayed at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Perhaps it was seen by Katharine Lee Bates, who toured the Fair and admired its “alabaster city” before she headed west for her memorable moment atop Pikes Peak.

Abbie herself worked intermittently in Boston, as a stenographer and telegraph operator. She enjoyed extended vacations at the homestead, having fun with her nieces and nephews. One niece later remembered a husking party where Abbie served “a huge [clam] chowder cooked in the iron wash-kettle which had been scrubbed and burnished for the occasion.” Postmaster and party guest George W. Jones exclaimed in astonishment, “Abbie, this is *ce-mense*.”

Abbie stayed in Falmouth during the winter of 1889, perhaps caring for her widowed mother. Between January and June, she kept a running account with a grocer, Frank L. Lumbert. Purchases, totaling \$27.56, included coffee, crackers, soap, vinegar, parsnips and prunes, cassia, and a good quantity of sugar and molasses. These



last three items suggest that Abbie was baking a lot, or making a lot of candy. Was she indulging her own sweet tooth, or somebody else's? Abbie bartered for her groceries with Lumbert, receiving a credit of \$22.77 for eggs, 34 pounds of butter, and 20 pounds of apples. She likely saw a good deal of Hattie Gifford, who had remained in Falmouth, and she probably met Katie now and then, during the professor's vacations from Wellesley.



Abbie died at age 42 after a gradual, two-year decline. Her funeral at the Quaker meetinghouse on November 15, 1903, was crowded with friends and relatives. The *Enterprise* noted that “Many will miss the sweet smile and the cheerful, uncomplaining voice. None could look upon that face, so beautiful even in death, and not but feel that ‘our loss is her eternal gain.’”

The mourners who loved her are proof that Abbie's life was a success. Over and above that, she also did a great service for Katharine Lee Bates. She provided Katie with a sympathetic audience, something every poet needs for encouragement, even (especially!) a twelve-year-old poet. Who would have thought, back in that dreary February classroom, with all its excited chatter about a singing school, that one day everyone in America would be singing Katie's song? It never would have happened without the people who shaped Katie's life—including little Abbie Moore.

Meg Castello
& *Thelma A. Spicer*