

Sharing Our Stories
Family Chroniclers



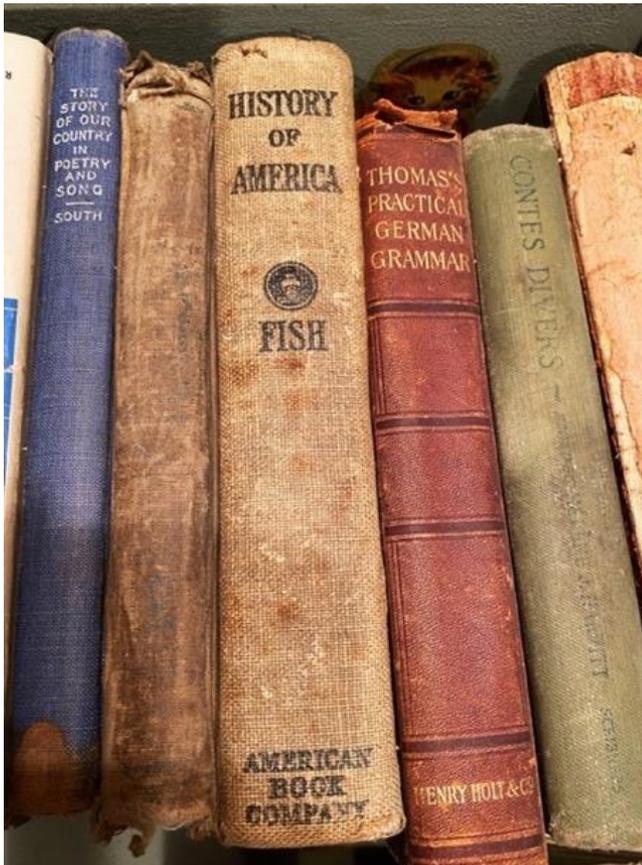
*Children of the present & the yet unborn
shall celebrate the hundredth anniversary -
spirits of the departed shall meet with them.*

- Betsey's words scribbled
inside an old chest

Dear Betsey –

I read that your mother was a bookworm of sorts in the late 1700s, that “her love for study had kept her so closely in school that when she was married, she had not learned housekeeping arts, not even cooking.”

This sounds like my own mother! As a child, she and her four siblings read the classics aloud and memorized long poems. In their 80s, she and her two younger sisters could still perform.



In the 1930s she studied international relations at Syracuse University, dreaming of adventure abroad. Near the end of her life, she looked back on that unrealized dream: “I wanted to work with the foreign service” she declared, then paused: “but I had five kids instead!”

Nonetheless, she remained a voracious reader, preferring a good novel to cooking for seven. In her 90s she was reading a 500-page tome on the historical roots of the Middle East conflict. (What would she think about the genocide in Gaza?)

I check out the many bookshelves in your home, Betsey, revealing wide ranging intellectual interests of your family. I finger through the large bound volumes of family genealogy in the parlour.

One biographer noted your “sense of history and sense of having made history as an early Ohio pioneer.”

The mere fact that you insisted the parlour not be touched after your death speaks to a commitment to keeping alive the memory of the Cowles history, and the importance of Austinburg in the abolition movement.

Just as I am probing the stories of the objects in that parlour almost two centuries later, you also took care to document the history of an old chest that had been brought west by your uncle in 1800.

Your descendant Margie opens the chest to reveal a musty page, your handwriting prescribing its future use:

“Preserve the old chest carefully for the sake of the Pioneers of the then west & if strangers – children of the present & the yet unborn shall celebrate the hundredth anniversary – spirits of the departed shall meet with them.”



This picture was taken at our 175th Celebration in 1976.
All our former living pastors returned.



Bill Barndt 1948-1957	Dave Clark 1958-1963	Don Spencer 1964-1968	Dale Kent 1969-1973	Tom Blossom (1974-1981)
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I hear your voice echoing from that weathered paper and prophetic pen and I am also here, meeting those spirits.

Two hundred years later, thanks to you.

You helped to organize the three-quarter centennial of Austinburg in 1875, and my father presided over the 150th anniversary in 1950, Betsey!

No longer one of the “yet unborn,” I was there as a five-year-old, and in 2025 your descendants celebrate the 225th anniversary.

Perhaps meeting the “spirits of the departed” through your careful preservation of their special objects and their stories.



*You spent the last decade of your life
at the family homestead in Austinburg*

*From your desk, you wrote a series of articles,
"Reminiscences of Olden Times," for the Ashtabula Sentinel.*

*You penned stories about the first families,
the church and school, work and household activities.*

*Always with an emotional prose, paying homage,
in particular, to the pioneer women:*

*"God Bless the matrons of those early days...
O, they were brave and noble too...
They ever welcomed the stranger
with sunny smiles."*

*I wonder if there were ever any mention
of the displacement of other brave and noble people,
Betsey, the Indigenous "matrons."*

Who were the "strangers" that were welcomed into the fold?

Who was not welcomed?



Syracuse University was in the heart of Haudenosaunee territory, the Iroquois Confederacy (or Six Nations) whose governance practice inspired the democratic base of the U.S. constitution.

It was no coincidence that the suffragette movement emerged in that same part of upstate New York.

The early leaders, some of whom you knew, Betsey, like Lucretia Mott, were inspired by their friendships with Haudenosaunee women, who modeled a society in which women were respected and seen as the counsellors for the council.

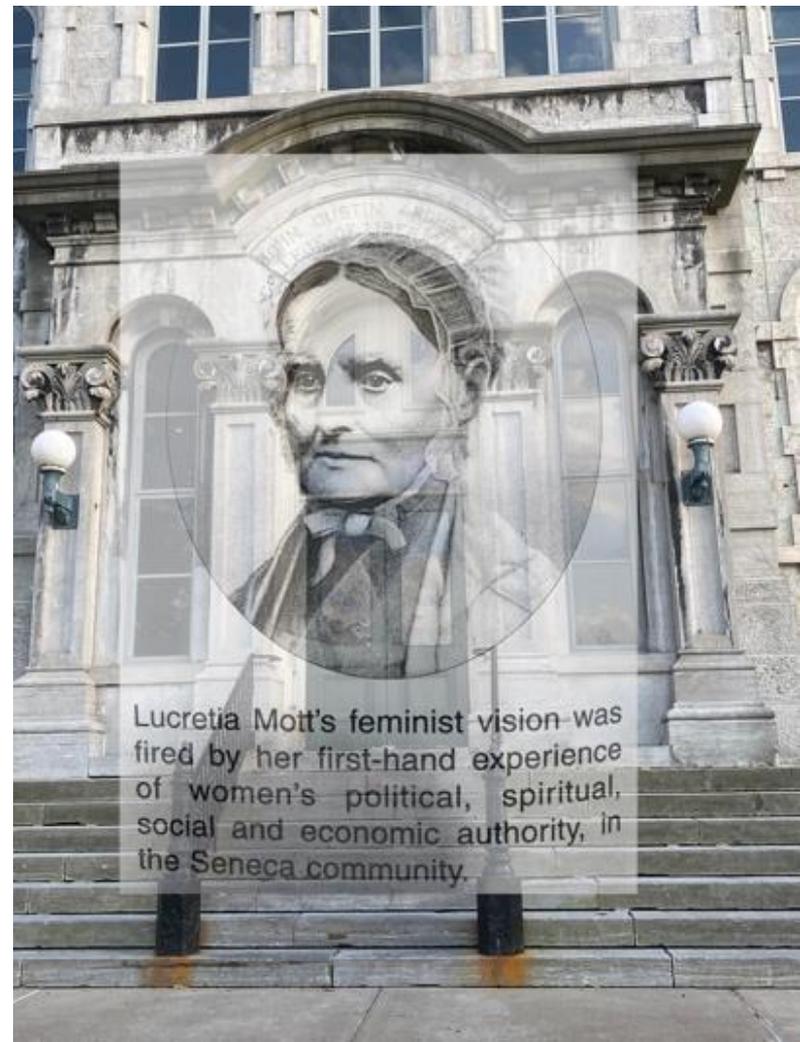
Witnessing another way of thinking about gender relations, suffragettes realized that "another world is possible."

Today that influence is recognized in both the Women's History Museum In Seneca Falls as well as in the Seneca Cultural Center as ["Sisters in Spirit."](#)

*When I visited my mother's alma mater in 2024
I was struck by the majesty of the colonial educational structures.*

I playfully superimposed onto the buildings images of Indigenous and colonial women who connected with each other in that era despite the patriarchal leadership of government and universities.

I want to ask my mother "Did you know?"



I felt the profound impact of the deaths of your parents and siblings on you, Betsey, in your own poetic words:

*My father, dear father I loved so too great,
And kind gentle mother whose voice was so [sweet],
When they bore them away and whispered their [sic] dead
I wept that my spirit with these had not fled.
And while o'er these idols the warm tears did start.
A voice whispered peace to the orphan's lone heart.
It breathed of a home where the last....should bind
And murmur no more, I'm blind, I'm blind."*



*I imagine you pecking away (were you already blind?)
on the heavy manual typewriter, Betsey,*

*while my fingers offer a gentler touch
to craft my letters to you with digital photos
on a very light laptop computer.*

*I also took on the mantle
of family chronicler, Betsey.*



In the early 1990s, I gathered my parents, together with two siblings, on a balcony at [Chautauqua Institution](#), to share their history.

Secrets were uncovered and those recordings fed our celebration of their 50th anniversary in 1991.

A few years later I probed my parents' memories of old family photos, my son at my side.



In 2022, after the deaths of my parents and younger brother, we gathered again at Chautauqua, this time with three generations.



We are now the elders.

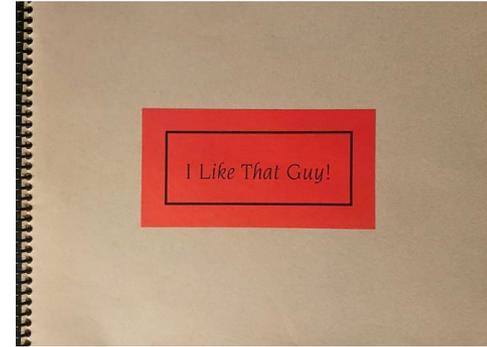
Over five days, we gathered, tape recorder running.

Each day we dug deeper, sharing stories that had never been shared, unearthing the pain of divorces, violence, and silences; the regrets of us elder siblings and the anxieties of our children, nieces and grand-nieces.

You and I, Betsey played the role of historian in our families.

Over the decades I produced photo essays on family history as well as prose poems for each of my siblings.

Perhaps the most emotional project was to create a book for my brother Van's 50th Birthday. When I was five, Van was born with Down's Syndrome. During a family storytelling session,, we learned how challenging it was in 1950 for my parents to choose to keep him at home rather than follow the doctor's advice to admit him to an institution and focus on the other three children.



Van became the heart of the family. We all learned to see his presence in our lives as a blessing rather than a curse, sometimes ignoring the difficulties or infantilizing him around certain life issues like sex and money.

Riding back from a family gathering in the early 1990s, Van told me excitedly about a TV show that featured a young man with Down's Syndrome.

When I suggested that Van could write his own life story, he immediately spouted a list of chapter titles...!

We gathered many photos, I interviewed him and collected quotes from his family and friends.

We titled it "I Like That Guy!" reproducing Van's common response soon after meeting someone new.

At the official book launch on Van's 50th birthday in 2000, Van stood proudly behind a podium and read from its pages. My artist son Joshua immortalized his uncle in an oil painting based on one of my photos.

Every time we got together in the subsequent 15 years, until his death at 65, Van would mention his book several times a day. I believe that, in the broader scheme of things, Van's book is my greatest accomplishment...!

*While the book carries Van's story, I see him daily in my backyard garden.
The Serviceberry tree planted in his memory is bursting forth with springtime buds and blossoms.*

*In the midst of dark times, Van, you speak to me through the constant rebirth of the Earth.
Born again in my heart, reminding me to embrace every day and everyone, without judgment.*



I wonder, Betsey, if your blindness toward the end of your life made you more aware of what it means to live with a disability, and what gifts might accompany the challenges.

Did you find when that you lost sight, you were more sensitive to sound, to touch, to vibrations of the Earth..?

*Visiting a tree, for example, by feeling its bark, buds, flowers?
Breathing in its fragrance? Imagining it inhaling carbon dioxide, water, and energy from the sun?*

Just like you and me, trees breathe, but we inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, while trees remove gas emissions from the atmosphere, addressing the effects of climate change.

Perhaps, Betsey, based on your own experience, you would add disability discrimination to the roots of the tree of inequities.

Exploring the complex tangled roots of oppression, disability advocacy would complement your anti-racism and anti-sexism work. All centre the physical body, and how power operates to deny, control, and violate our bodies.

Wooden frames and leather-padded, gold-gilded albums in your parlour are filled with photos, mainly formal portraits.

Photography was only invented when you were in your twenties, Betsey, and prints didn't appear until the mid-1800s.

So you wouldn't have had a chance to take candid shots of people in action or of nature in transformation. Something that is so second nature to me now!

Through the very few photos of you and of your house, I am learning about you, your family and social movement history, while I am uncovering photos from my archives to write about my own personal, family, and movement history.



In 2023, five graduate students joined me in a participatory archiving process to organize my [photo archives](#) which are now at York University.

In recent years I've created powerpoint presentations based on those archives, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the [International Participatory Research Network](#), revisiting a [multimedia education kit](#) for the Toronto Workers History Project, revising my exhibit "[My Trees and Me](#)" for an anniversary edition of the Canadian Women Studies Journal.

Photos are attached to my pen...integral to almost everything I write, from the political to the personal. More often now, I am offering photos and photo essays for my family and friends' obituaries and Celebrations of Life.

Perhaps that is my role as an octogenarian: to mine the treasure trove of my photo archives to learn from our past and keep the stories alive.

What makes us feel that our experiences are worthy of being shared more broadly than our families, Betsey?

I sometimes wonder if it's arrogant of me to think that this history, not just my personal history but the history of the social movements I have participated in, is important and needs to be shared and learned from.

Yet I could not be writing letters to you, Betsey, if you and others hadn't preserved your archives. I would not have learned the history of the anti-slavery movement in my hometown, may not have been pushed to unearth the Indigenous history of my home state Ohio.

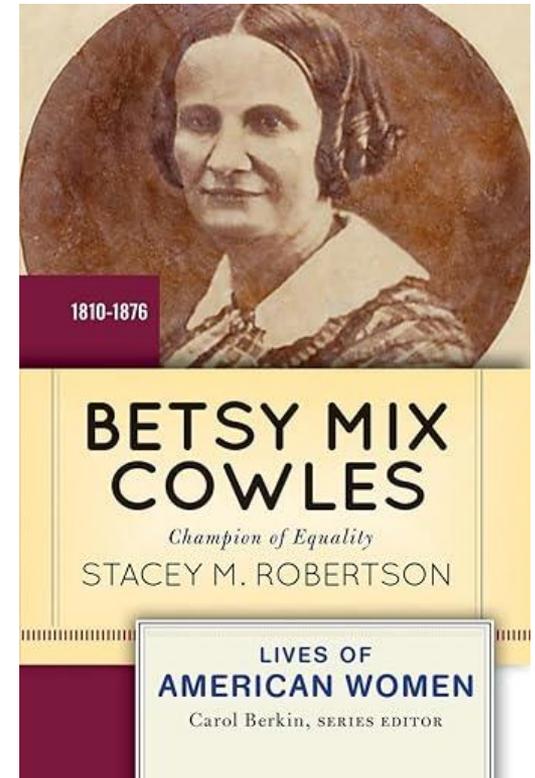
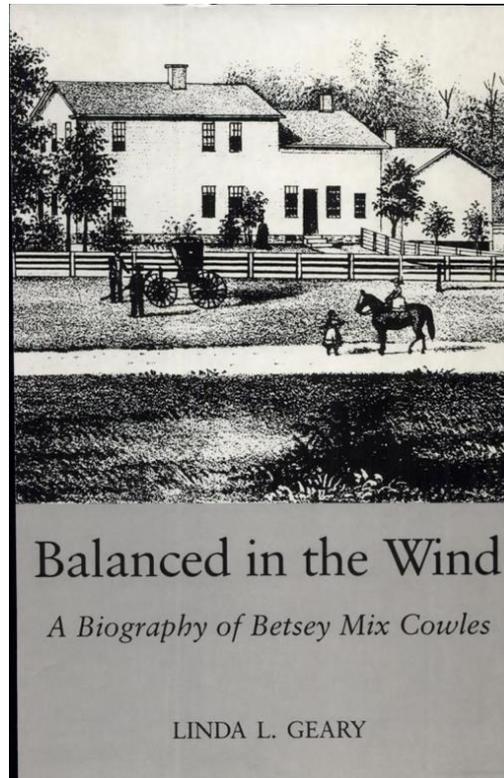
Thanks to your great great great niece Margaret Ticknor, my mother's friend, all of your documents are in the Kent State University archives. Her daughter Ginny now carries her legacy, organizes historical re-enactments, and has generously shared documents with me.

I am grateful, too, for your biographers, Linda L. Geary and Stacey M. Robertson, who have meticulously mined those raw materials, more than a century after your death.

Each tried, in her own way, to make sense of your actions and the historical moment you lived.

The stories they crafted have fed my own writing and connected me with you. These two women wrote somewhat different stories, reminding me that we will always bring our own subjectivity to the telling of another's story.

How I frame you and your life says as much about me as it does about you.



*I am no longer in Austinburg, our common hometown,
I have been re-rooted for more than 50 years in Toronto, Canada.*

*I feel a deep connection to blood, adopted and chosen family,
to a large community of friends and acquaintances,
to educational institutions and social movements,
to multicultural populations and diverse cultural artistic practices.*

*And, yes, to this landscape, to nearby High Park and
the [oak savannah being restored, led by Indigenous stewards.](#)*

*To my backyard, which is being rewilded with native plants
And the alley with the three sisters: corns, beans, and squash.*

*To the trees in the front and in the back of my house:
the red maple, Russian olive, Serviceberry, and Crab Apple trees.*

*They are one reason I cannot leave here;
they, too, are family.*

*As I approach the end of my life on Earth,
I feel some urgency in sharing these stories.
Both for the opportunity to revisit
and deepen my reflection on my journey,
and for the possibility of sharing them with future generations.*

Did this also motivate you to write in the final years, Betsey?

I have also been a kind of death doula myself...for trees.

*I sought a special tree in each place I've lived,
and sometimes returned to find some of them
already transformed into stumps
their rings offering clues to their storied lives,
before they decompose into rich soil for new growth.*





Friends have invited me to photograph important tree encounters.

During a four-day canoe trip in 2016 in the Temagami region of Ontario, Lori and Wayne revisited the site where they first met in 1989 protesting the logging of old growth forest.

My neighbour Ann asked me document a ritual as she said goodbye to the precious but diseased elm tree in her backyard.



Sometimes a tree has inspired an entire photo essay, like [The Jicaro of Ciudad Colon](#) in Costa Rica and the [Hawaiian Tree Overstory](#) framed by Richard Powers' homage to trees.

While I'm usually behind the camera caressing each new tree with my lens, my partner John has captured me encountering tree friends on our travels around the world: from Hawaii to Costa Rica to a [photo essay](#) honouring our friend Om who lived in a tree for ten years in Chacala, Mexico.



*It's my desire to be buried in my backyard wild garden to fertilize a tree.
While some cemeteries have created designated spaces for green burials,
municipal laws don't allow me to stay that close to my home.*

*When visiting your home in Austinburg, Betsey, I crossed the street
to the graveyard that was created for your family and early settlers.*

*There I met you through your gravestone, imagining your own integration
with the Earth. I raised my eyes [from the ground holding you to the trees](#)
encircling your resting place, and imagined that*

the spirits of the departed shall meet with them."



*I wait for a breeze to scatter the seeds
of the milkweed by your house.*

*We can never know
where our stories will travel,
in what fertile soil they will find
new roots and thrive,
perhaps 200 hundred years later....*

References:

1. *Quoted in Geary, 91.*
2. *Ibid., 93.*
3. *Ibid., 93.*