

To Thee We Will Sing: The Life of Annie Hutchinson Foote

Donna J. McCalla, President, Hebron Historical Society

Longtime Hebron residents easily remember Annie Hutchinson Foote. A beautiful, popular and vivacious girl during her school years, Annie left Hebron in 1908 to attend college. She returned in 1919, and became a cornerstone in the community until her death in 1986 at the age of 98. Her story is one of dedication, courage, and sacrifice.

Born in 1887, Annie Lovina Hutchinson was the youngest child of Alfred and Lovina (Holbrook) Hutchinson. She quickly earned a reputation as a serious student. Like other Hebron children, Annie went to the one-room Gilead Hill School through the eighth grade. However, unlike most, she went on to high school at Bacon Academy in Colchester. Hebron didn't have its own high school, and options for post-8th grade education were limited. Every Sunday, the family would hitch up the team of horses and make the long trip from Gilead to the Turnerville (now Amston) train depot. There, Annie would take the train to Colchester where she would be met by the family she boarded with. On Friday evenings, she returned to Gilead to spend the weekend at home. This went on for four years, but the Hutchinson family gladly made the sacrifice for their scholarly daughter who made straight A's in language and classical studies. Interestingly, Annie also wrote the words to "Baconia", Bacon Academy's Alma Mater, which is still used today. The first line of the song is another example of Annie's celebration of all things in her life: "Baconia, we hail thee! To thee we will sing."

On those weekend sojourns back home Annie Hutchinson often saw Robert Erastus Foote, three years her junior, at Gilead Congregational Church. At age 12, Rob announced to his parents, Edward and Alice Foote, that one day he was going to marry Annie Hutchinson.

Annie's dream of going to college was reinforced when she received a full scholarship to Mt. Holyoke. It was an offer that no other Hebron woman had ever received; yet no one was surprised when she ultimately chose to turn down the scholarship. Residents knew that Annie Hutchinson was dedicated to family, and when faced with the decision of whether to leave Hebron for Mt. Holyoke or take care of her very ill sister-in-law, Grace, Annie made the sacrifice. There was plenty of time for college, she said; for now, Grace needed her.

In addition to taking care of Grace, Annie taught at area schools until 1908, when a second opportunity for a college education presented itself. A family friend learned that Alfred University, a 4-year institution in New York, had an opening for a student with her potential. There was no scholarship this time; the Hutchinson family paid the tuition and fees, and Annie was off to New York.

By her junior year, Annie had been elected Class President. Rob Foote, still hot in pursuit of his Annie, transferred from Trinity College to Alfred to be closer to her (and stave off the competition!) The yearbook editors declared Rob and Annie "soul mates" and assumed that they would ultimately marry.

Marry they did, on August 20, 1913, but only after Annie became the first Hebron woman to earn a 4-year college degree. She and Rob went on to become educators at Suffield Academy until Rob was named Principal of Chester High School. Life was great for the Footes in 1919; by then, they had fulfilling careers in education and three children. But then the call came. Rob's brother, Arnold, who worked the farm with his parents, lost some fingers in a farming accident. Ed and Alice needed help, and they asked Rob and Annie to return to Hebron and farming. Of all the decisions the young couple

had to make in their lifetime, this was the hardest. In addition to the careers they had worked so hard for, there were also considerations like indoor plumbing. Rob and Annie had become accustomed to such simple amenities. Returning to Hebron meant sacrifices. Yet, as was typical of their generation, they put family first.

Ever strong of character, Annie soon adjusted to her life as a farm wife. She learned cheerful ways of taking the children out to the 3-seater outhouse in the middle of a cold January night. She was active in the Gilead Congregational Church, and served as Superintendent of Sunday School for over 50 years. She also was active in the Ladies Aid Society (today known as Women's Fellowship), and made many "newcomers" to Hebron feel welcome in the Church and in the town. She momentarily shocked the townspeople when she wore trousers to do farm work and drive the tractor; but soon, her example caught on, and other farm wives were soon wearing pants to do their chores. By 1945, she decided there was no reason why she shouldn't be a member of the State Legislative body. Back then, there were two representatives from each town (compared to today's "districts".) She ran, and was easily elected. As a state legislator, she pursued her lifelong goals of promoting education.

Annie and Rob ended up occupying the first floor of the Foote family farm on Gilead Street. Son Ed, wife Marion, and their family lived upstairs. While Annie never displayed favoritism toward any of her 14 grandchildren, a special bond soon developed between her and Ed's older daughter, Mary Ann. Even today, Mary Ann refers to Annie as "Grandma Downstairs."

Annie had always kept copious notes on life in Hebron. She would spend hours at the Hebron Town Records building, poring over historic documents. "One day," she said, "I'm going to write a book on the history of Gilead." The motivation to fulfill her pledge came in 1969. Annie went out to pick hickory nuts. A bull attacked her, knocking her down time and again, doing much damage to her 80-year old body. She later told her family, "I just prayed, and suddenly a voice told me to grab the bull's nose ring." She grabbed the ring, causing great discomfort to the bull, and he obediently allowed her to pull him all the way back to the fence, which she crawled under and walked away to safety. "That's it," she said. "I'm writing that book now."

Annie Hutchinson Foote published her book, *In Gilead*, in 1970 when she was 83 years old. Mary Ann was honored to be able to type and edit the manuscript for her grandmother. Residents lucky enough to have a signed copy note her elegant signature.

Even the strong of spirit eventually fall victim to age. On the night before she died, Annie recited the names and birth dates of all of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to another granddaughter, Betsy Foote. She then looked at Betsy and said, "Do you think Rob will be okay if I'm not here to be with him?" They had been married 72 years; no one could conceive of Annie without Rob, or Rob without Annie.

Annie died the next day. Rob followed her less than a year and a half later. As Bacon Academy student voices fill the air with "To thee we will sing," the memories of Annie Hutchinson Foote live on.