

Isabel Hyams and the Orchard House

In 1918, when we bought our home, 29 Pleasant Street, Fingham, a high trellis enclosed the lawn and garden. This, we removed as soon as possible. My first meeting with Isabel Hyams, who lived across the street from us, was when she appeared at our door one morning. With what a pleasant smile she greeted me, saying that she wanted to welcome me to the neighborhood and to tell me how glad she was that we had taken down the trellis. "Now," she said, "I can look across the lawn to your garden, and can enjoy the far-reaching view of the meadows to the south." I immediately felt that I wished to know this neighbor well. This first meeting developed into a friendship that lasted until her death in 1932.

This was in the summer of World War I, and every morning, Dr. Howard, with our children and me for an audience, raised the Flag in front of our house. We had had our ceremony only a few mornings, when we looked across the street to Miss Hyams'. There, in the corner of her orchard, nearest to us, stood Miss Hyams and a group of her girls, saluting the flag, as Dr. Howard raised it to the peak of the pole. Then the girls turned and silently filed back, with Miss Hyams, to their places at the breakfast table, built aground the base of the old apple tree. This ceremony was repeated every morning during that summer.

Little by little, I learned Miss Hyams' interests and achievements. In writing this article, I have taken data of Miss Hyams' life from notes on record in the files of the Alumni Association of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For the personal accounts of life at the "Louisa M. Alcott Club" on Oswego Street, Boston and at the "Orchard House" in Hingham, I am indebted to three of the "children"--now middle-aged and grandmothers, who belonged to the Club in its earliest days. These are three of the Novogrod sisters, Dorothy Lewis, Frances Gravatts and Jennie Glazer. "Jennie" lent me photographs; "Dora" and "Fannie" answered my many questions; and I am taking their answers almost word for word.

Miss Isabel F. Hyams was the daughter of Solomon M. and Clara C. Hyams. They lived in a large house on Wales Street in Dorchester, built in the days of beautiful estates in that section. Later, the house was sold and Isabel and her sister, Sarah, lived on Jamaica Way, in an apartment overlooking Jamaica Pond. Miss Hyams was a member of the class of 1888 of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For many years thereafter, she was associated with Mrs. Ellen Richards, assistant Professor of Sanitary Chemistry at the Institute, in her laboratory work relating to Public Health.

The pioneer effort of Miss Hyams in social and education work was the Louisa M. Alcott Club, which she founded in 1895, together with Marion Hatschisky Ehrlich and Francis Stern, at 15 Oswego Street in the South End of Boston. It was through the inspiration and encouragement of Miss Hyams, that this same Francis Stern continued her work in Dietetics, until she became an authority in nutrition, Education, not only throughout this Country, but abroad, also.

Through clubs and classes of children of all ages, Miss Hyams adapted the principles of Home Economics to the child's physical development, with extension work into the home for the parents. In 1905, an exhibit of this work at the 5th International Congress in Washington, was given a special award medal. These lessons in Domestic Science were a fore-runner of the movement known as Health Education.

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She was the benefactor and prime mover in many activities relating to the cure of tuberculosis. For twenty-seven years, she was clerk of the Boston Tuberculosis Association. She was a leader in establishing the Prendergast Preventorium for children at Mattapan and of the Sheltered Workshop for discharged T.B. patients who are unable immediately to engage in industrial occupations under competitive conditions.

The Louisa M. Alcott Club at 15 Oswego Street was financed by Miss Hyams. Everything was done, not only to interest and make the children happy, but they were taught ways to bring beauty into their homes with small expense. Milly Nathan joined the Club in its early days, and later was Miss Hyams devoted Secretary, as long as she lived. Together, they carried up dirt to the third floor of the Club House for window boxes, so that flower seeds could be planted to make the whole house attractive. The area between Oswego and Genesee Streets was most untidy and the children were taught to show how much better the place looked if it were kept cleaned up. The boys of the club were given white uniforms and picked up the trash and put it into their wheelbarrows. Cooking and simple crafts, including basket weaving, were taught. Each child was given her own cooking equipment, with kettles, plates, cups, knives, forks and spoons. One of the girls told me that their first lesson was to learn how to cook noodles--a wise choice with a good chance of attaining success! Many opportunities were given the club members--among other things, on the first Tuesday of each month Miss Hyams hired professional musicians to give club members an evening of good music.

For a summer or two, Miss Hyams took the children to a farm in Concord for a vacation. In 1901, she purchased the estate now numbered 36 Pleasant Street, Hingham, and named the home "The Orchard House." What an ideal place to come to from the hot city! Towards the west of the house, was the orchard; pink with bloom in the spring and a pleasant reminder of the red apples that would follow at harvest time. The high ceilinged house, built about 1805, lent itself to the home for this club. A central hall separated the two front rooms, with a wide porch towards the south and west of the house. Miss Hyams' living-room was the one to the west, with the large dining-room behind it, and the children's living-room was the one to the east side of the hall. Over the mantle was a large copy of Raphael's "Madonna Della Seggiola".

Upstairs, there were four bed-rooms. The front south-west room was Miss Hyams- the front south-east room with four cots in it was in yellow with nasturtiums on the wall; behind this was the north-east room, with pink rose buds on the four bedspreads and on the walls apple trees in full bloom, with boys and girls playing beneath the trees. The other room to the north-west had blue morning glories on the walls and blue forget-me-nots on the four bedspreads. What an opportunity to pick fresh flowers from the garden to suit the color scheme for each room!

"Any child who belonged to the Club and was willing to go, had the benefit of a two weeks vacation at Hingham. There were age groups in the various classes. The youngest may have been from 5 - 7; another, 8 - 10 or 11; 12 to 14 or 15; lastly 16 - 18 years. The youngest always went to the Orchard House first, the oldest last. But even after leaving the club, we had occasional re-unions at Miss Hyams' or Miss Stern's home. Those were always renewals of friendship which gave us the opportunity of reminiscing about the past.

for each child. I have already described how pretty each room was--the pink room, the blue room and the yellow room. One drawer in the dresser was allocated to a child. In the closet in each room, were several hooks, which we divided evenly among us. In back of the door in the bathroom were just enough hooks for our towels--one to a child. The bathroom was a delightful and charming place. Painted white, its bench with five white porcelain bowls. While one washed at the regular sink, five others washed at the bench--then the remaining children took over. This room was on the second floor, right off the back stairs. As a rule, we were never more than twelve at a time at the Orchard House."

"Across the lawn and through the orchard, to the west of the house was a playhouse, furnished with children's furniture, but big enough to be sat on and enjoyed. This playhouse had three rooms--kitchen, livingroom and bedroom, all beautifully furnished, to draperies and rugs."

"Did we cook in the house: Indeed we did! What excitement when we could finally see the smoke coming through the tiny chimney. In and out-in and out we would run, just to make sure it was still coming. Only three at a time were allowed to do this. The place was too small to allow for more, but we all partook of the meal. Some were good, others not too palatable. But it was fun! I almost forgot to add that we did have dolls, in the living room, on the settee and one on the tiny linen chest in the bedroom."

"Milly Nathan seemed to have come along with the club since it was born. Next to Miss Stern, she was Miss Hyams' right arm. Milly's mother was there for one summer only--that was the summer Mr. Buchinani went to Italy and came back with a beautiful bride. That summer, Milly and her mother had the room off the dining room. After Mr. Buchinani's return, he and his wife had a nicely furnished room in the attic--it was larger and more convenient in many ways."

"During our rest hours, fairy tales, and later, short stories were read to us. I doubt if many of us actually listened intently. We always picked a sunny spot, and I doubt if the grass was ever too wet for an hour of rest."

"Our trips to Nantasket on Tuesdays were always exciting occasions for us. A hearty lunch was always being prepared in the kitchen--weather permitting--and what a thrill when we were finally on our way to the trolley car. The ride itself to the beach was something we looked forward to with great anticipation. What fun to get into the bathing suits which were not too becoming to any of us--and to run into the cold water where we splashed about to our hearts' content. Then for a sunny spot to dry: then to enjoy the lunch we had been looking forward to. How we ate. We were young and always hungry, at least, I always seemed to be. Miss Hyams and Miss Stern always enjoyed watching me, as I silently enjoyed my food, for my cheeks always became so rosey after each meal."

"Then beat ^S of all--our visit to Paragon Park, after we had taken our shower at the bath house and dressed again. There we were treated to two or three amusements and an ice-cream cone. That was all paid for by Miss Hyams. I am certain Miss Hyams' delight in simply watching us as we screamed on the roller coaster or on the Virginia Reel was as great as ours; she would laugh so heartily that the tears streamed down her cheeks."

The younger classes paid four cents dues--two cents on Tuesday and two cents on Thursday. The older groups from age 12 on, paid five cents a week

Can you recall the lovely bouquets of forget-me-nots which were sold at the station when the trains arrived? When these beautiful blue flowers were in bloom, we would pluck them in the evening, as we walked along that road--Unica Street--over the tiny bridge and then on, as far as the then Jordan's farm.

During the entire summer, Mr. and Mrs. Buchinani lived at the Orchard House. His duties were to care for the orchards, flower and vegetable gardens and to give loving care to the twin horses--one named "Isabellina" and the other "Saraphina", after Miss Hyams and her sister. All meals were planned by Miss Hyams, with the aid of Mrs. Buchinani. Such delicious meals! But desserts were always prepared by Miss Hyams. Our two favorites were steamed date pudding with rum flavored hard sauce--the other, cottage pudding, topped with hot chocolate sauce. How good they were. These were things we did not get at home, but you may be certain we have served them to our own families. Also the table at each meal was set by the children--each taking her turn. What wonderful experiences those were for us.

And don't forget our rides, every afternoon (if we were not at the beach or picking berries) in the surry with the fringe on top! How we jounced along on the not too smooth roads of those days--singing all the while! And with each jolt, our voices all a-tremble--like an opera singer. The more bumps the more we liked it. How beautiful and shiny Saraphina and Isabellina were. Perhaps they too enjoyed that.

Since its inception and for several years, many boys became members of the Club and for a number of years, they came to the Orchard House. They slept in the two attic rooms, which were simply but comfortably furnished. We got along nicely with them and at times they were fun to be with. The boys were taught carpentry and simple rules of cooking.

In regard to our daily tasks while we were in Hingham, it was always necessary for more than one girl to be assigned to a job. The day we arrived, we had our choice--to help in the kitchen and dining-room--care for the bathroom and waxing front stairs--polishing brass on doors--cleaning of bedrooms and halls being done by the greater number. For instance, I always preferred keeping the bathroom, front stairs, hall and copper and brass spic and span. Also, it was my duty and delight to see to the floral arrangements throughout the house--as many as fifteen different ones each day. Flowers in the garden were plentiful and the choice of color schemes was always a source of pleasure for me.

Towards evening, there were times when we, including Miss Hyams and Miss Stern, were asked to pick potato bugs off the plants, or to pull weeds in the garden. But most evenings, after a light, but always tasty meal, and after all was tidied up, we would all take a stroll through the countryside after which, at eight p.m., when the bell was rung, it meant time to retire. All hands and faces and teeth were scrupulously washed. Such a nice feeling to get into our beds, feeling so clean and ready for a good night's sleep.

In each bedroom, there was one large dresser, a commode and a white cot

"On days when it rained we played most of the time in the shed back of the kitchen, but at night we entertained ourselves in the children's living room which was opposite Miss Hyams'. There we had all kinds of games at our disposal. A fine old music box brought us much delight; after winding it, we would listen to the sweet refrains which emanated from under its lid--none of that popular music--just the finest from operas. This music box, by the way, Miss Hyams bought in Switzerland."

"Those of us who were fortunate enough to be in Hingham the last two weeks in August had a special treat--that is if one enjoyed picking blueberries. That was always fun for me. Once a week, on an afternoon, we went to Turkey Hill Lane for a picnic and to pick berries. Some children detested this, but it was fun for others. On arriving home, we would pick them over, making sure to discard all bad ones, and after thoroughly washing them, we had them for supper. The rest were cooked and put aside for later use."

"On the night before the day of our departure, we always had a masquerade party. We were allowed to go up attic and dress up in any of the costumes that were waiting for us in the big trunks. With what we had of our own belongings, we managed to get up some silly outfit. Our days for departure were sad ones for most of us. It always was for me. I would sit on the front porch and drink in all the beauty around me to keep happy memories of for the cold and wintry months. One time I was reluctant to leave--I was sad at heart and as I sat on the porch, these words of farewell were finally framed--

"Good-bye, Hingham, I must leave you,
Though it breaks my heart to go,
Something tells me I am needed
In my own city home.
Perhaps I'll see you next year,
But no longer can I stay.
Hark! I hear my Mother calling,
So, Good-b e, Hingham dear.

(This was set to music of an old song.)"

One time, I said to Miss Hyams, "Isabel, how do you keep the girls in such perfect order? I never hear you raise your voice." She laughed and said, "Why I don't do anything." Then I knew that she just smiled and the girls felt instinctively, the understanding and love of her spirit. If anyone failed to comply with the regulations of the house, she was told to go upstairs, to Miss Hyams' room, and wait behind the door until Miss Hyams came up. Recently one of the girls told me, "I loved Miss Hyams so much, that I would be naughty on purpose, just to be along with her upstairs. After a little talk together, and my promising to try to be better, she would give me some goodies."

One summer, the local paper stated, "The Jewish Orphanage has been opened for the summer." Isabel called my attention to it and said, "That week, there were several nationalities there, but not one Jew among them."

Summer went on in the Orchard House until 1928, when new responsibilities came to Isabel and Sarah Hyams. Their brother, Godfrey had died, leaving a large fortune and the two sisters were put in charge of the disbursements for charitable purposes of the income of the Godfrey M. Hyams Trust. The

Orchard House at 123 Pleasant Street, Wingham was sold to the Ralph N. Dobles, who lived there until June 19, 1956, when they sold it to the Theodore B. Hannas, the present owners in 1958. Miss Hyams' spirit of helpfulness and hospitality was a part of the house, which not only descended to the Dobles, but was carried on by them. Throughout the years, out-of-town automobiles would stop at the Dobles and the well-dressed occupants would get out, look across the orchard to the play-house, then knock at the door and introduce themselves as some of the "children" who used to come to the Orchard House years before.

So many evidences of Miss Hyams' neighborliness were constantly shown; Christmas, Easter, birthdays were all remembered. One September, she asked me to come over to make my grape jelly in her kitchen, for her vines had a heavy crop. When I arrived, I saw on the stove, an eight quart kettle of grape juice that Isabel and Willy Nathan had already prepared for me to start my jelly! That was just one instance of her many thoughtful deeds. Isabel gave generously--and unsolicited!--to the building of the Wingham Girl Scout House. After her death, her sister Sarah and Willy Nathan came down each year to the Girl Scout Christmas Market. Miss Sarah Hyams died the day after Pearl Harbor, December 1941.

The last time that I saw Isabel Hyams, she was confined to her bed, and only shortly before she died. She had an Italian bracelet put on my wrist watch and as she put it on for me, she told me that when I wore it to think that she was clasping my hand. I know what the friendship of Isabel Hyams did to inspire me and her influence is still a living help.

"Isabel F. Hyams gave her entire life to the promotion of work for the young and needy, the sick and the unfortunate. In selecting the objects for which she worked and gave, she looked only to the results which might be accomplished and made no discrimination of race color or creed."*

Mrs. Charles T. Howard
February (1942) 1958

*From the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Record, in the files of their Alumni Association.