

## *Hazel Albertson, Author, Muse, Activist*

Hazel Hiller Hammond Albertson, who in the 20<sup>th</sup> century helped frame others' views of West Newbury, as well as the Town's views of itself, was born on December 21, 1883 in the northwest corner of Pennsylvania, where oil was first produced. Her mother, Nellie Bassett, was born and raised in central Massachusetts. Her father, E.W. Hammond, described himself as having been a [“rich, liberal oil man in West Virginia.”](#)

According to Frances Davis' *A Fearful Innocence*, Hazel Hammond met Ralph Albertson around 1900, when she had just finished high school. Her father, who shared some of Albertson's socialist ideals, offered Albertson, then broken and sick, sanctuary after the failure of his Commonwealth Colony commune near Columbus, Georgia. As Hazel nursed Ralph's typhus, she was inspired by his vision of world fellowship and progress. Hazel and Ralph married in 1904, after he divorced his first wife. She was 20; he was 38.

The September 1, 1909 *Newbury Daily News* reported that West Newbury's Chestnut Hill Farm had been sold to Ralph Albertson of Boston. The Albertsons planned to establish an open doors haven of cooperative liberal Christian fellowship. She and the children stayed at the Farm while he pursued business, socialist, and personal interests in Boston and beyond. In the 1910's, he returned on weekends, bringing countless characters who then came with others, including progressively inclined Harvard students. Many (notably [Walter Lippmann](#)) made their way into history books; almost all were in thrall to white-bloomer-clad Hazel, whose warmth, vitality, beauty, and intellect rarely failed to charm. In 1919, as he left for a sojourn in Bolshevik Russia, Ralph deeded the Farm to Hazel, subject to a \$4,000 mortgage. In 1921, she filed an uncontested petition for divorce on grounds of abandonment.

Hazel's approach to farming, fraught with near-miss tax and mortgage foreclosures, may be best summarized in a [1911 debate at Laurel Grange](#). She rhapsodized about farming as a thing of beauty and joy. Her opponent “spoke in a practical vein. Referring to Mrs. Albertson's statement that a farmer found great joy in the beauty of country sights and sounds, the sunsets and the ever changing panorama of nature, the music

of birds and bees, of winds and storms, Miss Rogers thought that the farmer was usually so busy with the problem of earning a living that he had no time for enjoyment of the kind mentioned.”

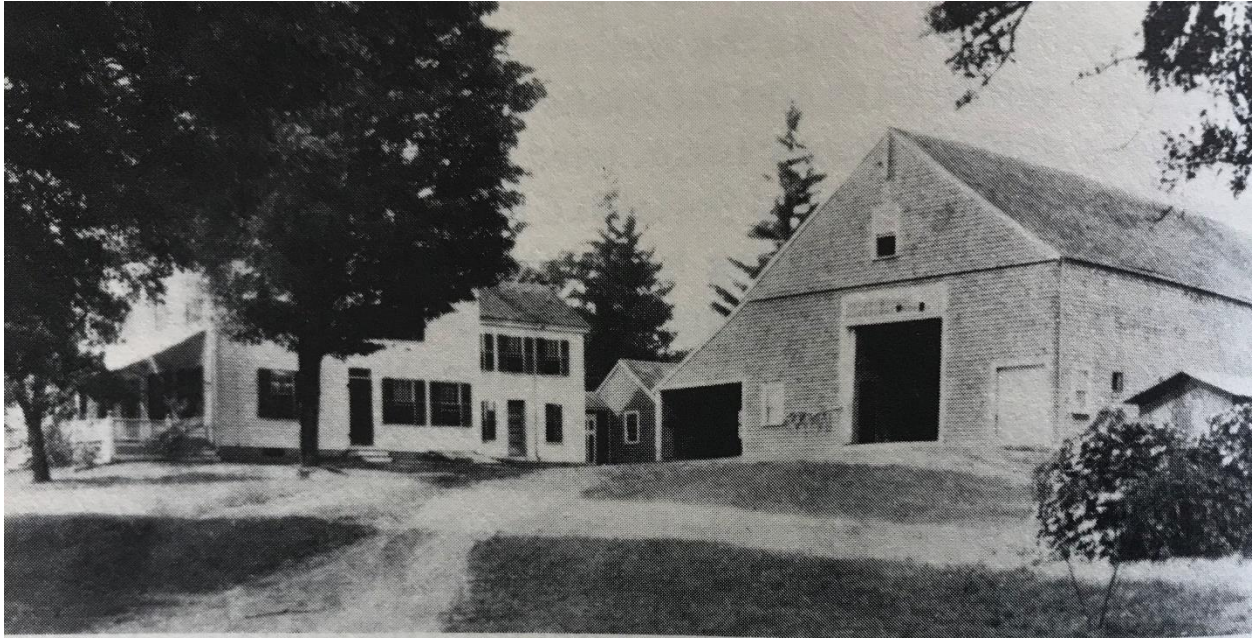
Hazel's lyricism found a spectacular outlet in writing and directing musically scored, elaborately costumed pageants, whose casts often counted in the hundreds with audiences in the thousands. [For the Town's 1919 centennial](#), she wrote *The Spirit of the Merrimack*, which began with a glacier melting in the sun as the cast of “grasses, wild roses, black eyed Susans come and dance beside the river.” Among her other works were pageants for the Town of Merrimac, Dummer Academy, Newbury's tercentenary, and in 1930 an [extravaganza performed by newsboys](#) on the Common as part of Boston's tercentenary.

Hazel applied to herself [her recommendations for all](#): “give at least 15 minutes a day to the study of welfare problems. As a club, start a group for such study and have speakers.... Have panel discussions on such subjects.” A leader in the local suffrage movement, she became a founder and prime mover of the West Newbury Woman's Club, whose crusades ranged from raising money to fight TB to cleaning up the Merrimack River. She led the Girl Scouts, chaired the Town blackout committee in WWII, and was active in myriad groups including the Town Hall Forum, the “community betterment society,” and the Town's Red Cross public health committee. She gave lectures about newly released books, current events, and means of achieving world peace. For decades she served as an officer of the statewide federated Woman's Club.

Throughout, Hazel welcomed interesting, liberal minded people to the Farm. In the early 1930s, she hosted Bertrand Russell Brinley, who set his *Mad Scientists' Club* boys' books in West Newbury. While dining at Chestnut Hill Farm in 1938, Virginia Lee Burton found the ending for the children's classic *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, introducing West Newbury to the world as Popperville, whose Town Hall will forever be a special place to all who know the story.

Hazel Hammond Albertson died on July 24, 1969 in Newburyport. She was 85 years old. Chestnut Hill Farm remains in her family to this day.

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*Chestnut Hill Farm Source: A Fearful Innocence by Frances Davis*



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*Hazel Albertson back row, 2d from left*

*Source: Boston Globe 3/4/1932*