

# PREFACE

*Weston Blelock writes:*

Anita M. Smith, painter, herbalist and writer, was a direct and formative influence in our lives. In 1954 Nelle Jones Blelock, an aspiring writer married to William W. Blelock Jr., should have been content. Her husband's company had recently built a house for the couple and their two small children (my sister, Julia, and me) according to her design. But she heard voices and had visions. In a recurring dream she saw herself meeting a wise woman who lived in a house made of books. At Nelle's urging, the family left Bedford, Quebec, and made their way back to the United States. In the fall of 1956 Bill Blelock accepted an offer from Rotron Inc. to join the company as one of its early employees.

A year later Nelle was introduced (by Sally Carlson, daughter-in-law of John F. Carlson) to Anita Smith. Anita was seeking new tenants for Stonecrop, her bluestone house in Woodstock. The Blelock family moved into Stonecrop, and Nelle visited Anita for the first time in her cottage next door—formerly her herb shop, now converted. The living space had built-in shelves, cabinets and tables piled with books. It seemed to Nelle that if she were to move a single volume the house would come tumbling down. Our mother had met the woman in her dream.

Miss Smith was diminutive in height but packed a formidable personality. Her family had been pillars of Quaker society in Philadelphia since the nation's founding. As a result of numerous journeys to Europe she regarded France as a second home and was fluent in French. She had turned her back on Philadelphia in 1912 to pursue her art and seek fulfillment as a painter in the fledgling art colony in

Woodstock. Once, in her native city, while waiting in line for a theater engagement, she had become aware of her privileged status when she saw that others were forced to queue on the opposite side of the velvet rope. She resolved to seek out experiences beyond that velvet safety barrier and to devote herself to the deeper meaning of life. One way of doing so was to dedicate herself to her painting, instead of to the traditional role of wife and mother. Consequently Anita never married nor had children.

She braved Woodstock winters—just as the men folk did—in an uninsulated barn with only a woodstove for heat, a kerosene lamp for illumination and a stream as a natural dishwasher. It was a trying yet exciting time. She believed it was necessary for her to learn about the people who lived in the Catskill Mountains before she could successfully paint the landscape. Anita became acquainted with the local residents by helping the women to preserve their summer produce, by participating in quilting bees and by assisting at apple pressings. In turn, the women and then their husbands shared with her their generational stories about the supernatural doings and heroic actions of their ancestors. In this way she rooted her canvases in the local landscape—and began keeping extensive files for this history of Woodstock.

Among Anita's favorite writers were Marcus Aurelius, Virginia Woolf, Rabindranath Tagore and Madame de Sévigné. By the time she moved into her herb cottage in the 1950s, she had in her collection over a thousand cookbooks and her cabinets contained many ancient herbals such as Gerard's *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes* (1633) and

Culpeper's *English Physician and Complete Herbal* (1813). Anita set high standards for herself, and she had a sign posted on her door warning that casual visitors were not welcome before four in the afternoon because she was writing until then and did not wish to be disturbed.

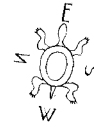
*Julia Blelock continues:*

To my brother, Weston, and me, Anita Smith was "Nietsie" (an affectionate soubriquet used by her nephews). We first met her as children in 1957. Nietsie proved to be very supportive of our mother's creativity and lent her an old studio so she could write her plays in peace, away from family interference. In turn, our mother became like a daughter to Anita, and assisted her in the final stages of writing the first edition of this book.

Miss Smith did not suffer fools—or children—gladly. I well remember as a five-year-old riding in the back seat of her car, with Anita and our mother chatting in the front. When I interrupted their conversation once too often, Nietsie turned around with eyes narrowed and handed me a rubber band. "What's that for?" I piped. "It's for your mouth," replied Anita. But that same year Nietsie arranged for me to take art and pottery lessons at the Woodstock (Byrdcliffe) Guild, and she was often willing to include Weston and me as dinner guests for her delicious meals of coq au vin or coquilles Saint-Jacques. Our parents chose not to have a television set in our home when we were growing up, so it was a great treat to visit Nietsie in her cottage next door and see the young Clint Eastwood as Rowdy Yates in *Rawhide* or Leonard Bernstein conducting a Young People's Concert. On those happy occasions Kami, her ancient Siamese cat, dozed away on top of the TV set, and Susie, a wire-haired terrier, nuzzled our hands for surreptitious treats.

In the summer of 1964 Nietsie invited our family to join her for the month of August in Céreste, a village in the south of France, where she had rented a villa with two wings joined by a bridge over a narrow street. Every day we set out by car to explore the Roman ruins of Arles and Nîmes, Van Gogh's cell near Saint-Rémy, the castle at Aigue-Mort or the cowboy country of the Camargue. By then Susie had passed away and Anita's canine companion was Mais Oui, a French poodle who joined us on our travels that summer.

A couple of years later Anita went to one of her friends for a letter of recommendation, and this helped me matriculate at Miss Porter's School in the fall of 1967. That winter was a particularly cold one, and Nietsie wasn't well. My father drove over to MPS in late May 1968 to fetch me for a terribly sad occasion. Nietsie had passed away. She was to be buried in the Artists Cemetery in Woodstock.



When our mother passed on in 1999, Weston and I returned to Woodstock—to the house she had inherited from Anita. After much thought and discussion, we resolved to honor Anita and our mother through a program of restoration—including the Stonecrop buildings and gardens and a collection of intellectual property. Further, we determined to embrace and celebrate a mindset and way of living that had been handed down to us from Anita. This was the genesis of our company, WoodstockArts.

One of our first major projects was to develop and publish a second edition of Anita's 1959 classic, *Woodstock History and Hearsay*. It was our aim to gently polish the original but to retain Anita's voice. Weston took on the task of developing a complete set of endnotes, guided by Anita's musings, notebooks and various artifacts. We greatly augmented the original set of eighteen illustrations, always taking care to select images that would be compatible with Anita's own visual palate and sensibilities. We also decided to include in the new edition a number of AMS's own Woodstock canvases from 1920 to 1928. We believe they contribute significantly to a documentation of Woodstock's ambience when viewed in conjunction with the text.

The reader will note that the voice and perspective of this book are those of 1959. Where Anita used words such as Negro or squaw, we have not changed them to terms that would be more conventional or deemed more acceptable today. As a Quaker who revered all of life—including the human, animal, plant and mineral realms—she certainly meant no disrespect. Additionally, the section near the end of the book devoted to Woodstockers in Service has not been researched or updated; it appears as it did in the first edition.

The turtle icon was a powerful symbol for AMS. In the first lines of this book she recounts how the indigenous god Manitou sent down from the sky the first woman in the shape of a tortoise. Much later, the Esopus Indian chief Nanisinos signed important documents with the mark of a turtle. Anita felt so strongly about this animal as a totem that she chiseled a tortoise compass into a flagstone on the terrace of her home in Woodstock. She also included a turtle image on the cover of the first edition of this book. We have continued that tradition in this second edition, adding a copy of Anita's tortoise compass to the end papers, and using it throughout the text.

*Weston adds this note:*

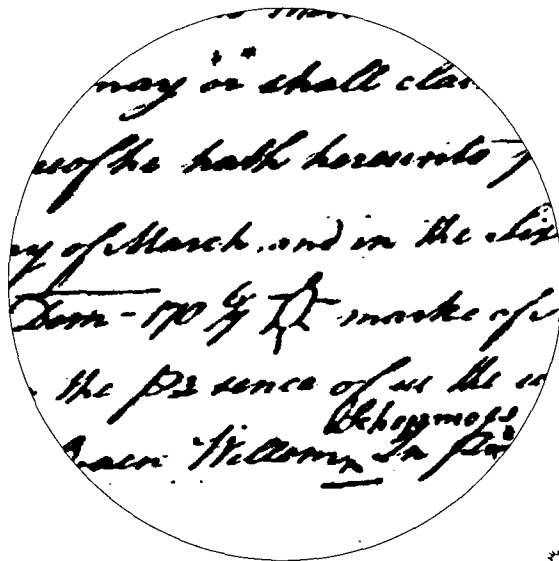
It is utterly peaceful when a great snowstorm has mantled Overlook and the surrounding countryside in a blanket of white. At a time like this the magic of Woodstock emerges. This can also happen in the throes of spring when the flowers burst out in wave after wave with the rising heat. Anita's paintings and writings capture these moments. She admitted late in life that there was, still, a lot of her Quaker heritage in her makeup. It was as though she threaded her art through the eye of the needle that was her still, small voice.

Her personality was inextricably intertwined with her role as observer and gentle translator of Mother Nature's moods and beauty on canvas and in prose. These moods allow one to drift—as into the sanctuary created by the bend in a stream—and to be at peace. There are great lessons to be learned through a partnership with nature, and we feel that Anita Smith's stories guide us toward a better understanding and appreciation of our wild selves.

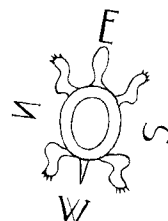
Anita's Stonecrop has proven to be our haven, and since 1999 we have been gradually restoring the various buildings and gardens. The soil is now full of earthworms and is once again able to support a rich variety of herbs and flowers. Two years ago we restored an arbor and replanted a pink rose bush on a back terrace. In the same way we have brought to fruition the second edition of this book.

*Julia finishes with these words:*

We have purposely not updated Anita's story to continue the arc through to the twenty-first century. We feel strongly that the book serves well as a prequel to the Woodstock Festival of 1969, which took place



ABOVE: The mark of a turtle by the Esopus Indian Chief Nanisinos can be seen at the center of this detail from a 1707 deed, which was also signed by the early landowner Johannes Hardenbergh. Courtesy of the New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections.



ABOVE RIGHT: Anita M. Smith etched a tortoise compass into the bluestone terrace of her home in Woodstock—symbolizing her respect for the Native American spirit and her own great love of nature. A stone rubbing was made of the etching, and the image is used as a motif throughout this book.

just a year after her death. Many of us today are looking for wise and comforting voices redolent of an earlier time, and we feel that Anita's story resonates in that way. We believe that Woodstock—known internationally because of its art heritage and the 1969 festival—represents a special blend of imagination, creativity and commitment to an alternative way of life.

More than once Nietsie pointed out to Weston and me ancient farms in the south of France with their tier upon tier of cultivation up steep hillsides. Each generation contributed as much as it could. Like the waves of an incoming tide, those who follow carry the efforts of their forebears further up the shore. It is in this spirit that we put the finishing touches on the second edition of Anita Smith's *Woodstock History and Hearsay*.

—WESTON BLELOCK AND JULIA BLELOCK  
*Stonecrop, 2006*