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# Voices

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***Woodstock: History and Hearsay***, by Anita Smith. 1959. Second ed. Woodstock, New York: Woodstock Arts, 2006. 335 pages, introduction, photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$37.50 cloth.

Anita Smith was born in 1893 to a wealthy Pennsylvania family. Her ancestors had sailed with William Penn in 1682 and then settled in Philadelphia. Smith was taken abroad by her mother in 1904 and began her education in Switzerland. In 1912, a year after making her debutante debut, she traveled to Woodstock to join a small but growing colony of artists. She would return many more times before permanently settling in Woodstock in the early 1930s. In 1931 she presented a paper at the Historical Society of Woodstock based on the lore and history of the area. That paper evolved into the book *Woodstock: History and Hearsay*.

The introduction to Anita Smith's book, written by Alf Evers, quickly chronicles the history of the small village and introduces readers to Anita Smith. The second edition, published in 2006, includes the entire 1959 edition, along with additional material by Weston and Julia Blelock, who grew up as children next door to Smith. When the Blelocks inherited Smith's home, Stonecrop, they chose to publish this second edition. The Blelocks have added many things to the new edition, expanding it from a local history book to include a biography of Smith, a portfolio of her work, endnotes, illustrations, and other visual pieces that enhance Smith's own story about the town of Woodstock. It is through the Blelocks that we come to know something about Smith herself, her work, her herb shop and gardens, and her love for Woodstock.

Smith's writing style in this book is anecdotal, as if she were speaking to fellow Woodstockers—as indeed she was, giving the paper at the Historical Society of Woodstock. About the area's first inhabitants, she writes, "Little is known regarding the Indians who are said to have camped on our village green" (p. 22). *Woodstock: History and Hearsay* is less a history, and more a charming series of recollections. It reads like a mix of the real and the imagined, especially the "hearsay," which she defines as a story told to her "by someone who heard it from someone." At times these stories are seamlessly woven into her historical narrative, as she mixes historical data with stories told to her by longtime locals with her own opinions and thoughts about the area. In their introduction to the second edition, the Blelocks are careful to point out that they have not changed words or terms Smith used, such as Negro or squaw, but instead let Smith's own Quaker-influenced regard for all living things speak for itself. Nor have they attempted to

update the book to the present, feeling that it serves well as “a prequel to the Woodstock Festival of 1969, which took place just a year after her death” (p. 9). Instead, the Blelocks have gently left Smith’s speech and cadence alone.

The book’s first four chapters cover the earliest periods of Woodstock’s history, from the sixteenth-century native settlers through the Anti-Rent War of the 1840s. Again, Smith writes these as a combination of hearsay and researched facts. At Chapter Five, the book takes a decidedly artistic turn with the founding of the Byrdcliffe Art Colony in 1902. The famous art colony became known and identified with Woodstock because of its flamboyant members, as well as the enormous output of its teachers and students, whose work included pottery, furniture, graphics, fiber arts, and paintings. Byrdcliffe is still an important part of the Woodstock landscape, and the objects created there, highly sought-after collectibles. Members also produced and presented original theatrical works, magazines and other publications, and musical performances and recitals.

Another group began the Maverick Art Colony in 1905, following a quarrel between Byrdcliffe’s founders over artistic direction. In the summer of 1916, the Maverick Festival started. It was the first large festival held in Woodstock, and Smith spends many pages describing the artists and events that occurred. Articles written about it at the time describe the festival-goers as “boisterous revelers” with a “shortage of inhibitions.” In supporting its raucous reputation, Smith states, “For example, at one festival, an outsider, abiding by the stricture to wear some clothing, covered his body with tights, but then painted his entire anatomy on the outside” (p. 114). The festival was ended in 1931 by what Smith claims were the behaviors of “outsiders.” It is interesting to note that not that many years later another festival would put Woodstock on the map, and this one would have a “shortage of inhibitions” and “boisterous revelers” of its own, along with many “outsiders.”

Smith focuses on the burgeoning arts scene for several more chapters and then returns to what to her would have been more recent his story with a story of Woodstock’s involvement in World War II. Chapter Thirteen is a collection of stories told to Smith by several soldiers from Woodstock. The final two chapters bring back Smith’s easygoing society-page style of writing, focusing on other “local personalities” and finishing where she began: why she came to Woodstock and what she knows best, “Artists Talk about Art.” The book then concludes, rather oddly, with memoria to the Woodstockers who died in war. She begins this part by discussing the memorial in town and follows with a listing of those who died in the Civil War through World War II. The book ends with detailed biographical notes for the World War II soldiers.

Smith’s original book is a quirky collection of anecdotes, facts, oral narratives, and lists wrapped around the artistic topics that most interested her. The Blelocks’ edition enhances the original, adding a more complex look at Smith herself. Together, the book is a delightful, if somewhat nostalgic, look at an important place during an important time.

—Mary Zwolinski, Portland, Maine