

Library Month Profile

Jeanne Minhinnick

By Anna Feldman Gronau

Two framed photos hang in Milford's Ann Farwell Library. But, who is this Jeanne Minhinnick – the person in the photograph who's *not* Ann Farwell?

Jeanne Minhinnick was my grandmother. Before her death in 1985, she was so well known in the County, particularly in South Marysburgh, and her work so much about remembering, that I hadn't imagined a reintroduction might ever be called for.

Jeanne had true County credentials: Her mother Jennie had been a Welbanks. Jeanne's grandfather's grandfather, a Loyalist, had settled in 1783 on South Bay – where Welbanks descendants still reside. When Jennie died in 1903, shortly after the birth of her only child, Jeanne was raised for a time by her maternal grandparents, Hiram and Esther. As owner/editor of *the Picton Times*, Hiram, and his wife, knew or were related to practically everyone. Jeanne spent winters in Picton and summers visiting the homesteads and farms of friends and relatives – observing, first-hand, communities marked by mutual respect and affection and an ease with people's differences. So began her lifelong sense of belonging here.

Growing up, Jeanne witnessed a way of life that retained 19th century customs, furnishings, and speech – intriguingly different from her father's Toronto household. The County was relatively isolated; people saw little need for a lot of change. In Jeanne's words, "They were content, though not complacent." Eventually, it became her life's work to research, record, preserve and explain that old-fashioned world before it disappeared.

Jeanne's passion for old houses invariably overlapped with her love of the written word. At age eight, she wrote a "novel," killing off all her young protagonist's relatives by chapter three so she could inherit a 17th century house in England! Jeanne read insatiably and wrote throughout her life.

Despite loving history, Jeanne was herself thoroughly modern. As a young woman, in the spirit of the 1920s, she went to work – writing articles, then editing various periodicals at Maclean Publishing. She met and married a handsome World War I veteran, William Nelson ("Bat") Minhinnick, a commercial artist and writer. Their friends included artists and bohemians.



Jeanne as a young woman

She was always in tune with all things new and intellectually leading edge. Her outré behaviour – including smoking! – scandalized her in-laws. Though, when Alix (my mother) was born in 1925, there was joy throughout the family.

By 1937, the story goes, Jeanne's book habit and thus a debt at Britnell's (Toronto's preeminent bookstore) had grown significantly. So, she approached Mr. Britnell for a job. By 1940 she was his chief assistant and buyer and had developed the store's rare and old book department.

Around that time, Jeanne met Ann. Witty and level-headed, Ann complemented Jeanne's determined romanticism. In 1940, they purchased a derelict 1830s house near the Welbanks homestead on County Road 13 as a vacation home. They moved it across fields onto land purchased from Earl Collier and named it Bay House. And, when vacations weren't enough, they bought a nearby farm.

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