

Preface

In writing the Betsy-Tacy books, Maud Hart Lovelace created a type of historical record of life for one little girl growing up in the Midwest at the turn of the 20th century. Her stories of small-town life, family traditions and enduring friendships have captured the hearts of her fans over the years.

Maud always believed she was born to be a writer. From the time she could hold a pencil, she was writing diaries, poems, plays and stories. "I cannot remember back to a year in which I did not consider myself to be a writer, and the younger I was the bigger that capital W," she said.

The Betsy-Tacy books grew out of Maud Hart Lovelace's storytelling to her daughter, Merian. "She always wanted me to tell her stories of when I was a little girl in Mankato," Maud said. Telling these stories to her daughter; focused Maud's thoughts on Mankato and stirred her memories of childhood. The idea for a book was born and Betsy-Tacy was published in 1940. The book was never intended to begin a series, but because of its success, Maud continued to write. The volumes in which Betsy, her family, and friends are central characters begin when the children turn five, take them through high school, and end with Betsy's wedding. A volume was released nearly every year until 1955.

Maud captures the history and spirit of the time and place, a time in which people were amazed at the contrast between Mankato's pioneer past and its comfortable and civilized present. Mankato was only 40 years old when Maud was born in 1892. She grew up hearing first hand the stories from the early settlers who arrived by steamship or covered wagon. She heard stories of bravery of the First Minnesota Regiment at Gettysburg, the vivid stories of the Dakota Conflict, and the devastation of grasshoppers, floods, blizzards and epidemics. She loved these stories of hardship and adventure.

The physical beauty of the Mankato area left its impression on Maud and created lasting memories. Her home on Center Street was surrounded by green hillsides. From atop the hill behind her house, she could look down on the whole town and see Front Street, Sibley Park and far away in the valley, the "silver ribbon" of the Minnesota River. Maud and her friends had these hills for a playground. Maud commented, "Mankato is a wonderful town to grow up in. It is a wonderful town to live in." When asked at the age of 82 what she remembered most about Mankato, Maud answered, "The hills."

The books are fiction based solidly on fact. A book reviewer called Betsy-Tacy a "historical novel" based on the author's childhood. Maud explained, "With all my historical novels, I did very thorough research, reading newspapers, magazines, and memoirs of the period...to check costumes, furniture, popular music and so on. This procedure continued, in fact, even with the Betsy-Tacy books." She was able to bring to life a period of time, but she had not set out to tell the story of her own life.

Even though some of the plots in the books were invented, many of the characters and places were not. She wrote, "The invention sprang from fact, for in writing the high school books my diaries were extremely helpful. The Ray family is a true portrayal of the Hart family. Mr. Ray is like Tom Hart; Mrs. Ray like Stella Palmer Hart; Julia like Kathleen; Margaret like Helen; and Betsy is like me, except that, of course, I glamorized

her to make her a proper heroine. The family life, customs, jokes, traditions are all true and the general pattern of the years is also accurate. It is a great joy to me to have that dear family between book covers.”

The books are a wonderful expression of family life and family values. Mr. and Mrs. Hart [*Mr. and Mrs. Ray*] are great parental role models, and their parenting skills apply to families today. Even though Maud was born 100 years ago, the books she wrote teach valuable life lessons that are timeless. Tom and Stella Hart helped guide their children through life and always supported and encouraged their independence. The parents worked together to negotiate the best outcome for their children. They were willing to adjust to the changing times and ages of their children. The Harts readily welcomed their children’s friends into their home. Maud wrote, “What contributed most to our happiness was the homes...our own and other people’s. Those were the days of singing around the home piano and dancing in the home back parlor...with the carpets rolled up.” The Hart children grew up with a sense of security, love, self-esteem and self-confidence.

In *Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown*, we learn more about Mankato’s Front Street business district. At the turn of the century most could walk into any business along Front Street and know the owner and the employees by name. These storekeepers and businessmen and women were friends and neighbors. Maud shows us this down-home familiarity and hospitality in the Betsy-Tacy books.

Over the years Maud’s fans have traveled to Mankato to seek out the homes of *Betsy* and *Tacy* and visit the places of Maud’s childhood. Her ability to draw the reader into the life and times of her characters has made the series a lasting favorite. Because the books are highly autobiographical, there is some confusion between fiction and reality. A natural curiosity develops and makes us wonder, what ever happened to...? This guidebook was created for the Betsy-Tacy fan who would like to visit the sites or for those who would simply like to learn more about them. The fact is that the places in *Deep Valley* did exist, even though most have changed with time and some of the buildings no longer stand. Every place has a story, and most often a person is at the heart of the story.

I have included the actual names of the people and places, along with the address of each place, to make it easy to use this book on a self-guided tour of Mankato. The fictional names are always in italics. It is my hope that you will enjoy learning more about Mankato, *Maud’s Deep Valley*. Maud wrote these words in 1961:

“As you set out to explore Mankato, the Deep Valley of the Betsy-Tacy books, you must remember that the books contain as much fiction as fact. Many of the characters, it is true, are based on real people, but the stories do not always follow the actual pattern of their lives. And many incidents have been invented to make various plots.

You must remember also that years have passed since Betsy, Tacy and Tib (to use story names) were children here. To find Deep Valley in this bustling modern city, you have to close your eyes to the airport, to the streams of automobiles, and to many beautiful new homes and schools and shops. You have to imagine horses and carriages, ladies with trailing skirts and ruffled parasols and children in long black stockings.”