

Journal of History of Martha's Vineyard and the Elizabeth Islands



THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

VOL.31, NO.2

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SPECIAL ISSUE:
Centennial of Tom Benton



Collection: Jessie Benton

Bicyclers begin the climb up Boston Hill from Hariph's Creek, 1960.

Tom Benton: Chilmarker

by ARTHUR R. RAILTON

Rita Piacenza Benton

"Without Her, I'd Have Been a Bum!"

by ELEANOR PIACENZA

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This is your Society and your financial support is critical.

THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

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The Dukes County Historical Society was founded in 1922 to preserve the history of Dukes County for the public benefit. It is a nonprofit institution, supported by membership dues, contributions and bequests, which are tax deductible. Its annual meeting is held in August in Edgartown.

It maintains two historic houses, both providing guided tours to the public during the summer, one in Edgartown and the other in Vineyard Haven. A nominal fee is charged to non-members.

In Edgartown, the Thomas Thomas Cooke House, circa 1765, is on the corner of School and Cooke Streets. Acquired by the Society in 1935, it is maintained as a museum of Island history.

Also on the Society grounds in Edgartown are the Francis Foster Museum and Gale Huntington Library. Both are open to the public year round. The Museum has an exhibition of the Vineyard's maritime heritage. The Library contains logs, journals, genealogies and other Island documents, plus many photographs and volumes of history.

The Edgartown property also includes the Gay Head Lighthouse exhibit with its 1854 Fresnel lens and the Carriage Shed containing various old boats and wagons, including an 1854 hand pumper fire engine. These, too, are open to the public all year.

In Vineyard Haven, the Society maintains the Jirah Luce House, circa 1804, formerly operated by the Tisbury Museum, now part of the Dukes County Historical Society. The exhibits are of early Vineyard explorers and settlers, with emphasis on the maritime history of Holmes Hole, as Vineyard Haven was once called.

The public is invited to visit the Society and also to take out a membership, which includes a subscription to this quarterly journal and free admission to our buildings.

Tom Benton: Chilmarker

by ARTHUR R. RAILTON

This year is the centennial of the birth of Thomas Hart Benton, famed American artist. We are devoting this issue to him and his wife, Rita Piacenza Benton, longtime summer residents of Chilmark. The article on Rita, written by her sister-in-law, Eleanor Piacenza, begins on page 87.

TOM BENTON was born 100 years ago in Neosho, a small town in Missouri. Although he lived most of his life in cities, he remained, as he was born, a small-town person.

"No matter how much I lived in the cities," he said in 1969, "I always sought this rural life. And Rita thought much the same as I did. When we got to Chilmark, that was what we wanted. . . The minute I hit it I was satisfied."

Their discovery of Martha's Vineyard in 1920 turned out to be more important to Tom and his art than he realized. He had been discharged in December 1918 after five months in the Navy, a World War I sailor stationed in Norfolk, Va., and was living in New York City, painting and teaching art. His girl friend, Rita Piacenza, whom he would marry two years later, was first to come to the Vineyard.

"My wife found this place," Tom told the *Boston Globe* in 1966, "I followed her." They had learned about the Island from an artist friend, William Scott, who summered at Menemsha. All winter in New York, Scott would talk about its charm. Furthermore, he said, they could live on the Island cheaper than in Manhattan.

As Benton explained it, Scott "lived across the road from Willie Mayhew's house in Menemsha. After that he built a house with a studio on the cliffs over beyond the Ira Davis

ARTHUR R. RAILTON is editor of this journal.

place. His porch looked out toward the [Elizabeth] Islands and the westward sun that went down over them. . . . He made hundreds of drawings of the old busted-down docks and fish houses, of the rough-and-ready boats tied up to the piles in the Creek and of the oxen that used to pull the nets up on the grass to dry."¹

Scott's description and paintings were enough to persuade Rita to try the Island in the summer in 1920. "In those days, it was hard to get to," Tom recalled in 1969. "[Bill] gave her the name of a lady he said had a cottage for rent. It was Ella Brug. . . . Rita and a girl school teacher from the Bronx went . . . This was in June and the Island got invaded by fog and the girl got depressed and left Rita there."²

Alone in foggy Chilmark, Rita wrote to Tom in New York urging him to join her. Tom agreed: "Ella Brug had a barn that I could rent for \$50. . . an enclosed barn, made like a house. So we came up, [Tom] Craven and I, and rented that barn and Rita lived in the little cottage down below."³

For Rita, it was a holiday, but Tom found the Vineyard to be a warehouse filled with exciting subjects. He loved its people, its vistas, its character. As it has so often, with artists and nonartists alike, Chilmark captivated him. From then on, he was addicted, returning every summer. He wrote in 1937:

*Martha's Vineyard had a profound effect on me. . . It separated me from the Bohemias of art . . . providing me with a homely subject matter and a great quiet for reflection. . . . It was in Martha's Vineyard that I first really began my intimate study of the American environment and its people.*⁴

¹ *Vineyard Gazette*, August 20, 1940.

² Polly Burroughs, in her biography, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Portrait*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1981, identifies the teacher as Lillian Hoffman. The Burroughs book contains many anecdotes of the Bentons on the Vineyard and should be read by all who are interested in the subject. Additional Vineyard-related material, including an article by the Bentons' friends, Peggy and Henry Scott, was published in the August 1988 *Intelligencer*.

³ Conversation: Tom Benton, Eleanor and Santo Piacenza, 1969. Tom Craven, a struggling writer, was Benton's closest friend at the time. They shared a small flat in Manhattan.

⁴ Thomas Benton, *An Artist in America*, U of Mo. Press, Columbia, Mo, 1983, 4th ed., p.63.



Brug barn, c.1922, after Tom had put two small windows in the big door.

Getting here from New York in 1920 was not a simple journey. "In the old days, it took a lot of trouble," Benton told the *Boston Globe* in 1966, "You had to take the boat from New York to Boston, then get down to New Bedford and get another boat, if you were lucky."⁵

Because of its inconvenience, Chilmark was a much quieter retreat than it is today. Especially in June. But in July others joined them at Mrs. Brug's:

And then some people came — Peggy Owen. They belonged to a Jewish family, an old Sephardic Spanish Jewish family that was very wealthy, and she had come up there with her kids. . . . Mrs. Brug had built another house and they lived there, so we formed a little community. . . . It was a two-mile walk [to Menemsha] . . . through the woods. So we walked there to get our fish. There was a general store where the postoffice [was] in Chilmark and they had everything you could possibly want. Everything. Rope, candles, dry groceries of all sorts. Things like eggs, fresh chickens. But fish was our regular diet and we walked

⁵ Tom must have been misremembering. The normal water route in summer was New York to Fall River or New Bedford, then to the Vineyard.

*up to Menemsha all the time and either caught the fish or had them given to us.*⁶

Mrs. Brug, their landlady, was the widow of a Providence doctor. Born in Chilmark in 1858, daughter of James and Harriet (Cottle) Mosher, her first marriage to Horace Poole of Chilmark ended in divorce. She went off-Island to work as housekeeper for Dr. George Alan Brug, whom she married a few years later. When he died in 1911, she moved back to Chilmark and built cottages on the acreage behind her house and barn to rent to summer visitors.

She was a gregarious, loving woman and she made the young artist and his friends from New York feel like members of her family. They were overwhelmed by her generosity. On her birthday that first summer, July 31, 1920, Tom drew a poster-size greeting card showing himself, Tom Craven and their guest, Rollie Crampton. A verse, probably written by Craven, ended with: "Her 1000 generousities they never can repay. They send 1000 wishes for a glad birthday."

Mrs. Brug, in addition to renting her camps and barn, augmented her income by putting on dinner parties for the summer folk. There were few restaurants on that end of the Island. In August 1920, that first summer, the newly formed Barn House association held a dinner party at Mrs. Brug's. In addition to the Barn House members, in attendance were "Mrs. Brugg's tenants of barn and bungalow." Those tenants were Benton, Craven, Crampton and Rita Piacenza. They seemed most welcome in that "companie of merrie laydes and gentlehommes," as Craven described the group in a letter the next morning.⁷

The Barn House was a cooperative summer camp owned by a group of intellectuals, usually described as "radicals," who had, one year before, bought an old Chilmark farmhouse with a large barn on South Road. Late each afternoon, after a day of swimming and fishing, they gathered over drinks (these were days of Prohibition) in the

⁶ Piacenza 1969 conversation.

⁷ Burroughs, p.23.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Benton, left, and Craven wearing Navy uniforms, that first summer.

slightly renovated barn to discuss art and politics, hence the name, Barn House. Right from that first year, Tom and his friends, virtually unknown, were accepted by these better-known artists and writers in that remote corner of the Island.

Tom had met Rita Piacenza in 1917, when she signed up for an oil-painting class sponsored by the Chelsea Neighborhood Association.⁸ Living with her parents on 21st Street, she was 22 years old and working for a Manhattan hat-designer. In her design work she did a lot of sketching, but had no experience with oils, so she joined the class. Tom,

⁸ Some say it was in 1918. It was during the winter of 1917-18.

now 29 and a struggling artist, was the teacher.

According to Santo Piacenza, Rita's eldest brother, it was love at first sight for Tom, although perhaps he didn't realize it. In any case, he was stricken that first night with her beauty, much more than with her art.⁹ She soon gave up the class:

*Although we both thought I was getting on pretty well as a painter, I gave up art for marriage (Rita told the New York World-Telegram in 1942). I wasn't born to be a career woman. . . Perhaps there was something in knowing that he was too big an artist to compete with. Home is my domain. . . I'm interested in making our house the happiest place in the world for all of us.*¹⁰

They were married in February 1922. Neither set of parents approved, for a variety of reasons. Tom was a Protestant and Rita was Roman Catholic. Then there was the class difference. Tom was from an old Missouri family, its men important in state and national politics. His great-uncle, after whom he was named, had been one of Missouri's first United States Senators, a man famous in history. His father had served four terms as United States Congressman. Tom had grown up in Washington, D.C., the son of a Representative with all the privileges that went with it. Tom's mother had built a reputation as a hostess among Washington's elite.

In contrast, Rita, born in Italy, had come to the United States as an immigrant in 1908 at age 12, via Ellis Island. Her father had come here in 1904, found work as a coppersmith, and by 1908 had enough money to return to Italy and to bring his family here (the eldest child, Santo, had come in 1906 and was already working in the Proctor Cafe, a well-known restaurant in New York's financial district). Father Piacenza, who worked in New York from

⁹ For full details of that first evening's class see Eleanor Piacenza's article in this issue.

¹⁰ Interview with Milton F. Perry, Museum Curator, Truman Library, 1964. Rita became much more than a homemaker. She framed Tom's paintings, becoming very skilled, often joking that it was her frames that made them sell. When one of his paintings (not one she had framed) was resold for \$3000 in 1939, she said, "Whew, they must have put a beautiful frame around it." Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original*, Knopf, 1989, p.295.

1904 until he and his wife returned to Italy in 1924, never learned more than a few words of English. Nor did his wife.¹¹

Rita's Italian immigrant status bothered the Missouri Bentons. She was not what they had in mind for Tom's wife. When Tom's father met Rita for the first time, he said, "Why, you look more Italian than she does, Tom!"

The Piacenzas weren't any happier than the Bentons. Tom was a struggling Greenwich Village artist whose future did not seem promising. They didn't like either his painting style or his life style. Tom had just exhibited some watercolors he had made during his hitch in the Navy. They were of ships and docks, highly stylized, being described by one New York critic as "a cubist's holiday." Such art did not appeal to the Piacenzas, who were most unsophisticated about art trends.

Santo Piacenza remembers that Tom was "painting those tremendous big Indians, and we Piacenzas didn't like them at all." Even as late as 1935, Santo did not think highly of his brother-in-law's work. When the Bentons were moving to Kansas City that year, Rita lined up many paintings and invited Santo to pick two for himself. Santo chose one Benton and another by one of Tom's students.

Rita was shocked: "You mean you like this one better than one of Tom's?"

The student's painting was a pleasant seascape with a boat that appealed to Santo. The Benton he chose was "Navajo Sands," an Indian on a horse in the Dakota hills. He still has the student's painting, but he sold the Benton many years later for a good price. "I wish I had taken two of Tom's," he now admits.

But the Piacenza family disapproval went beyond his art. It was financial. How was Tom planning to support Rita? He was no longer young, already in his thirties, yet he seemed to have no regular income, depending often upon his parents. The only regular income the couple would have was Rita's, and that wasn't much. The Piacenzas hadn't

¹¹ Santo Piacenza, conversation with author.

dreamed that their beautiful, talented daughter would end up supporting a husband when they left Italy for America, the land of opportunity.

None of the parents attended the wedding. After the ceremony, the party went to the Piacenza apartment where her father, an expert cook, had prepared a traditional Italian dinner. He loved to cook, as did both Rita and Santo. After dinner, the couple went to Great Neck, Long Island, where they stayed with Tom's mother until they could go to Martha's Vineyard for the summer. Tom's father, who died only a few years after the wedding, was in Missouri, the couple having separated.

It could not have been a pleasant stay at Great Neck as Mrs. Benton did not approve of Rita. She never did. Even years later, when they both summered in Chilmark, only a few hundred yards apart, they rarely saw each other. Rita walked up the path to her mother-in-law's only when invited, according to Jessie Benton, Rita's daughter. Those occasional compulsory visits were always somewhat strained. Tom, very fond of his mother, went up for tea almost every afternoon.

Jessie explains the strained relationship this way: "My grandmother did not speak to my mother because she was a foreigner and my grandmother was a snob. I thought my grandmother was fascinating. She lived right up the hill . . . and I used to go visit her every morning. She would be covered with her diamonds and her black lace gowns, and every morning she would brush this long white hair that came down past her waist. It was very ritualistic, and of course I loved it."¹²

The couple's financial uncertainty continued to trouble Rita's father. He seemed to like Tom personally, but worried about his ability to provide for his daughter. As Rita explained it, "My father said, 'You married an artist. Don't expect a thing.'" Rita had to agree: "Anything an artist gives

¹² Adams, p.338.

you is all extra. . . Don't expect and then you won't be disappointed."¹³

There was good reason for her not to expect much. Their first years were not prosperous. They had moved into a flat on Union Square in Manhattan that she described this way:

We had a flat — a cold water flat they call it in New York. We paid \$40 a month. We had seven rooms. . . no hot water. . . we had gas but we didn't have electricity. We had oil lamps . . . Then after [our son] T.P. was born, Tom got a job at the Art Students League at \$110 a month and we were rich — \$40 for the rent and all that other money for food — we were on Easy Street. But I still had to go with that little bucket to get oil for the lamps.¹⁴ In the summer we went to Martha's Vineyard. . . We lived in [Mrs. Brug's] barn. We used to rent our apartment. . . for \$10 or \$15 more than we paid [Mrs. Brug] for the barn — \$50 a summer.

The barn was a little tough because we had no running water at all — we had no sink; we had to carry water in . . . and when it rained [and we closed the barn doors] we were in pitch darkness. . . There was an old house that was going to pieces and Tom took two windows [from it], cut out the barn doors [and put in the windows]. It used to leak. . . but we at least had daylight.

The young couple became parents in 1926 when Thomas Piacenza Benton was born in New York City. The boy was called T.P., a nickname that still is used.

Tom had gotten the \$110-a-month position at the Art Students League with the help of Boardman (Mike) Robinson, an artist he met at the Barn House in Chilmark. They became good friends and spent many hours together on the Vineyard. "Mike and I, after getting drunk one night and turning over all the summer privies, became fast friends and worked and argued together beautifully," Tom wrote in his autobiography.

¹³ Perry 1964 interview. Father Piacenza had reason to be concerned about who would take care of his daughter. He and his wife moved back to Italy only two years after the marriage.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* According to biographer Adams, this was not their first apartment. He suggests that before the wedding they lived together on 21st St., in a tiny place that prompted Rita's father, on a visit, to say: "Jesus! This is worse than the way we lived in Italy." Santo Piacenza says Adams is wrong. The flat described was where Tom and Craven were living.

The job at the Art Students League that, in Rita's words, put them "on Easy Street," didn't last long. Fortunately, his paintings were beginning to sell, as he became less cubist and more realistic. His Vineyard subjects seemed especially popular. He sold one to a friend for \$50 and when he later learned that his friend had quickly sold it for \$150, he was upset. He complained to Rita, who offered to sell his paintings from then on. She did and soon became his best salesman, always getting a good price.

Tom sometimes made her selling job more difficult, as she explained:

I remember when our boy was little and we didn't have any money to pay the rent and a lady came into the studio. She had seen a painting of Martha's Vineyard and she went to Martha's Vineyard [summers] and wanted to buy it very much. She waited for the longest time [making up her mind] and I was exhausted talking to her.

Finally, she had decided to buy the painting and then Tom walks in and she said:

"Mr. Benton, do you consider this the best work you ever did?" He said, "Hell, no. I haven't done the best work I've ever done."

She walked out. She didn't buy the painting. . . . that very lady has [since become] quite a collector and she now has many Bentons . . . She came back and bought it. . . months after, but right then was the time that we should have had it because we didn't have any money.¹⁵

Tom's mother and sister came to the Island at his suggestion in 1923. They rented a camp from Mrs. Brug. Mrs. Benton liked Chilmark so much (and perhaps liked being near Tom so much) that she decided to build a house there. In August 1924, she bought two acres near Mrs. Brug's from George West Jr., and a year later built a summer house on it. Tom and Rita, who were still renting the barn each summer, asked Mrs. Brug if she would sell them the camp that his mother had rented. She agreed.

They didn't have much money so they entered into a contract with Mrs. Brug in September 1927 to pay her \$2000 for the camp and nearly three acres of land on Boston Hill.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*



Eleanor Piacenza Collection

Barefoot Tom, with artist's beret and son, T.P., in Chilmark about 1928.

They put \$100 down and agreed to pay \$200 a month until March 31, 1928, when the final payment would be made. Much later, in 1951, Tom bought from Faye Neumann, Mrs. Brug's grandniece, an adjoining 12 acres.

The camp was tiny, having started out as a chicken coop. Mrs. Brug put on an addition when she began renting it,

turning the refurbished coop into the kitchen. The addition included a living room with a stone fireplace, plus two tiny bedrooms. The Bentons later made bedrooms in the attic by adding gable windows and a dormer. The house, as is normal in Chilmark, just kept growing through the years, as Tom explained:

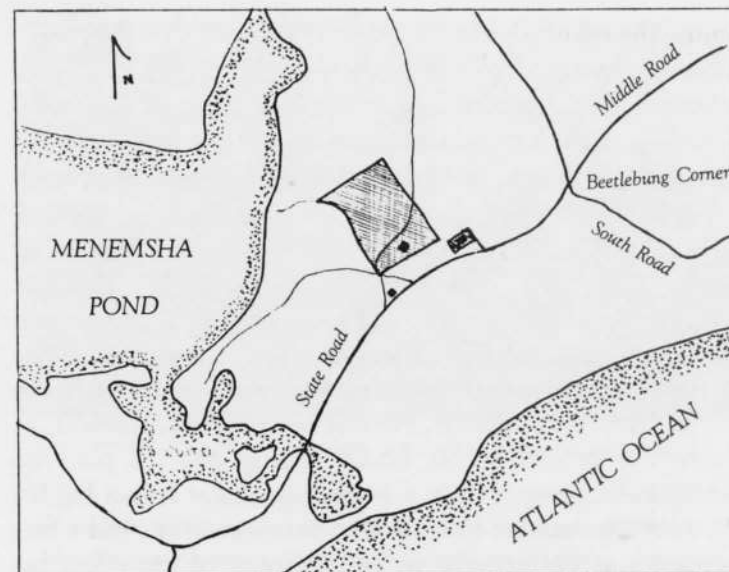
. . . we lived in that little house for two or three years before we started to enlarge it. . . . we kept adding one thing and another. I'd move [my studio] from one garage to another. I'd turn a garage into a studio. . . and then we'd decide that was no good, we needed that space for a bedroom or something and we'd build another garage. And then I'd move into that and then we'd have to build another garage. But in those days you did those [things] for a few hundred dollars.

During the two years after they bought the camp, Tom was working on a mural, "America Today," for the New School for Social Research. It was an unpaid project, the school providing only the walls and the materials, including the eggs for the egg-tempera. It isn't clear how much time Tom was able to spend in their newly acquired Vineyard house during those two summers. No doubt Rita and T.P. came, but he was travelling around the country making sketches for the New School project, his first major mural. He completed it in late December 1930.¹⁶

Having an excuse to get away was welcomed by Tom. He was not one to be easily domesticated, even by such a strong woman as Rita:

When my wife and I went to Martha's Vineyard [Tom wrote in his autobiography], my wandering itch was allayed for a while. I got interested in the Yankees, heretofore unfamiliar to me, in their ways and doings, in their fishing boats, and in the charm of their island country. But after a while, especially after T.P. was born, and my wife had me well enough housebroken to help with the diapers and the dishes, even the Vineyard could not

¹⁶ Tom in these years described himself as a muralist without walls. The New School project gave him the walls he needed to prove his ability, even though he was not paid for his work. In 1935, he wrote to the school asking that the original arrangement be reviewed since his work had increased in value and that he should be paid. He was not. It isn't clear where the money came from to finance his travels or even to buy the Brug camp.



Large shaded area is Tom and Rita's land, including 1951 purchase. Below it is Mrs. Brug's house. Smaller shaded area is his mother's.

hold my restlessness . . . I began to feel rather too well tamed and to itch for freedom.

The New School mural was scheduled to be unveiled to the public on January 15, 1931, so to celebrate its completion, Tom, Rita and T.P. spent Christmas 1930 in their Chilmark camp, warmed only by the coal stove in the kitchen. There was no electricity in that part of Chilmark at the time (it came in 1958), so reading was by kerosene lamp, water was by hand pump and toilet facilities were in the wind-swept backyard. The wind, always strong on Boston Hill, must have whistled through the walls and windows of that summer camp as the Bentons huddled around the kitchen stove.

After the unveiling of the New School mural in mid-January, Tom was exhausted. The completion of the huge project had resulted in a psychological letdown.

[He] returned to the Island alone. Unfortunately, he arrived with a bad cold, and in the damp, dark and unheated house it rapidly

worsened. His friends, Bill and Rachel Scott, took him in and he lay on the sofa in their big kitchen, sweating profusely. At nine o'clock at night ... they bundled him into a Model A Ford and drove him to the hospital. . . [with] a severe case of flu, aggravated by nervous exhaustion.¹⁷

After he recovered, Tom returned to New York, still unable to paint because of the emotional slump. Seeking some diversion, he discovered a new avocation. He picked up his son's harmonica and soon learned to play the scale. We know the date because on February 18, 1931, Rita wrote to a friend that "Tom has taken up the harmonica." That was the start of a dedication to the instrument which was to last the rest of his life. He was not naturally musical, as were the others in his family. Being able to play an instrument, even if only a harmonica, gave him a big lift at a time he needed it. Rita, who was a guitarist and a fine singer, was enthusiastic at first because of the effect his playing had on his mood. But later her enthusiasm dimmed:

There's one thing about Tom and his music: he thinks he's quite a musician. My daughter and son don't think so and I don't either. You can tell him he's not a good artist, but if you tell him he's not a good musician he fights you. . . He works hard [at being a musician]. . . He gave up art one year, he didn't touch a brush in one year; he was studying music. "There's enough paintings in the world," he said. "I want to do music."¹⁸

The publicity from his New School mural made his paintings more marketable. Their prices went up, despite the deepening depression which was causing other prices to fall. The family was becoming financially comfortable for the first time and soon moved into a larger apartment on 13th Street just off 5th Avenue. Tom called it "a swank apartment."¹⁹ They bought a used Stutz automobile and began enlarging the Boston Hill camp, even adding a tiny studio, his first on the Island, but not his last. It was replaced several times. In 1964, his third or fourth studio was much larger, as Rita explained:

¹⁷ Adams, p.176.

¹⁸ Perry 1964 interview.

¹⁹ Piacenza 1969 conversation.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Camp bought from Mrs. Brug, with Tom's first Island studio, about 1933.

It used to be a double garage . . . you can still open it up as a garage. We had a north window and we planted some pine trees on the other side and they got taller and taller . . . and hid the light . . . he couldn't bear to cut down the pines. We had to put a great big window in the roof, the north window is no use, but now he's got a good light above . . . perfect light and a potbellied stove . . . He has no electricity there so he won't have to work at night. . . I refused to put it in. . . it is very hard to get him to go swimming when he works. . . He can't stop. I would say, "Well, there's no food here, if you want to eat you got to go to the beach because we will have lunch on the beach". . . So we'd have a swim and we'd put out the food and immediately we'd come back. "I can't sit around the beach, I've got work to do," he'd say. We'd come back about two o'clock and he'd go right to work until it got too dark."²⁰

These two artistic types, Tom and Rita, got along with a minimum of squabbling, due in no small part to her appreciation of art. In Tom Craven's words, she was "one of the few women of my acquaintance who [understood] painting."²¹

But it was more than her artistic knowledge that held them together; it was her absolute faith in Tom and his talent:

When I was a young girl (Rita told Sally MacDougall of the

²⁰ Perry 1964 interview.

²¹ "Thomas Hart Benton," by Thomas Craven, *Scribner's magazine*, October 1937. A chauvinistic remark that would raise hackles today.

New York World-Telegram in 1942), I somehow had the sense to recognize that Benton was a great man. I've never for a moment changed my mind about that.

She understood his needs, allowing his work to occupy as much of their lives as necessary. And his work demanded a lot. Yet she never seemed to feel neglected:

He's very easy to get along with if you leave him alone. . . he's ready for bed about 8 o'clock. He reads until he goes to sleep. He kept that up all winter [while painting the Truman Library mural in 1962].

He has never had the time [to be a very good father]. . . he liked the children . . . but he never wanted to be bothered. . . He enjoyed T.P. very much when he played the flute.²²

Daughter Jessie disagrees with her mother. "My mother," she says, "thought children were everything. Nothing else was important. But I never felt ignored by Daddy as a child, he always had time for me, especially here on the Vineyard. He taught me to pick mushrooms, to swim and to fly kites. He didn't have time to teach me to ride my bike, though. He got Roger Baldwin to do that."²³

As for Rita's criticism of his musical talents, Jessie agrees that music didn't come naturally to her father, as it did to the others in the family. Unlike herself, her mother and her brother, Tom couldn't sing. But he did teach himself to play a good harmonica, Jessie says. He invented a system of annotating harmonica music which he gave to famed harmonica player Larry Adler, when he was working for Hohner, harmonica manufacturer.

Others on the Vineyard who played with Tom agree with Jessie. Musicians like Gale Huntington, Hollis Smith and Elmer Athearn, all have said Benton was a good harmonica player. They certainly played with him often enough to know. But being a good harmonica player doesn't necessarily make one a musician in the classical sense.

²² Perry 1964 interview. Whether he was a good father or not, Tom was chosen by the Divorce Reform League in 1940 as one of the country's five "best husbands." When she heard about the award, Rita asked, "How do they know?" Adams, p.299.

²³ Conversation with the author, Sept.1989. Roger Baldwin was a Chilmark summer resident and founder of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Tom on harmonica with T.P. playing flute in the camp's living room, 1940.

Rita recalled that Tom was always blaming the harmonica or the way the music was written for deficiencies in his playing. T.P., who was a world-class flutist at age 16 according to Jessie, occasionally grew impatient with his father's playing. Rita recalled one incident in her conversation with Milton F. Perry of the Truman Library:

I'll never forget when T.P. was about 14 and they were playing together and [Tom] said, "Now, T.P., this is the way." T.P. put down the flute and he says, "Dad, you're not playing the right notes. It's you; you can't play that harmonica."

However Rita and T.P. rated Tom's harmonica playing, it is clear that he enjoyed playing and that folks enjoyed hearing him. In August 1940 when Tom painted Zeb Tilton's portrait while the public watched at the Agricultural Fair (the portrait now hangs at the Society), the *Gazette* commented: "Mr. Benton hopes to complete the portrait

in time to participate in the ball game. He will not do his famous harmonica act, this being reserved for a later occasion."

As for Rita's statement that Tom did not take time to be a devoted father, Tom can speak for himself. He described his attitude in a remark made after his own children had grown to adulthood:

*Listen, I'm not going to monkey with the life of the young. Keep away. But Rita tries to get herself a melange, you know. Let 'em shift for themselves. Leave 'em alone. They may do a better job than we did.*²⁴

He did seem to have confidence in youth at a time when it was not popular to feel that way. In 1970, he told an Associated Press reporter: "I have seen no evidence that old men act any less irrationally than young men, and young men are more flexible minded."²⁵

If Tom didn't take the time to be a good father, as Rita said, it was probably due to his total immersion in his work, even while he was "vacationing" on the Vineyard. The months he spent here each summer when the children were growing up were not vacations. He used the time to sketch, to paint the faces of individuals in whom he saw timeless character. These were the faces and figures he used in his historical murals of America.

One biographer, Prof. Matthew Baigell, places great importance on those early Vineyard summers:

*The idea of concentrating on American subjects was reinforced by Benton's decision in 1920 to spend summers in Martha's Vineyard, in New England. There he met down-Easters in their own environment and began to make studies of them, suggesting by near-caricatures their quirky ways.*²⁶

"I began in 1919 to study history," Tom said in an 1964 interview, "and to plan a mural based on U.S. history. I exhibited it in pieces year by year at the Architectural League in New York. . . I became known as the mural painter without walls."

²⁴ Placenza 1969 conversation.

²⁵ Interview with Jules Loh, AP, March 22, 1970, *Providence Journal*.

²⁶ Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, Abrams, N.Y., p.55.

Benton wrote in his autobiography that it was during the years when he and Rita first summered on the Island that "I repudiated modernistic aesthetics and started painting with a meaning for the public." No doubt, the simple life style and character of Chilmark folk fleshed out that meaning.

In the "American Historical Epic," his grand work of this period, the Chilmark character was present. It was "... a comprehensive pictorial history of the United States in sixty-four panels, a project engaging his best energies for seven years. . . he began by delineating the fishermen, stern-visaged Islanders who impressed him as 'having the nobility of medieval saints.'"²⁷

His reputation was growing rapidly during these years. In December 1934, *Time* magazine ran a cover article on American regionalist painters, a term which Benton disliked because he said he painted for all America, not for one region. The cover picture was of Tom, one of his self-portraits, making him the first artist to appear on a *Time* cover. The article was "eulogistic" of Benton and the other Regionalists.

Benton, more than most artists, was a dedicated researcher of history. His greatest works, both in size and in artistic importance, were pictorial histories. His giant murals in Missouri, Indiana and New York are as much historical statements as art. He devoted the same energy to his historical research as to his painting.

"When art reveals life," he told the Associated Press in 1970, "it becomes a form of history of the most vivid kind, permanently valuable to men." He truly thought of himself as a historian, using images instead of words to record the past. That dedication makes him especially important to those with a deep interest in matters historical.

Island characters intrigued him and he loved to capture them on his sketch pad. Asked by his friend, Joseph Chase Allen of the *Vineyard Gazette*, how he could possibly know

²⁷ Craven, Scribner's, Oct. 1937.

what those pioneers that he portrayed in his mural at the Truman Library looked like, he responded:

I know because I have seen them — and in the flesh. . . . Some of the likes of them were still living here, in Chilmark, in the 1920s. Wests, Tiltons, Mayhews, Looks, Pooles, Vincents and Allens. . . . As far as looks go, couldn't George Fred Tilton have represented a hell of a mountain man, just as hell-of-a-one as he was in fact of a seafarin' man? . . . Two pair of those [oxen] in the Truman Library mural came from Martha's Vineyard, one pair from Gay Head and one pair from Craig Kingsbury's farm. . . . Getting the 'looks' of things is still about the easiest part of painting American history.²⁸

Tom didn't enumerate which figures in his Truman Library mural were Vineyarders, but we do know that Peter Colt Josephs of Chilmark is among them. In fact, he's in it twice, being portrayed in two poses as young frontiersmen, standing with rifle at the ready. He is protecting the women and children from the approaching Pawnee Indians, the first of whom, by the way, has a peace pipe extended.

Josephs explains that Benton "liked elongated figures, all bony and skinny," and he was such a figure in 1949. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in 1959 described his pose this way: "Long rifle at the ready, a sturdy frontiersman stares suspiciously at a Pawnee Indian offering a peace pipe. . ." For posing as a Missouri pioneer, Josephs was paid \$6 an hour.

Rita tells of Tom doing the preparatory work for the Truman Library mural at his Herring Creek studio, making his usual clay model, a technique he had used for years:

Tom did [the sculpture] for the Truman mural on Martha's Vineyard. We were there five months [until he finished it] and then we had to buy a car to bring it back [to Missouri] — an enormous car, you know — the station wagon. . .

The clay model measured 44 inches by 26 inches and included 31 human figures and many other animals and objects. Unlike his previous clay models which were not considered worth saving after the painting was finished, this one was to be preserved. The article in the *St. Louis Post*

²⁸ Vineyard Gazette, Jan. 22, 1974.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Family snapshot, 1944, on front porch. Child in rear is unidentified.

Dispatch, while Tom was still working on it, explained what would be done:

Preservation of the model for display in the Library has been made possible by an anonymous donor. It will be transported to Independence by Benton on a foam rubber mattress in [his] station wagon.

Tom and Rita did get the heavy and fragile clay piece to Missouri intact, but it was accidentally destroyed while being prepared for casting. Few of his clays have survived.

He used Islanders as models for his easel paintings as well as for the murals. Most were "true" Islanders, members of families that had been here for generations, but in his early years, he often used summer residents. His 1921 work, "People of Chilmark," which Craven described in a letter to Tom's mother as "easily the most complex and mighty

work he has yet undertaken," had no Chilmark natives in it.

"There weren't any Islanders in the 'People of Chilmark.' " Tom told Polly Burroughs. "I can't remember how it came to be called that. Craven, Rita and other friends posed."²⁹

His 1943 work, "Picnic," shows a group on a Menemsha Pond beach getting ready for a picnic. Included are Henry and Peggy Scott along with Fred and Diana James, all non-native residents of Chilmark. She and Henry posed, Peggy recalls, on their back porch while Tom sketched.

That same summer, Emily Huntington, a young girl and year-round Chilmarker who lived on Boston Hill, posed for the painting, "The Music Lesson." Her father, Gale, *Editor Emeritus* of this journal, also modelled for the work, being shown teaching Emily to play the guitar. She was paid a penny a minute; Gale posed for nothing.

This is not the only Benton painting in which Emily appears. When Benton was commissioned by the American Tobacco Company to paint two scenes of tobacco farming in the South for its advertising campaign, he used Emily again.

The painting shows an old farmer sorting tobacco leaves while a young girl watches. Benton first used the granddaughter of the farmer as his model. The ad men insisted she was not pretty enough, so Benton painted in Emily, using sketches from his "Music Lesson" made the year before. But that didn't satisfy the agency people. Emily was too thin, they said, and her "thinness . . . might suggest that proximity to tobacco caused consumption. 'Everything about tobacco must look healthy.' "³⁰

The company executives decided the painting was not suitable for an ad so it was given to George Washington Hill, president of American Tobacco, to hang in his office. Tom was upset. He offered to redo it leaving out the girl, but Hill would not agree. Tom argued that it was more than

²⁹ Burroughs, p.64.

³⁰ Benton, *An Artist in America*, p.296.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Tom driving open Chevrolet about 1944. Rita's shadow is at lower right.

just an advertising illustration, it was a fine piece of art. It should be shown to the public, not hidden in Hill's office. "Why, I'd buy it myself," he added, anxious to make his point. Mr. Hill called his bluff: "Fine, it's yours." Tom had to buy it back. "This little piece of self-promotion cost me three thousand bucks," he wrote.

Among the many native Chilmarkers in his works are George and Sabrina West, Frank Flanders, Dan Vincent, Chester Poole, Billy Benson, Zeb Tilton and Josie West. All had faces filled with character and it was that character that his paintings emphasized.

He continued using Islanders, both summer people and natives, as models throughout his career. A painting he did in the 1960s entitled "Dancers — The Twist" portrayed Island models. Rita described the work in 1964:

That new painting he did of the Twist, he told the boys that posed that he'd pay them \$2 an hour. They didn't want to be paid so Tom said, "I'll give you the drawings." Each got a drawing . . . One of the boys, the Helzberg boy, said, "You know this is as good a drawing as a Leonardo de Vinci."

"Well," Tom says, "that pays for all of it."

He was highly flattered that this young man appreciated his draftsmanship.³¹

³¹ The other boy was Jonathan Scott, son of the Henry Scotts of Chilmark.

Tom told Sara Davidson of the *Boston Globe* "I've painted many portraits of people here [in Chilmark]. Then I did some farm, outdoor-life scenes. Wild roses and flowers creep into a lot of the paintings."

It seems fashionable today in articles about his centennial to deprecate Benton's art as excessively sentimental, vapid and sugary nostalgic, lacking in subtlety. Such criticism is not new. Back in the 1930s, his work was criticized as "not genteel." If such criticism is valid (and the present writer is no art critic), it is perfectly understandable. Tom Benton was not a genteel, subtle man and he prided himself on that.

As if to emphasize that, Tom dedicated his autobiography, *An Artist in America*, to his son this way: "To T.P., who said, when Rita corrected his manners, 'I don't want to be a gentleman when I grow up, I want to be like my Dad.'"

That was Tom as he saw himself: a rough, outspoken man of the prairie, unlike the "limp wristed" aesthetes of the art world whom he despised. He saw art as bold, muscular and unsubtle. It is no wonder his art displays such characteristics.

But nonetheless the criticism bothered him. He wrote to a friend, Seth Low: "... I have occasionally ... tried to work in the vein of caricature, but the body of my work is primarily realistic ... I am not a dignified man, but I would like to have my past presented with a measure of seriousness because it has been, for all my clowning, a serious piece of business."³²

He saw himself as an outsider to the art set, even as he was part of it. About his life in the Latin Quarter of Paris he wrote (much later):

*In the company of such hardened internationalists as George Grosz, Wyndham Lewis, Epstein, Rivera, and that Stein woman, I was merely a roughneck with a talent for fighting, perhaps, but not for painting, as it was cultivated in Paris.*³³

As he grew older, he mellowed slightly, becoming less combative. He told Santo and Eleanor Piacenza in 1969, "I don't get mad at anyone [anymore]. I do speak out. . .

³² Adams, p.251.

³³ Craven, *Scribner's*, Oct.1937.

Courtesy the Barn House



Tom (white pants) and Rita (large hat) at Barn House party about 1938.

"I'm not polite about it, I just come out with it."

Years earlier, here on the Vineyard, he considered himself a maverick among the Island's summer colony, especially those "down-Island." When his friend, Vineyard summer resident Bill Scott, died in 1940, Tom wrote a tribute to him for the *Vineyard Gazette*. He might as well have been writing about himself:

... when I came here in 1920 after listening to Bill's tales of the Island's charm, there weren't so many summer people to make a society of their own. . . You didn't go to cocktail parties and sit under striped umbrellas and say all those socially radical things which excuse somehow in this day the possession of real things. . . You didn't talk about democracy because on the upper Island you lived it . . .

Tom had strong and often unkind opinions about other artist friends. He had this to say about cartoonist Dennis Wortman, a fellow Vineyarder and friend: "Denny . . . had this fixation about the Jews [and] public schools. I just ignored him . . . That's the way he is. And he lost a good friend [when he broke off with Tom Craven]. . . He and Craven got into some damn argument and Craven threw him out of the house. . ."³⁴

It isn't clear what those two artists, Wortman, an excellent

³⁴ Piacenza 1969 conversation.

and very popular cartoonist, and Benton, muralist and fine artist, truly thought of each other. *Collier's* magazine, in the 1950s, had fun with their supposed artistic antagonism in a piece entitled "The Battle of Beetlebung Corners." The brief text explained that Benton had challenged Wortman "in a match to see which of them could produce the better portrait of the other." Obviously, the "battle" had been humorously engineered by the magazine.

Wortman, no doubt in jest, is quoted as saying, "Sitting for hours with that pirate glowering at me with his superanalytical stare and his sketchbook was too much for me. I had to defend myself." Tom's painting was much kinder to Wortman than Wortman's was to him. But then Dennis was a professional cartoonist; only unkind critics called Benton one.

The two Toms, Benton and Craven, were extremely close friends for many years both in New York and on the Island. Craven bought a house on Music Street, West Tisbury, and retired there. An art critic and historian, Craven had done much to build Benton's reputation in the early days when they both were struggling. Before each married, they shared an tiny apartment in Manhattan. Later, they had a falling out, as Tom explained:

[Craven was] an excellent writer. Expert. [But] he went to pot . . . never wrote anything. . . He died last winter [1968]. . . We quit going to see him, he got to be such a bore. He wouldn't talk about anything but his various diseases. . . I think he wanted to get out of life when he moved up to the Vineyard. . . Some people used to think we were a couple of homosexuals. . . It was natural in a lonely situation when you had no money. Neither of us had much prospects [back then].³⁵

Henry Beetle Hough described Benton's blunt way in his book *Mostly on Martha's Vineyard*. Tom had just completed a portrait of Henry's father, George (Pat) Hough, retired editor of the *New Bedford Standard Times*, in 1946:

After the portrait was done, Tom and Rita invited my father and Betty [Mrs. Henry Hough] and me to their place in Chilmark

³⁵ *Ibid.* Craven did become a recluse in his later years, even avoiding family members.



Courtesy the Barn House

Tom and Boardman Robinson, 1948. Tom holds towel. He often swam nude. to see it, and Tom said, "What do you think of it? Not that I give a God damn."

That was the public persona he wanted to maintain, that he didn't give a damn what folks thought, but, like most humans, he did and, at times, was very cruel as a consequence, even to his friends.

When watercolorist Fred James, also a Vineyard summer resident and a good friend, went to Paris he brought back a beret as a present for Tom. When Tom put it on, Fred remarked, "Tom, you look just like the little peanut vendor at the Dome Cafe."

That was too much for Tom, who was sensitive about his height. He told Rita that he didn't want to see James again. He told her to tell Fred's wife to "take her gigolo husband and never come back." That incident was the straw that destroyed their friendship.

There is little question but that Tom's shortness bothered him. He was short; estimates of his height range from 5 feet 2 inches to 5 feet 4 inches. His daughter, Jessie, claims it didn't matter to him, but he was 50 years old when she was born. He had by then attained stature for his art so his physical stature was less important. After all, five years before she was born he had been on the cover of *Time* magazine, the first artist so honored.

Others, who knew Tom in the years when he was struggling, believe that his size did bother him. He was constantly being reminded of it. At 20, while in Paris, he was called "*le petit Balzac*" by his artist friends.³⁶ He seemed to compensate for his size by masculine talk and actions. He took up boxing in the Navy and throughout his early years he was proud of his muscular build and athletic ability. He could swim for miles, according to Rita, who, incidentally, was several inches taller than Tom.³⁷

His self-portraits during those earlier years invariably show him as husky, muscles bulging. He always painted himself taller than he was. His "Self-portrait with Rita" (1922) shows him standing tall, a rugged athletic figure with a long neck. Later in life, when he put on weight, he was still self-conscious about his figure, as he made clear in this conversation with the Piacenzas during their Italian trip in 1969:

If you saw me naked, it's the God damndest sight you ever saw. . . Since I got to Italy I've got a pot on me that really is like an acorn — a large acorn. . . a gigantic pumpkin, hanging off my frame. Skinny legs underneath, skinny arms, skinny all around.

³⁶ Craven, Scribner's, Oct. 1937.

³⁷ In 1946, art historian Horst Jansen wrote of Benton: "He seems to go through life in constant fear of being called 'Shorty' . . ." Adams, p.320.

(Continued on page 83)

An Album of Photos: The Bentons in Chilmark

These snapshots of summers at Boston Hill and Menemsha Pond make clear how much those months meant to Tom and his family. As daughter Jessie says, her father was more at ease here and spent more time with her here than at any other place. Their home was alive with happy occasions. Even though Tom was always painting, he was able to relax in Chilmark, more than anywhere else.



Two 1930 snapshots: Tom stands in front of camp privy (boy is his nephew Nat); Rita on camp porch with T.P., about four years old.



Camp after they began adding to it. Trees were few on Boston Hill then.

Arthur Griffin photograph.



About 1941, Tom, Rita and family welcome musicians for an afternoon of fun.

Courtesy the Barn House



Tom makes sketches of Trudy King at the Chilmark Barn House in 1948.

Arthur Griffin photograph.



T.P., standing, Tom and Jessie on floor, Rita on guitar, in a musicale with Islanders.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Rita sits outside kitchen door of much enlarged camp in late 1930s.



Friends talk over drinks: (l.to r.) Max Eastman, Craven and Benton.



Rita poses as she had for Tom's sculpture more than 50 years before.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection

His opinions were strong, whether about art or politics. And he did not suffer fools gladly. Santo Piacenza, Rita's brother, tells of the evening discussions that Tom and his cronies had in Kansas City. Tom was a dedicated Democrat and, over whiskies, he argued vigorously with his conservative friends. Rita would let the arguing go on until late before breaking it up with "Time to leave, you've all had enough to drink. Good night!" and she would escort them to the door.

Their marriage was a good one despite the fact that Tom, relishing his privacy, would often take off for a month or more wandering around the country, sketching and talking with ordinary people, building his collection of faces and figures for his paintings. It was something he had to do. Rita explained his restlessness this way:

He loves to go alone, he loves not to tell me where he is and he loves to tell me he doesn't know when he's coming home. He's done that all his life.

On one occasion Tom told his brother-in-law Santo, "It's been a hard, hard life to live with your sister. But if I hadn't met her, if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have a dime. She knew value. But she was a hard-boiled egg."³⁸

Once, when Rita broke her arm, Tom called Santo from Kansas City and told him to come right out. "She's your sister, you come and take care of her." Santo went out from New York, staying two months, doing all the cooking and driving for the couple. Tom, who had stopped driving years before, knew nothing about cooking, except, Rita said, frying bacon and eggs for breakfast.³⁹

Tom and Rita both loved to entertain and their homes, in Chilmark and in Kansas City, were filled with life. Jules Loh, writing for the Associated Press in 1970, described his visit with the Bentons:

An evening with him and Rita is a rare and refreshing experience. Rita is . . . his adoring fan and guardian angel. She sets an

³⁸Conversation with the author, Sept. 1989.

³⁹ Santo, now 99 years old, still does all the cooking at the Piacenza home in Chilmark. He spent his entire career in restaurants in the New York financial district.

exquisite table. Tom pours a stalwart drink. The conversation crackles with originality and wit. All in a setting of unpretentious good taste, with works by Benton looking out from every wall; and the artist himself, an ebullient gnome in rumpled corduroy and flannel with a great gray head and droll eyes, challenging every generalization, savoring every quip.

One thing seems clear: Tom Benton was knowledgeable, argumentative, a man of great ego and self-confidence. He knew from his earliest days that he would "amount to something" as a painter. His financial success, which was considerable in later years, seemed to affect him not at all. He continued to live and behave as he had from the beginning.

"Money has made no difference in my life," Tom told Jules Loh in 1970. "Rita's still in the kitchen, I'm still in the studio. I'm just lucky, extremely lucky, that financial success came late in life rather than early. . . . if I had been successful when I was young I might not have done anything, seen anything . . ."

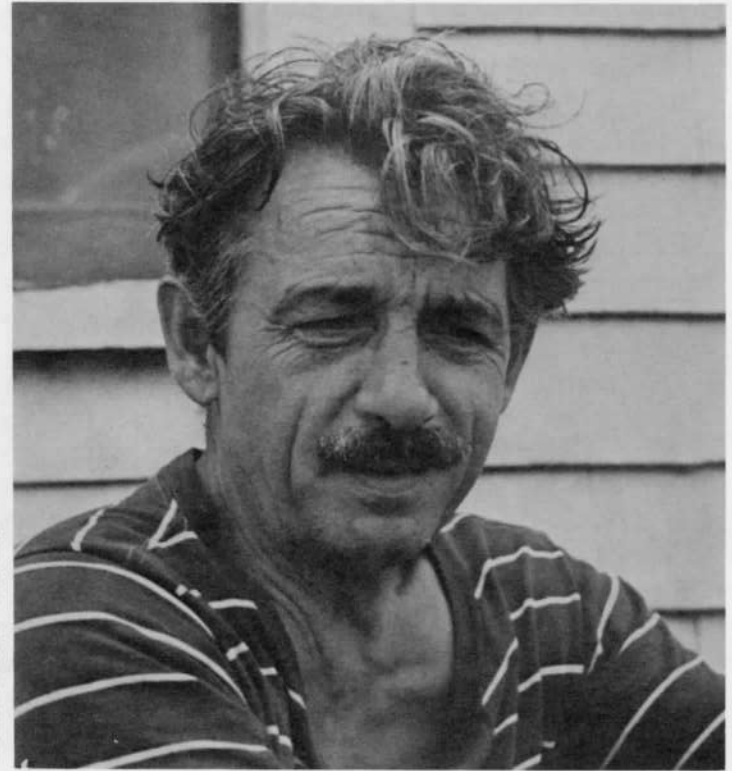
And he might never have come to the Vineyard. It was the fact that he could rent Mrs. Brug's barn for only \$50 for the summer that brought him here in 1920. Rita and he, barely earning enough together to pay their bills, were able to sublease their New York apartment each summer for more than they paid Mrs. Brug. They ate fish, mushrooms, vegetables, all available at little or no cost. They lived here for less than in Manhattan. So it was economics, in part, that made those early Vineyard summers possible.

Later, of course, their economics improved. They bought more property as Tom's paintings went up in value. Late in the 1940s, they bought a small camp on Menemsha Pond at the Chilmark-Gay Head line. They enlarged and winterized it so they could spend more time on the Island, coming earlier and staying later. In the final decade of their lives, that house, rather than the one at Boston Hill, became their summer home.⁴⁰

Evidence of how important Martha's Vineyard was to

⁴⁰ The property is now owned by their son, Thomas Piacenza Benton, better known as T.P.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Tom after a day's painting, hair rumpled, mood relaxed, ready to talk.

Tom is found in his autobiography, *An Artist in America*. In the Appendix he records the Chronology of his life, summarizing his accomplishments each year. In 1972, he completed a mural celebrating the centennial of Joplin, Missouri. He had been working on it a year. His entry for that year describes his work on the mural in five words; another accomplishment, a most remarkable one for a man of 82 years, takes up the rest of the space:

Completed Joplin mural in April. Spent four months of the summer building a stone retaining wall to control erosion on our beach at Martha's Vineyard. The wall is sixty feet long, from four to seven feet thick, and in some places twelve feet high. For moving the larger stones I had the help of younger men, John, Dick, Mark, and Eddie, but I did most of the work myself. If

the wall stands up to its purpose, I shall have defeated one of the forces of nature and thus arrived at my greatest achievement. Immediate side achievement — lost pot belly.

Wherever he went, he carried thoughts of the Vineyard. In 1974, while touring Italy with Santo and Eleanor Piacenza, he commented as he took chew of tobacco: "The last of my Martha's Vineyard chewing tobacco."

Chilmark was, he told Eleanor at another time, the place he loved most in all the world, as did Rita. He thought Rita would like to be buried in Chilmark. As for himself, he didn't care. He was a realist about death, as about life.

They both died in Missouri in 1975 within a few months of each other. Tom died of a massive heart attack in front of his just-completed mural, "The Sources of Country Music." He had gone to the studio after dinner to give it a final review before adding his signature. He died before he signed it.

Rita outlived him by only a few months.

Their ashes were brought to Chilmark for burial under trees they had planted years before. That was as it should be — their hearts were already there.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many Vineyarders who knew the Bentons have helped in the research for this article. They include Eleanor Piacenza, Santo Piacenza, Jessie Benton, Henry and Peggy Scott, Jap and Helen Gude, Jane Slater and Peter Colt Josephs. Research assistance was also provided by Eulalie Regan, Librarian of the Vineyard Gazette.

Many newspaper and magazine articles were helpful and are cited in the footnotes, as are the various Benton biographies that were used. The biography with the most Vineyard-related information is Polly Burroughs, Thomas Hart Benton: A Portrait, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1981. Tom's autobiography, An Artist in America, 4th Edition, U. of Mo. Press, 1983, (original edition 1937), is recommended also.

Rita Piacenza Benton "Without Her, I'd Have Been a Bum!"

by ELEANOR PIACENZA

IT WAS in the fall of 1917 that Tom Benton first came to know Rita Piacenza and, as Tom probably would have admitted, he kept learning about her for the next 57 years.

That year, 1917, was turbulent; the nation was at war. Thomas Hart Benton had been living in New York City for almost five years, struggling without much success to make his way as an artist.

"... I was in the most confused and, secretly, depressed state of mind I had ever been in. Chicago, Paris and New York had left me finally in a purposeless void. The great cities and the 'life of art' had failed me."¹ He was being buffeted by art theories and political isms, being drawn into vehement and noisy controversies by fellow artists with their radical notions.

The country had declared war in April and its grim horror was weighing heavily on everyone. To avoid being drafted into the Army, Tom had enlisted in the Navy and was awaiting word of his assignment. It was to be a long wait. He did not start his hitch in the Navy until July 17, 1918.

Meanwhile, there was the worry about finances. That

¹ Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, 4th ed., U of Mo. Press, Columbia MO, 1983, p.42

ELEANOR PIACENZA, a member of the Society, lives in Chilmark in the house originally owned by Tom Benton's mother. Mrs. Piacenza married the late Louis Piacenza, Rita's younger brother, and has devoted many years to collecting and organizing material about Tom and Rita. She is currently writing a book on the Bentons and this article is based on a small portion of her voluminous material. She confesses to partiality in her characterization, especially of Rita. "It's not easy to be objective about someone you love," she admits.

winter things looked bleak. How was he going to pay for his art supplies, for his food and rent? Then, out of the blue, a stroke of good luck bolstered his sagging spirits. A friend got him a job at the Chelsea Street Neighborhood Association to run their exhibitions and teach a night course in oil painting in a public school building.

At the first meeting of this class, Tom, a novice at teaching, located his students and their easels around a still life. A small dynamo of energy, full of knowledge, Tom launched with gusto into his opening remarks, looking over his attentive class. A tall, shapely young woman caught his eye. His gaze kept being drawn to her classic features and the soft black hair which flowed from beneath her cute red hat.

His lecture finished, he walked around the room to make himself available for individual help, edging toward the striking young woman in the red hat. She had been used to water colors and was absorbed in trying to conquer this new medium, oils. Tom stood by her in silence, entranced by her profile.

He asked her to take off her hat and turn her head toward the easel, so he could see her profile. He studied the contour of her head, her high cheekbones, her dark hair falling back in soft waves from her forehead. Her straight Patrician nose, full mouth, strong chin and shapely throat were the elements of a classic profile.

The teacher asked the student in the red hat to stay after class. He wanted to make a sketch of her head, he told her.

"Oh, by the way, what is your name?" he asked.

"Piacenza," she replied, "Rita Piacenza."

"Italian?"

"Si," was her answer.

That this young woman was sexually appealing, Tom could not deny. That she was dramatically beautiful, his artistic sense readily admitted. But more than that, there emanated from within her a glow, a spirit, that sparked a flame within him.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



It was Rita's profile that attracted Tom at that first painting class.

The teacher moved to another student. Somewhat embarrassed, Rita stayed behind when the others left. Tom made his sketches and she went home to tell her family about this "crazy" teacher who insisted on making many sketches of her head.

Tom couldn't stop thinking about her. Fitting his beret over his thick black hair, he lighted his pipe, picked up his

walking stick (an affectation from his years in Paris), switched off the lights and went out into the November night. The thick armor of his swaggering self-assurance had been dented deeply. Walking back toward 23rd Street where he shared a cold-water flat with his friend Tom Craven, he kept thinking about this Italian student. Who is she? Where did she come from?

For several classes, Rita was asked to stay behind so Tom could make more sketches. She told her older brother Santo that she was sure he was crazy, just another crazy artist. Then, several weeks later, when she walked into the classroom, there on Mr. Benton's desk was a plaster model of her head. It was beautiful. Overwhelmed, she didn't know what to say. Maybe he wasn't so crazy after all, she told her family that night.²

A summer or two before he died, Tom talked to the author at length about the importance of our roots, our beginnings. About understanding the environment which surrounded our early years and the impact it has on our future. None of us, he knew, arrives full-blown on the current landscape. Each has a past in which formative ideas were bred and nurtured, when young hearts pulsed with that early awareness of living, when impressions were created which affect us as our lives unfold. For Tom Benton, that girl in his oil-painting class was a challenge, his curiosity about her background was insatiable.

Rita was a working girl, nearly 22 years old, when she joined Mr. Benton's art class. She was working in hat design at a prestigious clothing establishment run by a Mrs. White. She not only had a knack for designing hats, she also had a flair for selling and had quickly become a success at her work. Soon, she began writing and illustrating articles about her hat designs for the *Ladies Home Journal*, even modeling them at times.

² This sculpture was cast in bronze in 1961 at the suggestion of Santo Piacenza, who spent that summer on the Vineyard with Rita and Tom. Six copies were made. Rita's copy is now in the permanent collection of the author.



Eleanor Piacenza Collection

Rita in 1915, age 19. Two years later, she and Tom met in New York.

She came to this country as an immigrant from northern Italy shortly before her 13th birthday. "In Italy, we were poor, very poor," Santo recalls. Their mother's brother, Louis Cerlian, and his French wife, known in the trade as "Madame Louis," were running a lucrative designer clothing business catering to New York's elite. In the summer of 1904, the Cerlians visited the Piacenza family in Italy and saw

their dire financial condition. That fall, they paid for the passage of Rita's father, Ettore, to come to America.³

A skilled coppersmith, Ettore quickly found work at a Manhattan coppersmith shop owned by a Frenchman. He earned \$18 a week. By 1906, he had saved enough to send for his 16-year-old son, Santino, who went to work at the Proctor Cafe in the financial district. For the next two years, father and son pooled their savings and Ettore returned to Italy in 1908 to bring the rest of the family, Rita, her mother and younger brother, Luigi, to New York. Now, after four years of separation, the family was together, living on 50th Street in what was called a "railroad flat."

Realizing that the Piacenzas were not happy with tenement living in a crowded city, the Cerlians a year or two later bought a two-family brick house on Manida Street in the Bronx, renting them the ground-floor apartment. The Bronx was out in the country then with rural surroundings similar to those back in Italy. Ettore raised hens and kept a vegetable garden. They could look across the open fields to the East River. Life, they agreed, was good in the New World.

Rita, who had a glorious voice, was a soloist in the nearby Catholic church. Her mother, a very religious woman, attended church faithfully, but it was only on those occasions when Rita sang that her father would attend mass; church had little appeal to him, for reasons you will understand later.

Education was important to Rita and she quickly learned English at night school, being tutored by a Scotch woman which resulted in her having an unusual accent, Italian with a Scottish burr. After finishing high school in the Bronx, she began working in the city for her aunt, Madame Louis, on 50th Street. Shortly, she moved on to a better position at Mrs. White's exclusive millinery shop.

Because the winter snows and cold weather made the long walk to the subway exhausting for the three Piacenzas, all

³ The Cerlians, especially their children, were very close to the Piacenzas, and later with Tom, often visiting him and Rita on the Vineyard.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Tom in uniform at Norfolk Naval base as a World War I sailor.

now working in New York, the family decided after seven years in the Bronx to move back to Manhattan. They found a flat on 21st Street where, according to Santo, Rita lived until she married and her parents lived until they returned to Italy in 1924.

It was there that Rita was living during the winter of 1917-18 when she signed up for Mr. Benton's class. Soon "Mr. Benton" became "Tom" as student and teacher began dating. Tom had no money for such things.

"My new girl had to pay all of our entertainment bills," he wrote later. "She didn't mind and as I had lost long ago any chivalrous ideas about the proper economic relations of males and females, we got along."⁴

That period between the fall of 1917 and summer of 1918

⁴ Benton, p.48.

marked the beginning of a relationship which lasted 57 years.

Tom's war service was short, from July until December 1918, but those five months at the Naval base in Norfolk, Virginia, proved rewarding, for they started him on a more objective approach to painting, bringing into focus the human relationships so vital to his inner nature and the concept of art that he sought to express.

While at Norfolk, Tom received a letter from a friend in Reno, who asked: "Do you ever hear from your little Italian girl?" That may have been how he described her, but Rita was not little. She was five foot six or seven inches tall, several inches taller than Tom. Furthermore, her high-spirited, ebullient personality made her seem even taller.

Back in New York, after his discharge, Tom quickly re-established his relationship with that "little Italian girl." She would invite him and his roommate, Tom Craven, a teacher, writer and art critic, to her home for Sunday dinner. Rita's parents never learned to speak English and the language differences made conversation sparse. "We'd sit in silence, stuff ourselves with great Italian courses [cooked expertly by Rita's father], get into a stupor with wine, then rise silently and go away," Tom wrote later.⁵ They devoured more food at these dinners than, with their slim budget, they had seen in a week.

New York, the war over, burst into the rollicking twenties, with Prohibition breeding speakeasies and rum runners, loosening moral values and increasing avarice for the easy money. Tom, who had exhibited some watercolors made during his Navy days, was not finding it easy to make money. Rita's unusual qualities grew upon him, touching deep-seated needs within him, stirring his thinking, firing his imagination. Her faith in his work strengthened his confidence in his ability and ultimately stabilized the direction of his art and his life.

Tom was becoming more important to Rita as well. She talked about him with her family. The Piacenzas were

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.49.

disturbed. What possible prospects could there be with this penniless artist? Rita was not deterred: Tom was her man. It is clear that she saw in embryo the true ability that would lead to greatness. No one shared her optimism.

When their marriage plans were broached, even Tom's friends were shocked. They were certain, Tom wrote later, "knowing something about my experiments, that it would be impossible for me to live permanently with any woman. I fooled them, or it might be better to say, my wife fooled them."⁶

Both families were concerned about the planned marriage. Rita's father, a huge man with a booming voice, spoke out:

"Why did she not choose that tall, handsome Irish boy, already a successful electrician?" he lamented in his loud Italian dialect. "Why must she give up everything to marry a *sbianchino* [house painter] who can't even afford to buy a wedding ring?"⁷

Tom's mother, a society lady who still lived in the dream world of her Washington years when she was a favorite of the Theodore Roosevelts, hostessing teas and musicales in the White House, looked with utter disdain on such a union. How could he bring himself to marry so far beneath him? This immigrant girl was not a lady; she worked for a living! Tom's uncle, a preacher for a sect of the Baptist faith, declared that by marrying a Catholic, Tom was going straight to hell.

The risk of hell ignored, Tom and Rita married on Sunday morning, February 19, 1922, in the Rectory of St. Francis Xavier's Church on West 16th Street, New York City. Father Morgan, S.J., conducted the simple service. Tom had taken instructions as a non-Catholic from Father Morgan, but they held little significance for him. Santo gave his sister away. Thomas Craven stood with Tom as best man and cousin Loulette Cerlian was Rita's maid of honor.

After the ceremony, the small wedding party walked to

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.48.

⁷ Author's conversation with Santo Pianza.

the Piacenza flat on 21st Street where Rita's father and mother had prepared a typical "pranzo," a grand Italian dinner. Santo's wife, now pregnant, was waiting for them. Madame Louis had designed and made Rita's short gray wedding gown, elegantly trimmed with tiers of ribbon, but she did not attend the wedding or the dinner. No one from Tom's family was present. But Rita's family stood by the couple.

Cousin Loulette saw the bride and groom off at Penn Station, where they boarded the train for Great Neck to stay with Tom's mother. Rita paid for the railroad tickets, as she had for the wedding ring. But she had no misgivings, financial or otherwise, about their future. She faced her new life, which she dedicated to him for the next 52 years, with courage, optimism and love.

While she could, at that time, earn more money than Tom, she gave up her career plans, convinced it would be demoralizing for him. She believed her creative efforts should go toward promoting her husband and his work, although occasionally, when things were toughest, she took part-time jobs. She spoke of taking assignments to design children's clothing, or of making a dress that she took from door to door to sell. She started out penniless many days and came back jubilant with "the bacon."

The struggle to get money enough to live on was a challenge that she liked. They were never poor, she told this writer many years later, they just had no money. In fact, when Tom's success paved with gold the "Easy Street" she often talked about, she remarked that "this security is sort of monotonous — we can pay the bills."⁸

Rita preferred that the spotlight was on Tom. She gave up her own career, promising as it was, to support him and his work. She knew he was going to be recognized for what he was, a fine artist. Soon Tom did bathe in the spotlight, not only because of his growing prominence as an artist, but because of his flair for bursting into print with

⁸ Oral history, Rita Benton, Truman Library, 1964.



Eleanor Piacenza Collection

Rita would be about 40 years old in this photo, taken around 1935.

controversial opinions. He had a talent for baiting his adversaries in the art world and was soon making headlines in the national press.

This continued for years, but the public knew virtually nothing about his wife, except for passing mentions in the newspapers accompanying a story about Tom. When Tom and Rita moved to Kansas City in 1935, a brief mention of her appeared in the social column of the *Kansas City Star*, praising her accomplishments as a super hostess, after an evening when celebrities had been entertained in their home. Clementine Paddleford, food editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, travelled to Kansas City to write a story about Rita's culinary talents, describing with relish her divine spaghetti and flavorful stuffed quail.

Years later, when Rita was arguing with Santo about who was the better cook, she brought up the Paddleford article as proof that she was. Santo told her: "That was because your name is Mrs. Thomas Hart Benton," adding that

maybe it was those cigarette ashes she often dropped in the sauce she was stirring that added the piquant flavor.

Unlike Tom, Rita always seemed self-conscious when appearing in public. She preferred to remain quietly in the shadows behind her famous husband.⁹ But there was nothing quiet about her in private when someone stepped on the toes of her husband or her children. She would come on strong, loud and boisterous in their defense!

It was to Rita that those closest to Tom attributed his spectacular success. They know that the story of his immeasurable contribution to American art cannot be told adequately without the story of Rita. Theirs was a relationship that defies logic. In their own way, they were very close. Friends rarely spoke of them separately. It was always "Rita and Tom," or "Tom and Rita." One was the alter ego of the other, yet each was a dynamic individual. Their many arguments and disagreements over the years were often noisy and vehement, but in their own inexplicable way they were inseparable.

Rita, like her husband, was not typical. There was none of the ardent feminist in her, no "women's libber" seeking to promote her identity. She fostered her own brand of independence, with no interest in the latest hair styles, bridge games, ladies' luncheons or women's clubs. She identified her life with Tom's. His art and his world were hers. That does not mean she was a partner in his paintings, although in the early days her remarkable sense of color sometimes provided a touch he needed.

They shared a deep understanding. She had an inner strength and an intuitive insight that he depended upon throughout his life. His dependence on her was attested to by many who knew them well. Their daughter, Jessie, called her mother a genius, that she brought order and stability to the household, keeping things running smoothly.

Those who knew Rita were captivated by her positive

⁹ Her self-conscious manner was evident during her appearance on the CBS television show "Sixty Minutes" with Mike Wallace.

personality, which sometimes soared into the realm of joyous superlatives, radiating the warmth of genuine friendliness, then coming to earth in the cold calculations of a business transaction. She knew how to bargain, building a reputation as saleslady *par excellence* for Tom's paintings.

Rita began selling his work early in their marriage. When times were lean and there was no market, she created one. Sometimes she would trade his sketches or "tryouts," as she called them, for a piece of meat or groceries at the store. She used her bargaining skills with the neighbors, inviting them into their flat for refreshments after stringing Tom's sketches along the walls in hopes that would stir up a sale.

She was a homemaker as well. Whenever they moved into a new apartment Rita would repaint and redecorate. To lend color and gaiety and to keep their morale cheerful, she always had a rose in the center of the table regardless of how lean the cupboard was. Her cousin said that once when she visited they had only potatoes to eat, but there was a rose on the table.

Those who knew Rita were convinced that she played an indispensable role in Tom's life. A close Vineyard friend, Ruth Emerson, remarked quite candidly that "If it hadn't been for Rita, Tom wouldn't have amounted to a row of pins." Then, as she thought about what she had said, she added, "People should know more about Rita." There are many who shared that thought.

No one was quicker to admit that Rita had made the difference than was Tom. One afternoon at cocktail time, when he was in his early 80s, with a mischievous twinkle in his tired old eyes, he remarked to Rita's brother, "You know, Santo, your sister is a hell of a woman to live with, but if it hadn't been for her, I'd have been a bum!" And he chuckled with the glow of inner satisfaction.

That their marriage lasted nearly 52 years was generally beyond people's expectations, a fact that was often debated by friends. Back in 1939, friend Tom Craven wondered about it: "In 1922, [Tom] married a gorgeous madonna of

the Lombard School, who is one of the few women of my acquaintance who understands painting . . . The wife designed hats, posed as a fashion model and was clever at selling pictures. They have lived together with more than ordinary felicity, to the surprise and disappointment of those familiar with Benton's quaint notions of propriety."¹⁰

Would an American girl, such as his mother wanted him to marry, have remained with Tom, a man of capricious idiosyncrasies, volatile and headstrong habits, who took off on sketching trips incommunicado for three months at a stretch? Speculation is useless, a waste of time. Rita was not an American wife.

Rita was Italian and proud of her heritage. She let this be known, especially to people like her pretentious in-laws, and particularly to Tom's mother, who never lost an opportunity to refer to her Italian inferiority and her lack of a proper background. Rita took spirited delight in telling and retelling the story of her meeting with a butcher in Kansas City. Tom loved a good steak and when he began wearing false teeth it had to be tender, filet mignon usually. Rita, always devoted to his needs and whims, sought out a highly recommended butcher to buy the steaks he would enjoy.

Still graceful, despite the increased girth that came with her advancing years and good cooking, she glided into the butcher shop with the sweeping grace of a ballerina, her lovely face glowing. She beamed at what she saw: the butcher was Italian! In no time, an animated conversation was flowing in their native tongue.

Rita explained her errand: a dozen tender steaks, stressing "tender," for her husband, Thomas Hart Benton. A smile lit the face of the Italian butcher, his dark eyes widening. Everybody in Kansas City had heard of Tom Benton. "You married to the famous painter?"

"Si," Rita replied.

¹⁰ *Scribner's Magazine*, Oct. 1937.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, brandishing his sharp knife. "You know why he's famous? I'll tell you why." And he lowered his voice, leaning across the counter. "He's married to an Italian, that's why."

The butcher, no doubt, was speaking from the heart, from his love of the country of his birth. But perhaps he had something more in mind. Does an Italian wife have qualities different from those of her American counterparts? Rita, clearly, was an Italian wife. Her nationality may provide answers to those skeptics who could not fathom how a marriage, any marriage, with Tom Benton could last all those years.

The Italian is not quite like any other nationality. As Luigi Barzini implies in his book, *The Italians*, it is almost impossible to define the Italian personality. He, or she in Rita's case, is an entity unto himself, which is why there are no conclusions to explain the endearing but baffling personality of Rita Piacenza, or to account for her success as the wife of Tom Benton, a role in which many women would have failed.

It goes back, in large part, to the people and the small farming village in northern Italy where she was born and lived until nearly 13. Steeped in centuries of Italian tradition and beliefs, the town and its people left an indelible mark on Rita. It was Verano, Briansa, a small medieval town, population 2000, where she was born January 5, 1896.¹¹ It had been built centuries earlier along the top of a hill, its long grassy fields sloping down to the River Lambro where millers ground the grain, where a silk-winding mill operated and where women washed clothes.

Maria Celliani, Rita's mother, was dark-haired, medium height, with a pretty face and a gentle, pious disposition, totally devoted to her home and her church, her children and her husband. Rita's father, Ettore, was entirely different.

¹¹ Rita constantly lied about her age. She claimed to be anywhere from 6 to 10 years younger than she was. Even her obituary misstates her age. She was 79 at her death, not 76 as printed. She could get away with it, always looking younger than her years.



Ettore and Maria Piacenza, Rita's parents, about the time of her wedding.

A large man, six feet two inches tall, fair in color with chestnut hair and mustache, he had tremendous vigor, a commanding personality, a lively sense of humor and strong convictions. He could out-reason, out-talk almost anyone with his booming, authoritative voice. He could spot a phony at any time, a trait inherited by his daughter. He

was a kind and affectionate father, a strong disciplinarian and a righteous man.

Rita was proud, too proud ever to mention that her father could not read or write. Her mother read the newspapers to him each day to keep him abreast of the news. Santo remembers that his father demanded that he read his school book to him every day. It was written by C. Collodi, author of the classical story of Pinocchio. Later, it was Rita's turn to read to him. His memory for facts was phenomenal. An intelligent man, he had never been given a school education. Born near the city of Piacenza, his family name, his mother had died young. When his father remarried, Ettore didn't get along with his stepmother and ran away as a small boy, forced to make his own way in the world. He ended up as a skilled and highly respected coppersmith in Verano.

The narrow cobblestone streets of Verano, where Rita grew up, were lined with two-story, barracks-like row houses. Every few feet, a door and a window marked a family's living space. A narrow passage broke the rows periodically, opening into a courtyard in the rear.

The Piacenza family lived in two rooms, one on each floor. The front half of the first floor was Ettore's shop, the rear half was the kitchen and living space. The back door opened on the courtyard. There was no electricity of course, but neither was there any running water, no kitchen sink and no toilet facilities except the community privy outside. The second floor was one large room, with beds for the whole family, to which the family retired each night, proud of having the only inside stairway in Verano.

Especially important to Rita in her childhood was her Nonna, her grandmother, "*la Cuma*" or midwife of Verano. A remarkable lady with deft hands and a knowing heart, she was loved and respected by all. Every expectant mother called for her. She was one of only three persons on the village payroll. A legend in the town, she was never allowed to retire, dying at 86, still known as *la Cuma*. Her funeral procession, the largest and most elaborate in the memory

of townfolk, was led by her first delivery, then a man of 64, carrying her last delivery, a baby of two.

From this humble beginning, Rita had ingrained in her the love and loyalty which bind the Italian family together, making it an invincible bastion against life's hardships. She learned that whether it was a cold-water flat in New York, a grand stone house in Kansas City, or those much-loved properties on the Vineyard, her home was her castle and like her family was to be cherished and jealously protected.

She learned very early also that the world was a place in which one must be shrewd and conniving to survive. That instinct, that bargaining cleverness, was to serve her well as she and Tom struggled against poverty in their early years together.

Rita, like her mother, accepted without question her Catholic faith and bowed to the autocratic role of the church, overseer of all aspects of life, as Italians had done for centuries. Then, while she was still a child, an event took place that changed her father's attitude toward the church and affected the family as well.

In the fall of 1901, an urgent letter was delivered to Ettore, as he was shaping a polenta pot in his forge in the courtyard. He gave it to Maria who read it to him. His father was dying in his home at Castle Don Giovanni. He left at once to join his brother and two sisters to comfort the old man.

The local priest, Don Pietro, a first cousin, visited the old man frequently, often bringing him a bottle of wine, of which he was very fond. For several days, the old man clung to life as the family comforted him. Then one day Don Pietro asked the family members to remain in the kitchen, their father wished to speak with him alone.

Great fear gripped the dying man. His sins had been many and he was frightened as to what his fate would be. Don Pietro prayed with him, assuring him that with his help, with his connections to God, for certain considerations, he would intercede and get him into the heavenly kingdom. The old man's fear left and he died in bliss.

Eleanor Piacenza Collection



Rita does laundry at Mrs. Brug's barn in 1922. Mrs. Brug is behind her.

After the funeral, his will was read. He had left his entire estate to Don Pietro. According to Santo, who heard the story many times, his father and uncle almost killed the priest right then.

Rita was young, about five, when her father returned home, bursting into the house with an angry tirade. He cursed the priest so loudly that Rita's Nonna and aunt came in from next door. Plans his mother had for Santo to enter the priesthood came to an abrupt ending.

"No son of mine will ever become a priest!" the father shouted.

The treacherous episode changed the family's life. Ettore's bitterness affected everything he did. An anti-clerical political party was being formed and he joined forces with their candidate for the senate in Milan. He became a visible, active agitator for change.

But it was too early, the turn of the century, for such revolutionary ideas to succeed. The powerful party of the church won the election and many villagers turned against Ettore.

He went back to his forge, trying to recover from the loss.



Rita and T.P. on front porch of their Boston Hill camp, about 1935.

His business suffered and he walked long distances to outlying regions to wealthy villas of clients, looking for work. They turned him down, being staunch members of the clerical party and his anti-clerical views were well known in the region. Work became more and more scarce and hard times hit the family. In 1903, Santo, then 13 years old, left home, going to Milan to work in a wine shop, eager to get away from the poverty at home.

The following summer, 1904, the well-to-do Cerlians from



Rita holds 10-month-old Jessie in garden of Kansas City house in 1940.

New York City stopped by to visit the Piacenzas while on a trip to view Paris fashions. What they saw shocked them. The depressed mood of Maria and Ettore, the sallow, unhealthy faces of the children, convinced them that something must be done. It was then that father Ettore was given the money to emigrate to New York to make a new life. It was then, although she didn't realize it at the time, that the world of Rita Piacenza changed forever. It was then that her marriage into a famous American family became possible.

Tom knew none of this at the time, but he chose well when he married Rita, avoiding superbly the hell to which he had been destined by his preacher uncle.

He chose well because there was in Rita from that childhood a sensitivity, bouyant and imaginative, which heightened her awareness of life. She could accept a life, stark and earthy; she was accustomed to life in a dark, dank,



The camp when they bought it. The chicken-coop kitchen is at the left.

claustrophobic house in Verano. Having lived with poverty, she faced each day cheerfully and optimistically, even during those New York years when she and Tom had little.

Rita's upbringing had impressed on her the sanctity of marriage and the security that came from the love and devotion of the family. No matter where Tom went or what he did, she was always there, dedicating herself to his needs and those of her children. She followed the pattern of her mother, except that Rita was less pious, less gentle, although just as big-hearted and strong when the occasion arose.

Her childhood might appear somber to the reader, but that is not correct. She had been happy, ecstatic with the color and pagentry of Feast Days, delighted when her aunt took her to church puppet shows. School was rewarding, with friendships that lasted over the years. Her father took her mushroom hunting on the long, grassy slopes of the hills, the memory of which she loved and often talked about during summers on the Vineyard while picking mushrooms in the Chilmark fields.

She had a kinship with nature, with birds, trees, rivers,



The camp had expanded by the late 1930s. It just grew, in Tom's words.

mountains and the cobalt blue of the sky which could be seen again and again in Tom's vivid paintings of his beloved Martha's Vineyard and of the mountains and fields of the west. Of the many strands in the fabric of her childhood, many became strengthened as they were woven into the texture of her life with Tom.

If ever a person loved flowers, it was Rita. They were always on the Vineyard table. A bowl of wild flowers, daisies, Queen Anne's lace, wild roses, honeysuckle, or perhaps some annuals a friend had brought. Tom responded as well to the beauty of flowers and expressed it in paintings of his own exquisite arrangements.

Yes, Tom chose well when he married Rita. And she chose well also. Her father had warned her not to expect much, being married to an artist. This she had accepted. But her faith, her patience and her wise devotion to Tom brought their rewards. He became, what she always believed he would: "The American Michaelangelo."

Rita knew that beneath Tom's crusty, fiery exterior was a deep sensitivity, a heart, an emotional complexity that few could understand. The rough public image he created for himself was a protective wall to hide his inner feelings. How gently he would fondle a dog's ears, stroke a small boy's

head, or with tears in his eyes receive the plaudits of a friend.

In 1949, Rita and Tom went back to Verano to visit her mother, then in her 80s. She was lonely for the husband who had died a dozen years before. Rita did not want to take Tom to visit her, she knew how it would affect him. The little old lady, dressed in black, came down the flower-bordered path from the house that she and her husband had built when they returned to Italy and greeted them. "I am waiting now," she said with a faraway look, "for the chariot to come and take me home." Tom burst into tears, his protective shell shattered.

In a 1964 interview, Rita explained that Tom was "a very easy person to get along with if you leave him alone. He's got to do exactly what he wants . . . He likes to get up early in the morning and he likes to have the coffee made, but he wants no one around. I know what he likes and after dinner I know what he wants to drink — the ice is ready. I know he likes hard-boiled eggs, the icebox is always full. He likes dates so I keep them around. He's very easy."

When he would go away for as much as three months, if Rita heard nothing from him, she was not disturbed. She knew he would come back. He always did. She knew he could get angry, blasting forth with profane language. She knew he could get depressed and wear himself out emotionally. There were many times when he would come in from his studio, tearing up a painting, never going to paint again! Rita would calm him down and have him out in his studio the next morning.

They both loved people and parties. They were noted for their gatherings in Greenwich Village on Saturday nights when Tom's enthusiasm for the harmonica overshadowed his art. Rita, too, got "the bug," as she called it, and sang and played the guitar with the boys. In Kansas City, Rita, the effervescent hostess serving plenty of good food, made their home a delightful meeting place where musicians of the Kansas City Symphony came to unwind and play and enjoy good company.

Stories about Rita are legion. There were some, a few, who didn't like her. Perhaps because she could not tolerate phonies and she didn't hide that fact. Children loved her liveliness, her spirit, the warmth of her affection. She was outgoing and exuberant, a beautiful Italian mother for all time. She was always willing to help less fortunate fellow artists. There is the story of the bottle of milk that appeared each morning on the doorstep of Manuel Tolegian and Jackson Pollock when they were struggling young students of Tom's in New York. She found ways to sell pictures for young artists. If you were ill, she was there. Rita was someone who was easy to love.

In Kansas City she would spend long television evenings in her later years knitting caps and mittens for children in Chilmark and for Jessie's family, while Tom took off to bed with a current book to read.

Tom had just finished his last mural, "The Sources of Country Music," in which the famed Wabash Cannonball was chugging towards its destination when he, too, reached his last stop. It was 7:15 in the evening of January 19, 1975. He was getting ready to sign it, always his final brush stroke. He never did sign it. Rita signed it for him later.

Someone asked, after Tom died, why did Rita shed no tears? There are sorrows too deep for tears. A few weeks after Tom's death, the writer talked on the telephone with Rita. Her voice was flat. The characteristic Rita zest was missing.

"I am tired," she said. "The house is empty. Life is so empty now."

A few weeks later, on April 8, 1975, Rita died. At her funeral, daughter Jessie said, "If there is a heaven, I'm sure Tom is there raising hell and perhaps it was the distraught angels who, unable to control him, called my mother there. But I like to think it was Tom himself . . . who couldn't have lived without her here and couldn't live without her there."

Bits & Pieces

ONE thing comes across to anyone studying the life of Tom Benton: he was a workaholic. His work meant everything to him. The only thing he enjoyed as much as painting was music.

Of course, he liked to talk, too. Sometimes, too much to please Rita.

Each afternoon, as the natural light faded he would clean his brushes, go into the house, light his pipe and have a bourbon or two or more. That was when he welcomed guests. And talk. Tom could talk about anything, had opinions about everything.

In his later years, there were fewer guests. His routine was to finish dinner, walk back to his studio and study his day's work, puffing thoughtfully on his pipe. Then he'd go back in the house, make a brief comment to Rita about whether he had done poorly or well that day and head for bed. He'd usually be in bed soon after 8 p.m.

He'd be up by five-thirty, have breakfast, alone, and be in the studio as soon as the light was good enough.

Eleanor Piacenza, whose delightful article in this issue tells much about these two Bentons, is concerned lest readers think Rita was a weak sister in their marriage. Absolutely not, she insists. Rita wasn't intimidated by Tom, although she did everything she could to make his life easy. But she held up her end in any discussion when she wanted to, as Eleanor tells us:

"When Rita came into a room, her vibrant voice, flirtatious eyes and buoyant personality added a spark of excitement to any gathering. It was never quiet when Tom and Rita came

to call. The conversation was animated, each vying with the other when there was a good story to be told. Rita would call out, 'Tom, shut up, let me tell it!' And often he did — though not always.

"Tom told Santo and me during our Italian trip that Rita wasn't a good story teller because she got too involved: 'She can't tell a story. She starts laughing in the middle of it and you never get the point, each time she approaches the point she begins to laugh.'

"One afternoon Tom and Rita came early for dinner at my house to listen to the Montagnana Trio, who were rehearsing in the living room. Tom was thrilled by the music. His body swayed to the lilt and rhythm of a Scott Joplin arrangement.

" 'Somebody among you has got a little genius,' he told the players. 'I like music, every kind of music.'

"As the rehearsal continued, he told us in detail about his experiences in the Middle West and South on his trips to sketch folk musicians and learn their tunes. He was working on his last mural, 'Sources of Country Music,' at the time. Occasionally, Rita would interrupt in her lyric soprano voice, singing snatches of songs like 'When the Saints Come Marching In' as the trio rehearsed.

"Santo had cooked up one of his fine Italian specialties, cazzualo, a favorite of Tom's. He was anxious for us to eat. Tom, still wound up about music, kept talking. On and on he went.

"Rita, with her usual gusto, stood up and ordered: 'Tom, let's eat!'

"Raising his glass of red wine, Tom replied joyfully, 'I don't need any food. My soul is full!' "

A.R.R.



Collection Jessie Benton, text courtesy Jane Slater.

*Jessie Benton & the butterfly & the
pussy cat & the steel & the wild roses
& the grape vine & Menasha Pond
& the rest of which was around the
summer of 1940 when Jessie was one year old*



Rita, T.P., and Tom Benton on the porch of their
Boston Hill camp in the 1930s.