

A visit with Miss Janet Tait
Presented by Margaret Humm Wilkinson

My name is Margaret Humm Wilkinson. I have been a part of Steilacoom's community for many years. During that time I have encountered hundreds, if not thousands, of people, but not another person quite like my teacher, Miss Janet Cornwall Tait.

The first thing Miss Tait taught me is the importance of Country and to be proud and thankful of where I lived. In that same spirit, I would like to call the Class to order, and as Miss Tait had us do at the beginning of every school day, stand and say the Pledge of Allegiance. So, will you please stand and say the Pledge with me? (All stand and face the flag. Note: A fabric sculpture of Miss Tait is displayed in the Steilacoom Historical Association's Museum)

When I first met Miss Tait, she like many of her peers of that Era, had an austere appearance. Although she wore dark clothing, she wore no make-up. Her salt and pepper hair was pulled back and worn in a "bun". She always carried a handkerchief, usually placed in the sleeve of her blouse. She had warm, gray-blue eyes, but her facial expression was usually very stern.

On the first day of school Miss Tait told her students: "I am here to teach you, and you are here to learn." She quickly added that: "if any student needs more assistance I am willing to help you after school." Miss Tait was a woman of her word, and she stayed after school many days to help those who were willing to learn.

(Miss Tait kept close tabs on her students' progress. One young man, who was failing, was given the opportunity to complete extra work during a holiday recess in order to catch up with his classmates. He took advantage of that extra work. Miss Tait never did learn what happened to that young man after his family moved out of the area).

The expectations of a woman, especially a teacher in the 1950s, were much different than now. The standards and social norms that Miss Tait embraced were those of a modern woman. She emphasized equality for every man and woman. One of the most valuable lessons she taught our Class was about the Bill of Rights, and that we should feel fortunate to live in the United States where the human, social, moral rights and property of every citizen was valued.

Miss Tait taught us to take pride in everything we did, including our penmanship. Once I wrote the wrong kind of "R's" and Miss Tait quickly pointed out the proper formation for a hand-written lower-case "R". She emphasized that our penmanship is our permanent mark on the world, and how you leave that mark for others to see will reveal to them your strength of character.

During the years after I left Steilacoom School, I remained in contact with Miss Tait, often visiting her at her home. She would always serve tea and Ms. Howie's recipe for cookies (Mrs. Howie shared the home with Miss Tait) when I visited. We shared many memories about her years as a teacher. She always said that her students were "her children."

Miss Tait also shared parts of her personal life with me during those afternoon visits. One afternoon she showed me the items that were most dear to her. When she moved from England to Darby, PA in 1911, and then from Pennsylvania to Steilacoom, she brought along a trunk filled with linens, china, plum pudding molds and other personal items.

On top of the linens was a stack of letters, neatly tied with a yellow ribbon. Those letters were from her fiancé, a World War I soldier, who was killed in action. His picture was in a lovely, gold frame, and a small box held a beautiful diamond ring, which, on that day, she slipped on her finger. A tear rolled down her cheek.

As I stated before, my first impression of Miss Tait was that she was a very austere woman. In reality, she had a gentle, thoughtful and humorous side, as I learned as I became better acquainted with her.

Through her grey-blue eyes she saw her students as like her own children, and she gave us her guidance and wisdom that has remained with me through the years.

During her teaching career Miss Tait also kept a roster of all her students.

She held herself, as well as her students, to very high standards. Her coaching, teaching and encouragement has had a lasting effect on my life. She taught me the meaning of integrity, honesty, loyalty, strength of character, and to have respect for others' opinions. Miss Tait, thank you. You always will be fondly remembered in my heart and mind.

How fortunate I felt to have had Miss Tait as a teacher, mentor and friend. She sparked my enthusiasm, impressing upon me, a very young girl, that a woman could be anything she wanted to be. She told us never to "settle for the moon when you can reach the stars."

To this day, my 8th grade classmates: Myrna Arbuckle (Gluck), Sandy Stucky (Bellamy), Julie Peck (McFarlane), Karen Dunkin (Stram) and I get together many times each year to catch up and reminisce about our days at Pioneer and Miss Tait,

In her 39 years of teaching in Steilacoom, Miss Tait influenced many students. She came to town in 1919 and taught until she retired in 1958. In 1924 she took over the 7th and 8th grades, a position she held for the next 20 years. She also was principal during this period, but turned the position over to Blair Taylor in 1946. (Blair Taylor was the sole male teacher at the school. He became Principal and then the district's first superintendent) Miss Tait continued to instruct the 8th grade students until she retired.

Miss Tait was born in Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland, England, on July 31, 1892. She died at Des Moines, Washington on November 3, 1980.