

Round Top Register  
March 1, 2017

**Neltje: A Life Outside the Lines**

by Lorie A. Woodward

photos by Anna Spencer Morse, Grace Photography

Neltje, daughter of publishing magnate Nelson Doubleday, escaped from the gilded prison of New York City’s high society to a sprawling Wyoming ranch where she reimagined, restored and repurposed her life.

“When I left New York, I was merely putting one foot in front of the other,” Neltje said. “I had no plan and no voice . . . just an overpowering urge to live outside the lines that had been drawn for me.”

Just prior to leaving the city with her two young children in tow, Neltje had begun exploring and experimenting with sculpture as part of the Lost Wives Project, tapping into the creativity that had lain dormant since childhood.

“Something in my soul whispered, ‘Be an artist,’” Neltje said. “I was tentative at times—terrified but determined. Terror and determination is a powerful impetus for change and reinvention.”

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Neltje’s childhood was one of glittering isolation. Wealth delivered all of the creature comforts including a home on the North Fork of Long Island and a country estate in South Carolina.

“I learned early on that while money greases life’s wheels and makes things more comfortable it doesn’t buy happiness,” Neltje said.

The Doubleday name also provided early connections with literary luminaries such as W. Somerset Maugham and Irving Stone and all who inhabited the pinnacle of high society.

“My parents taught me to perform well,” Neltje said. “I learned to be a socialite, a wife and a helpmate for a career-oriented man. It was a lifestyle that I eventually chose not to live.”

The young girl was shuttled between relatives and boarding schools as far away as Switzerland.

“In my opinion, we arrive on this planet longing to belong in our family and our tribal unit,” Neltje said. “The safety and security that comes from really belonging is paramount to human existence.”

Neltje, whose parents came of age in the Victorian era, was reared to be seen—and heard—at her parents’ request. When Neltje was at home, their daily lives often intersected only briefly

as her parents were dressing to go out for the evening. The time together was colored by lipstick, rich silks, the amber of aged Scotch and not-so-subtle glances at jeweled watches.

“Children, it seemed, were the ‘family accessories’ society expected of husbands and wives,” Neltje said.

Neltje, born in 1934, suffered sexual abuse in an era when such things were dismissed with the admonishment, “Don’t tell your father. It will make him angry.” The life-altering incident took place in 1943, when she was just nine-years-old.

“The adults in my life ignored what happened, but their silence didn’t make the abusive act or its aftermath, including an unspeakable rage, disappear,” Neltje said. “Instead it negated my existence.”

Neltje married early to escape the confines of her immediate family, but a loveless, emotionally bereft marriage was a jail of another type. The emotional isolation and lack of love ultimately drove her to separate from and then divorce from her husband John Turner Sargent. He was a Doubleday executive who was being trained for the company presidency, a position which ultimately went to her brother, Nelson Doubleday.

In New York she saw a therapist three times a week for two years to equip herself to take charge of her life.

“I was beginning to be in touch with my anger, but I was also beginning to learn to put my body where my mind and my heart were,” Neltje said.

Cutting through the stifling veil of red hot anger at the way she was treated as a child and other abuses, some directed to women in general, opened a world of possibilities to Neltje.

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Lured by Wyoming’s advantageous divorce laws, Neltje headed west with her two children.

“I planned to spend the summer, get a divorce and return to ‘civilization,’” said Neltje, who needed to stay in Wyoming for at least two months to be able to file for divorce in the state.

She didn’t expect to find her spiritual home in the aptly nicknamed Equality State.

“I sensed immediately that life in the West was built on hard work, hard words and honesty instead of the disassembling of truth that I had lived with at home,” Neltje said. “The pull was so strong it was as if I’d lived here in a previous life.”

Wyoming also offered her a chance to put down family roots in solid ground. She purchased a 442-acre ranch and enrolled her children in the local school. It was a one-room schoolhouse

with two teachers overseeing all instruction for students in grades 1 – 8. Their education was just one of many things that were more personal in rural America than in NYC.

“The most important thing was that we were a family,” Neltje said. “In Wyoming I could put away the feeling of abandonment and live without fear. Whatever happened, I knew I could give my kids the gift of love and belonging.”

Under the broad expanse of western sky, she reimagined herself. Neltje became an abstract expressionist painter capturing the memory of a moment generally either connected to being a woman or being in nature.

“Being in nature restored my sense of play and adventure,” Neltje said.

Despite her newfound freedom, the act of putting brush to canvas was a leap of faith for the woman who had “failed art as a third grader for coloring outside the lines” and once found a ceramic squirrel she had created for her mother cast aside in the trash a day after Neltje had presented the gift. Plus, Neltje had a sister who was an artist and another who was a writer, neither of whom was particularly pleased to see her move into their artistic territory.

“Art scared the crap out of me because I had no earthly idea what was coming out,” Neltje said. “I had to learn to speak with a paintbrush.”

Her foray into Sumi-e, an ancient form of Asian art using various concentrations of India ink on rice paper, informed her early artistic vision—and her relationships.

“Sumi-e taught me that a mark meant everything,” Neltje said. “Once it’s there, you may try to cover it up with another mark, but the original will never disappear. It is just like life—we are responsible for each and every stroke.”

Monotypes also stretched her mind and unleashed her paintbrushes’ voices. A monotype is a single print taken from a design created in oil paint or printing ink on glass or metal. Because it is a printing process, artists have to create with mirror images in mind.

“Left is right, right is left and the last color put down on the surface holding the paint will be buried in the monotype,” Neltje said. “The process allowed me completely free expression and provided the opportunity to work with a lack of control. It taught me to paint in the moment and accept what happened.”

According to Neltje, it was akin to a musician playing improvisational jazz.

“I became confident in my ability to paint what I was moved to do,” Neltje said.

As her confidence and her body of work grew, Neltje began entering competitions and earning spots in exhibits and galleries, each one more prestigious than the last. Today, her canvases are

likely to be measured in yards and hang in places such as Sheridan Community College and the University of Wyoming.

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As her artistic voice got louder and stronger, it empowered her and kick-started the can-do spirit that had been hibernating alongside her creativity.

“I discovered I like to learn by doing,” Neltje said.

With no prior training, she became a rancher who raised commercial Angus; an innkeeper who restored and managed a historic hotel in Sheridan expanding it to include a daily restaurant, banquet catering and a regional conference center; a retail entrepreneur who created an antiques and home décor destination; and a philanthropist who founded a residency program for visual artists and writers that nurtures their creativity and brings arts to rural Wyoming.

Most recently she has developed a residential sub-division, and now she is working on another commercial development. In the past, she’s been up to her elbows in methane gas development.

“On-the-project training is absolutely freeing because there are no expectations,” Neltje said. “It stretches my creativity to swing from one thing to another and meet people who think so differently than I do.”

In 2016, the 82-year-old added author to her list. Her memoir, *North of Crazy*, was released to general acclaim.

“I’m no more complicated than many people, but I do have a variety of interests,” Neltje said. “I’ve chosen to wear many hats. As a result, I have a wonderfully, powerfully exciting life.

“I had to tell my story in my way in my time. When I was a child, no one would listen, but now I have a strong, bold voice. Hopefully, my truth will inspire other women to find theirs.”

## **SIDEBAR**

### **A Business Built on Round Top Relationships**

Neltje, a proponent of authenticity and relationships, built Turned Antiques, her destination antiques and home décor store, on a foundation of authentic Round Top relationships.

“All the people in Round Top have been generous, kind and welcoming,” said Neltje, who has been shopping the Round Top Antiques Shows for a decade. “The dealers here helped train me

when I was just getting started in the antiques business. Frankly, I like walking around sweating and talking to people—dealers of all sorts.”

Turned Antiques, like so many things in Neltje’s life, originated because one thing led to another—and she had to make choice. It was 2003. She had just finished building and completely furnishing the homes at the Jentel Foundation, her annual, year-long residency program for visual artists and writers, with antiques. There were 12 pieces left over from her two-year antiques shopping spree.

“I could either sell the antiques or get bigger,” Neltje said.

Most people would have opted for a quick sale. Neltje isn’t most people. Instead, she built a 10,000-square-foot showroom and an 8,000-square-foot storage room to which she eventually added another 2,000 square feet to house any inventory that has lingered for three years. And, unlike most people, Neltje didn’t build her retail space in a town. She built it on her secluded ranch 19 miles from Sheridan, Wyoming.

“I didn’t envision Turned Antiques as a retail destination,” Neltje said. “I just didn’t want to have to leave the ranch to manage it.”

Neltje built it—and they came. Today, the store is open on Saturdays from the first weekend in May through Labor Day. It re-opens the first weekend in November and remains open through Christmas. It is closed the rest of the year. While there is something for everyone at Turned Antiques, which has expanded its offerings to include bed linens, men’s and women’s clothing, books, toys, toiletries kitchen wares and contemporary furniture, it, like the Round Top Antiques Shows, is often the focal point of girls’ shopping adventures.

“My job is to bring beauty to Sheridan—and beyond,” Neltje said. “What we offer is a rarity in this part of the world, so it’s not unusual during the Christmas season for a carload of women to drive five or six hours over icy roads to spend the day with us.”

She discovered Round Top as she was scouring the Plains states for inventory for her showroom.

“A dealer in Nebraska told me I had to go to Round Top because it had the largest availability and selection of antiques in the country—and I needed to meet her friends Michael Breddin and Ed Fulkerson at Leftovers [a destination antiques and home décor store in Brenham],” Neltje said.

The trio hit it off. Through the years, she and Fulkerson have developed a relationship that crosses into the territory of family. Regardless of where they are in the world—and both travel extensively—they talk on the phone at 10:00 Central every Sunday morning.

“I’ve talked to Neltje on a SAT phone when she was on the side of mountain as part of an expedition tracking a ghost bear—and from a whole lot of other interesting places,” Ed said. “She, as much as anyone I know, seizes life and squeezes every bit of ‘juice’ from every experience.”

During the Round Top Antiques Shows, Neltje spends a week or two as a guest at Sugarlumps Fulkerson’s guest house.

“Our relationship is somewhere between brother and sister, mother and son and thrill-seeking aunt and up-for-a-challenge nephew,” Fulkerson said. “It’s hard to define, but suffice it to say we’re family.”

They share their lives, which includes their respective expertise.

“I’ve learned so much from Ed and Michael about elegance, beauty, style and taste,” said Neltje, who no longer manages the day-to-day operations of Turned Antiques but still directs the merchandising vignettes. “They’re masters of many things but especially textures. Layers of lushness entice people to touch things, which adds a tactile connection to the eye candy. Engaging the senses is powerful.”

And when it comes to shopping, Neltje knows what she’s talking about. While she tries to limit herself to one semi-truckload of merchandise per Round Top show, she admits that usually two or three trucks make their way north at the show’s conclusion.

“I have an addictive personality when it comes to my passions,” Neltje said. “My store is in a very rural area, so I strive to bring something new and different to attract customers, which means I take my shopping very seriously.”

**Editor’s Note:** *A special thank you to Ed Fulkerson and Michael Breddin, co-owners of Leftovers Antiques in Brenham, who allowed us to photograph Neltje as she shopped with them.*

## **SIDEBAR**

### **The Whole Story**

In fall 2016, Neltje released her memoir, *North of Crazy*. The 274-page book, published by St. Martin’s Press, was a three-and-a-half year endeavor born out of equal parts of pain and love.

“It’s not money but spirit that allows you to pick yourself up, glue the pieces back together and start life over again,” Neltje said. “My words needed to exist outside my head so that other women will know they are not alone as they struggle to find their voices and paths back to wholeness after trauma or tragedy—and be confident that a beautiful life can be constructed from the ashes.”

*North of Crazy is available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and fine booksellers everywhere including Leftovers Antiques in Brenham.*

**QUOTATION**

“The idea that money buys happiness is fundamentally flawed because it just plain doesn’t work. Money doesn’t buy peace, joy, laughter, love, hope or fear, anger, determination—all of those we’re blessed with as part of our personalities. The money store doesn’t sell the essence of humanity.” — Neltje