Isabelle "Barbara" Fiske Calhoun, Artist, Cartoonist, Mother, Free Spirit, and co-founder of Quarry Hill Creative Center

by Cynthia Close

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In 1946, Isabelle "Barbara" Fiske Calhoun, then Barbara Hall Fiske, and her husband, Irving Fiske, bought 140 acres of farmland near Rochester, Vermont, with their wedding money. What started out as a family summer place eventually became known as the Quarry Hill Creative Center, which exists to this day.

I knew nothing about the center until reading an obituary in the *Burlington Free Press* for Calhoun, who died on April 28, 2014. The *Free Press* identified her as a ""hippie commune' co-founder." Having had a longtime interest in alternative communities, this immediately caught my attention, and I began to research what I learned was Vermont's "oldest alternative living community and artists retreat." Who was this woman and what had transpired on that property over the course of the last 68 years to earn such a reputation?

I discovered that the property is now in the hands of Isabelle (known as "Ladybelle") McFarlin, Calhoun's daughter. I called Ladybelle, asking to visit the center and interview her, and was pleasantly surprised by her open and friendly reception despite the fact that she didn't know me. But Ladybelle warned me that visiting Quarry Hill a few days after the biggest snowstorm of the season was not the best timing. She made it clear that the road to Quarry Hill might present some challenges.

I soon learned Ladybelle's warning was not overstated when I found myself at the bottom of an icy, snow-covered dirt road, contemplating whether to risk getting stuck somewhere between Quarry Hill and Rochester. Without a four-wheel drive vehicle, it seemed residing in this isolated community during the winter would be close to impossible. I decided to turn back and try visiting in the spring, when the roads would be better.

An Isolated Idyll

It was this isolation that first attracted Barbara and Irving Fiske, two bohemian intellectuals from New York City, and inspired them to buy the land. Though city life offered certain benefits, the young couple had become enamored of accounts of turn-of-the-century life in Vermont.

The property, which they bought for $1,000, had only one house with no plumbing and a fragile barn. Since life there was primitive, the Fiskes initially only used it as a summer place, where, Ladybelle told me, they could "run around naked" without attracting attention from curious neighbors. As a child, Ladybelle "hardly ever remembers wearing any clothes."

The family—first Barbara and Irving, later with their children, Ladybelle and William—were nomadic. They spent summers in Vermont, but were otherwise on the move, stopping in New York City, where, for a time, Barbara ran The Gallery Gwen in the East Village. She showed her paintings at the gallery along with the work of others, and Irving gave talks on tantra, Zen, Sufism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and atheism. Then, if they had enough money, the Fiskes traveled to Florida.

Money was always an issue. It seemed like they never had much. Nonetheless, Ladybelle, born in 1950, remembers her childhood at Quarry Hill "as beautiful, but at times lonely." She also recalls feeling like she lived in a cloistered place with a strong fear of being "captured" by the outside world.

An Unusual Young Woman

Isabelle "Barbara" Hall was born in Tucson, Arizona, on September 9, 1919. Her family was originally from the South, their history going back several generations in North Carolina, but her brother suffered from tuberculosis so the family moved to Arizona. Barbara's grandfather was the editor of Phoenix's primary newspaper.

As a child, Barbara was adored, and her interests in art and music were cultivated at a young age. She attended art school in Los Angeles—quite an adventure for a young woman in the 1930s. Around 1940, she moved to New York.

During the war, Barbara earned her living as a cartoonist, working for Harvey Comics under the name "B. Hall." Cartooning was not considered a proper profession for women, but since most of the male cartoonists were away at war, it left an opening for talented women, and she took it. She drew the popular "Girl Commandoes" comic strip, and she was celebrated in *The Great Women Cartoonists* published in 2001 by Trina Robbins and later mentioned in *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896–2013,* a more recent book by the same author.

It was in New York's Greenwich Village that she met her future husband, Irving Fiske. He came from a successful Russian Jewish family who had changed their name from Fishman to Fiske. Irving was smart, studying writing and physics at Cornell University, and quite charismatic. He graduated early in 1928 and soon became a successful playwright, inventor, writer, and public speaker. The bohemian artist and the charming writer fell in love and lived together during a time when that was unheard of. Eventually they married on January 8, 1946.

No Hitting Children, No Killing Animals

The Fiskes were interested in surrounding themselves with like-minded people who were also engaged in the arts. They started inviting their city friends—other artists, writers, and free thinkers—to join them, and gradually an alternative community formed.

Unlike many alternative or intentional communities, there were few rules and regulations and no manifestos to sign if you wanted to join the interesting folks at Quarry Hill. Ladybelle reiterated several times during our phone conversations that they had only two hard and fast requirements: "No hitting the kids, and no killing of any kind—no hunting or fishing or even boiling lobsters alive."

Vermont has a long history as a welcoming place for utopian, as well as radical, social, economic, and religious movements, going as far back as the 1830s. According to the Vermont Historical Society website, Quarry Hill was one of the first communes where men were actively involved in child rearing.

For nearly 50 years women and children held sway at Quarry Hill to an extent not widely accepted in conventional life. Barbara and Irving believed in ideas perpetuated in the writings of William Blake and Wordsworth that children "held the knowledge of the world" and that they should be completely free to do whatever they wanted, all the time. Children were considered more intelligent than adults.

Education at Quarry Hill

The Fiskes took a determined stance against public school education. Great admirers of Blake, they subscribed to the tenet that, according to Blake, such institutions were "dark satanic mills that grind men's souls to dust." But this did not dissuade them from attempting to set up their own school for the children at Quarry Hill.

Many of the residents and visitors were well-educated intellectuals who brought their experience and expertise and, along with the Fiskes, developed their own curriculum. They established North Hollow School, which was accredited and surprisingly lasted about 12 years. It is recognized as a successful experiment and has been widely compared to Summerhill School in England.

Other educational opportunities were available at Quarry Hill. Many people came to the community to study painting with Barbara, whose artistic reputation and talent were well established. A home-study course called "Free the Kids! Program" offered educational material on the negative effects of spanking and violence on children. The course became a model for other alternative schools.

Free Love, Yoga, and Art

Since there was no dogma or fixed doctrine behind Quarry Hill, it's not surprising that life there was always in flux. With the continual arrival of friends and visitors, liaisons inevitably developed. Jealousy was discouraged; it was an emotion to free yourself from, a necessity when the accepted practice was for women to have primary, secondary, and tertiary lovers. Irving was not monogamous, while Barbara was the more devoted of the two. (They later divorced in the 1970s, and Irving died in 1990 at age 82. In 1989, Barbara married Dr. Donald Calhoun. He was a Quaker like herself, as well as a writer and sociology professor. He died on May 5, 2009.)

Quarry Hill residents practiced yoga and meditation and believed in the transformative nature of art. Hard drug use and alcohol were discouraged, as was piousness. Quarry Hill was not a religious place.

The Big Divorce

By the 1960s, the community had attracted a number of youths who were part of the back-to-the-land movement. Although the Fiskes owned the land, they welcomed their visitors to stay and, if they wanted, to build living accommodations on the property.

In the 1990s, the residential numbers reached a peak, when about 90 people lived there full-time in various structures built without an overall master plan. Creativity and freedom were encouraged; building codes seem to have been ignored. This laissez-faire approach worked as long as everybody got along, but it sowed the seeds for a situation that eventually disrupted the tranquility of Quarry Hill.

As the years went by, people who built on the property began to assume they had rights to the land. This, however, was not the case, which made selling their homes nearly impossible. Tension grew between the family and the "homesteaders," finally exploding in a lawsuit in the late 1990s, which Ladybelle refers to as "the big divorce."

It was an unfortunate outgrowth of a philosophy that was based on freedom from rules, where most agreements were oral and children reigned supreme. The lawsuit was

ultimately settled. Some of the people involved moved out, and today approximately five of the 20 or so buildings on the property are unoccupied.

Quarry Hill Today

The land is held in a family-owned corporation, Lyman Hall, Inc., and as Ladybelle reminded me it is, and has really always been, the family "business." Various people have been invited to rent rooms at a very low rate for as long as they choose, or build houses at their own discretion. Although the houses, and other personal property, remain in the hands of the tenants, the land is owned by the Fiske-Calhoun family, so Quarry Hill has never been a true commune in that regard.

Ladybelle Fiske McFarlin has become the spokesperson for Quarry Hill. When I asked her about her mother's legacy, she said it was her "belief in art as prayer. Art was her religion. She had a deep devotion to creativity." Ladybelle is the living proof of that legacy and carries the mantle of creativity in her own life on Quarry Hill. She and her husband, Brion McFarlin, manage the property where the original rules—no killing of any kind and no harming children—remain in effect. She has had a fascinating and, at times, difficult life and is working on a memoir.

Each year, usually in August, an all-night costume dance party is held at Quarry Hill. In the morning, anyone who is still awake can consume as many blueberry pancakes as they want, made from Brion McFarlin's secret recipe. This sounds like a much better time to visit Quarry Hill, so I've put it on my calendar, no four-wheel drive needed.