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A VISIT WITH LOUISA MAY ALCOTT : LIVING HISTORY LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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Video Description

Step into the world of Louisa May Alcott with this living history portrayal of the author by Jan Turnquist, character actor and Executive Director of the historic house museum Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts. Presented by the Cape Ann Museum to celebrate Women's History Month and as part of their *Saturday Showcase* series that combines performing arts with

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historical and cultural themes, this event features Louisa May Alcott as she might have appeared during her 1868 visit to Gloucester when she stayed at the Fairview Inn on Eastern Point. While providing background details on the groundbreaking novel *Little Women* as well as humorous anecdotes about her life, Turnquist captures the progressive spirit and unique personality of this fascinating literary icon.

Subject list

Louisa May Alcott	Orchard House
Henry David Thoreau	<i>Little Women</i>
Ralph Waldo Emerson	<i>Little Men</i>
Ellen Emerson	<i>Flower Fables</i>
A. M. Barnard	<i>Hospital Sketches</i>
Thomas Niles	Roberts Bros.
Abigail May Alcott Nieriker	Fruitlands
Jan Turnquist	Fairview Inn
Transcendentalism	<i>Saturday Showcase</i>
Women's History Month	Living history performance

Transcript

Courtney Richardson 00:00

...of Education and Public Programs here. I'd like to welcome you to Saturday Showcase. This is a wonderful program that's generously sponsored by the Goldhirsh Foundation, and it's designed to bring children and families in the rest of the community here for wonderful performing arts programs. Today we have a special treat. But before I introduce her, I would like to just do our membership plug. If you're not a member, we'd love for you to join us to be able to participate in a lot of the other events that we have. And also we have a survey which is conducted by seARTS, so if you have a second at the end of this performance, they are on the table outside and we'd love for you to fill those out. Also on the table outside if you didn't have a chance to see it, were some Louisa May Alcott artifacts and documents from our collection; we always like to make Cape Ann connections with everything that we do. Miss Alcott was here in 1868 staying at the Fair View Inn, so we actually have the guest book that she signed, and

that's on display. And we also have the plaster—we also have the plaster bust that was done of Louisa May Alcott and I believe the bronze sculpture is at the Orchard House, which is where she lived and wrote *Little Women*.

01:18

So, now for our introduction.

Welcome. You're about to meet Jan Turnquist, Executive Director of the Historic House Museum Orchard House, in Concord, Mass, where *Little Women* was written in 1868. Known as their resident Louisa May Alcott, Jan has portrayed Miss Alcott in public service announcements currently running nationally on the Fox TV network; several BBC productions including *Blue Peter*, Britain's longest running children's TV show, *Bookworm*, and their open university programs; as well as on PBS and for First Lady Laura Bush. And I don't know if some of you might have recently seen her on PBS, where she served as a consultant and a featured interviewee in the documentary that was aired this month, which is Women's History Month.

02:07

Jan's performance is a blend of stage drama and living history. In a living history portrayal, an actor becomes a character just as they do in the play. But unlike a play, the audience may interact with the character and ask questions or make comments. So you'll be able to do that with Jan—or with Louisa—and then after Louisa's performance, you'll be able to ask Jan questions as Director of the Orchard House. You do not need to be an expert on Alcott's time period, which was 1832 to 1888, in order to speak to her. Just be yourself, but remember, she will know nothing of this century or place. She will stay in character and only know of her time period. Miss Alcott will come in after having had a minor carriage accident and will be waiting for repair. She will be most grateful for your company.

02:57

Now if you will prepare to travel back in time to meet Louisa May Alcott.

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 03:12

...where I'm supposed to wait, but I fear I'm interrupting you.

Courtney Richardson: 03:15

Not at all, come right in.

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 03:17

Oh, these are the people who I'm supposed to meet? Oh my goodness, I didn't expect so many! Did you hear what happened to my carriage? A young man was rolling his hoop... he paid no attention and the hoop rolled in amongst the feet of the horses. The horses reared up, the wheel came off. And I'm stranded for a time, although I can't think of a better place to be stranded. And he said there were people who wanted to meet me—I thought he meant one or two. He said go in and wait. It will be, he thinks an hour or so before he gets back with that carriage. So I thought I'd go in. He said he thought that you'd heard of my book, *Little Women*.

Is that right? And you're smiling! Now this is heartening to an authoress. I can tell you some people have not been so happy. They think, "Jo March! She's too independent! Not proper! They don't know that I based her upon myself. And I didn't make her half bad enough.

04:27

But you know, I had just completed *Little Women*, Part One, in July of 1868, when I needed a rest. I was completely worn thin. And where do you think I wanted to come for a rest? Yes, indeed, right here. I have such memories of this place. It was heaven to leave my pen, and ink, and cares behind and breathe this wonderful air.

05:08

I came on August 5, and then on August 11, my sister and brother-in-law and two little nephews who call me Aunt Weedy—can't say Louisa—came to join me along with the Bartletts—very, very dear friends, the Bartletts—and we had a party at the Fairview. They had a 40 foot kitchen, in that hotel, and just a casual policy that anyone, any guest, could just wander in and any hour and start to make whatever you wanted. And it was really like having a wonderful private home that you just shared with a lot of friends. But that's how I felt it anyway. It was a wonderful, wonderful time. And I had no idea what would become of this book. I don't know if you know, some of you, you do know *Little Women*. You seem to be aware of it. I have to tell you, I never planned to write a book like that. When I was young, I loved making up stories. I've always loved that. I've always loved reading. I've loved hearing stories. I've loved acting them. But when I was young, everything I wrote was from my imagination—the wilder the better. I wrote little stories for children about fairies and elves and imps. Have some of you walked around Walden Pond in Concord? Some of you have. Was it before 1862? No? Ah.

06:55

Well, if it wasn't then, you would have had no chance to meet this wonderful friend to our family, Henry David Thoreau. Such a good friend. He was like a much older brother to me. Being 15 years older than I, and he would take my sisters, some friends, myself walking round the pond, you know, the vast woods, all around. And he knew where all the best places to find berries would be. Oh, we had such fun. He could identify any animal track. Make any bird call perfectly—the birds would answer. Oh, it was just a magical place with Henry in it. And for years and years, this was the relationship: my older brother, so to speak. And we lost him in 1862.

07:52

But the memories that he has left. I remember one time we were walking on one of those wonderful visits to the pond. And he stopped very suddenly. He was looking at something and I hurried over to see what it was. I thought, well, it must be some very interesting animal track or something unusual in nature. When I got there, I was really disappointed. There was no animal track—there was nothing of interest at all. There was a bit of a cobweb on a leaf. And you know what he said to me? He must have seen the look of disappointment on my face. He just got this

sort of twinkle in his eye the way an older brother would look at you if he was going to tease you, or an older cousin or something. He said, “What do you see?” I see a cobweb on a leaf.

08:49

And still with that twinkle, he just shook his head. “No, no, no. This is the handkerchief of a fairy.”

09:03

Now can you imagine the little beings washing out their fairy laundry, laying it to dry. It just opened up my imagination. And I could picture the little fairies and elves and imps playing in water droplets, sliding down leaves, wearing flowers for their hats. And I would make up stories after that about these imaginary little creatures all around us in the woods. Now, Ellen Emerson, some of you know Ellen's father, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

09:43

Ellen being six years younger than I am, loved when I would make up stories out loud as we would walk. Have any of you ever done this for a child? Have you just made up a story right off the top of your head, out loud, no writing involved? Several of you, yes. Have you ever noticed that the next day or the next week, sometime later, that child remembers it far better than you do? Has this happened? That's what was happening to me. Ellen loved these stories. And she, the next week or something, she'd want to hear it again or she'd remind me of something and I'd be trying to remember. Finally, I decided to write these stories down for Ellen so she'd have them. As best I could remember, I wrote them down and I sewed the pages together. So I made sort of a little book for her, took it down to the Emerson house. It's just down the road from our house in Concord. We live in Orchard House, and the Emerson's live in a house that they have named The Bush.

10:48

I've never quite figured out why. I know why Father wanted to name our place Orchard House. There are apple orchards all around. But The Bush, that has eluded me. I really should ask Mr. Emerson about, shouldn't I. Well, in any case, I took my little book down to the Emersons. And Ellen was so pleased and couldn't wait to show her father when he got home—who then brought the book down to show my father. They were both so excited, these gentlemen, that they thought I could publish this book. Now I had had short stories and poetry published in periodicals.

11:32

But a real book that could be sold at a booksellers. That, well that was very exciting to think about and you know, that's exactly what happened. That little volume that we called *Flower Tables*, became my very first published book. In 1854 it came out. The advanced copies were out just in time for Christmas. And all through my early years, I have to tell you, we used to joke that our finances should just simply be called the “All Costs Sinking Fund.” And I just got used to the fact that any birthday, any holiday, if we wanted any presents or any sort of exchange, we

would make them. Usually what I would come up with would be a play. I loved to create plays. And I would work for weeks. Sometimes we'd make costumes and properties and all sorts of things. And then we'd invite all the friends that you would be giving a gift to including, of course, your family members, to watch this magnificent production. That would be my gift, or sometimes a poem. Well, in 1854, I had something a little more substantial to put in some stockings, and especially my mother. For my mother, this book was to be a very special gift. And I still remember what I inscribed in that copy that I gave my mother for Christmas:

13:04

“Dearest mother, into your Christmas stocking, I place my firstborn—knowing that grandmothers are always kind.”

13:20

And it's so true. My mother has encouraged me. Do you know that we have heard on many an occasion from neighbors and well meaning advisors of all kinds, what we should not be doing. When I was very young, I used to love to run as fast as I could go, like the wind, and I would try to fly. I could fly the highest of all and I'd go running down the hill, thinking I was flying. And I almost was. Well, I remember neighbor ladies saying loudly to their little girls as I went flying by, “Little girls do not run! It is not ladylike!” Saying it loud enough for me to hear.

14:14

Physicians have said in no uncertain terms, “Writing is brain work. And brain work will destroy a woman's health. This a medical certainty. You will not allow your daughters to do brain work if you care about their health and well being.”

14:45

I am happy to tell you that my mother encouraged my writing when I was young, gave me a pen for my writing, when I desired to write my stories, with a little verse that she composed: “May this pen your muse inspire, when wrapped in pure poetic fire.”

15:07

My mother had a gift with words I think.

15:12

Father built me a desk of my own in my bed chamber at Orchard House. It was on that little desk—it looks more like a shelf—but it was on that little desk that I wrote page after page after page of *Little Women*.

15:30

I thought, “This will probably end up in somebody's trash heap.” I should explain a little more why I was so reluctant to write about my own life. I told you, I loved imaginary things like the fairies. I loved reading Shakespeare. The tragedies always seemed so thrilling—someone always died a horrible death. That was wonderful from my point of view. I used to excite suspicions of

our librarian in Concord when I would go in and ask for works on poisons and murder so I could write one of my theatricals that my sisters and I would put on. If you know *Little Women*, you know a bit about one of my favorites from my very young days. It was when Josephine played the role of Roderigo, who had a great sword and a mustache and thrilling boots that stole the show.

16:34

Now, I played that part of Roderigo. I wore pantalettes, which I found very comfortable. But I didn't want to seem too presumptuous, but I can't help noticing that there are a lot of dress reformers here wearing pantalettes!

16:57

You are ladies after my own heart. And you're not wearing these as costumes, you just wear these!

Audience Member: 17:03

Out and about.

Jan Turnquit/Louisa May Alcott: 17:06

I am heartened indeed! This is splendid. Well I [inaudible], and that set a few tongues wagging as it was. "Oh, those Alcott girls, they'll never find husbands!"

17:19

They thought we were just so improper.

17:25

I must tell you that to write these thrilling tales, my blood and thunder tales I call them, became a help to our family because, well, since you're dressed reporters, you must be forward thinking people. You haven't seemed shocked by anything I've said. I'll just go ahead and speak openly about something that I've kept a secret for a very long time.

17:48

I have a lot of thrilling stories published under a pen name. Published in those weeklies like *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* were *Flags of Our Union*.

18:03

I've had stories published like *Behind a Mask*, or *The Story of a Woman's Power*. Would you like to hear just a little bit of it? Well it was the story of Miss Jean Muir, your very lovely proper young lady of 17, hired by the Coventry's to be their governess. Oh, her French was perfect, and she played music beautifully. She just sort of glided through the room; she was just charming in every way.

18:38

But when alone, Miss Moore's conduct was decidedly peculiar. Her first act was to clench her hand and mutter between her teeth, "I'll not fail again. If there is power in a woman's wit and will."

19:02

She stood a moment, motionless, with an expression of fierce disdain on her face, and then she laughed, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha" and shrugged her shoulders with a true French shrug, saying, "I'll not fail again. This would be a good place for me to work in. But come, the curtain is down and I may be myself for a few hours—if actresses ever are themselves."

19:43

She then knelt before the one small trunk that held her worldly possessions. She removed a flask and poured a glass of some ardent cordial, which she enjoyed extremely.

20:10

"Merci, my friend you put heart and courage into me when nothing else will. But come. The curtain is down."

20:21

And she then removed the thick, abundant braids from her head, revealing her own scraggly locks. She wiped the pink from her cheeks and removed a few pearly teeth, and slipping out of her dress appeared herself indeed. A tired, worn, moody woman of thirty at least!

20:54

Shocking, isn't it? Oh, but I had fun with those thrilling tales. Now you won't reveal my secret because they wouldn't have published them if they had known a woman wrote them. But they provided a carpet for the parlor when we were cold or food for the table. The tragedy of the Coventrys became the blessing of the Alcotts.

21:26

And in *Little Women*, the March's—so much of what I wrote in *Little Women* is truly exactly our lives. Well, you may wonder if I had such an aversion, if I wanted to write these fantastical things all the time, how did I finally overcome my aversion to writing from reality? Well, do you recall in the beginning of *Little Women*, the setting is during the Civil War?

21:57

In *Little Women*, Father goes to war. In reality, I took our young years which were lived out before wartime and moved them into the war. We were young before the war. Father was too old to go and fight. In 1862, I wanted to go. I saw the boys standing in the center of our village, gathering on April the 19th of 1861. And I thought a small town is, is really like a large family in times like these. I must do something. I had watched my parents as part of the Underground Railroad, as charter members of the male and female abolitionist societies. I thought, it's my time to do something. I'd have gone to fight as a soldier if I could have. But I found out that I

could serve with Miss Dix—Dorothea Dix, some of you know of Miss Dix? She's a force to be reckoned with. I thought I could go as a nurse, but she required that one would be, her ladies would be 30. So I had to wait until I turned 30—November 29, 1862. And then I qualified. She had three requirements: you have to be 30, you had to be unmarried, and you had to be plain. Well, since I qualified in all three respects, I did apply and I was accepted. When I was there, I was assigned to the Union Hotel in Georgetown, just outside of Washington city.

23:45

I was amazed at what I saw. Nothing could have prepared me except my mother's wonderful advice, which was "Do the duty nearest you." So whatever came my way, I thought, what can I do? What is the thing closest to me that I could perhaps be helpful? And it was a transforming time for me. For the first time in my life, I didn't want to write imaginary things I wanted to write about these brave soldiers. And so I would go back up to my room after my duties were over, and I would just write and write and write. And I sent these pieces home just as letters to my family, but they knew that many people wanted to know. So many people had loved ones, and they wanted to know what is it really like in these hospitals? So they decided, with my permission, of course, to publish these in the newspaper. Well James Redpath saw them, and he thought he'd like to bring them all out together as a book. And so they were published as *Hospital Sketches*.

24:52

Now that is an adult book. I would not recommend that as a follow up to *Little Women*, but you will understand if you read that book, how perhaps you could say it was helpful in changing my style. Because it was my first reality writing. Everything in that book was based on the truth. I change certain things. For example, I didn't call myself Nurse Alcott, I was Nurse Tribulation Periwinkle. And I wanted to bring humor in as much as I could. Because you know, one thing we learned in that hospital, so desperate and very difficult... circumstance requires that you find something that you can smile about—something that you could laugh about. The doctors, the nurses, the patients we all did. We learned that the ones who couldn't do that couldn't survive. So that was always a piece of it for me. I would sometimes take two or three patients even and combine them into one character, because I wanted elements of this story and that story and the other story, and move along a little quicker. But the heart of everything I wrote there was true. And this is what led Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers to contact me and ask if I would write a realistic story about my childhood.

26:15

And I thought we were too odd and dull... who would want to read about my sisters?

26:24

I noticed there are some children here. Now I have to ask the children this specifically: Do any of you children have brothers and sisters? You do? I suppose I'll just ask her, but I'm guessing that I might know the answer and some of you might agree with this. If I said I want you to write a story about them, that's what would be your subject, what would you think?

26:52

Well, what I thought was, my sisters? Really it seems to be the common experience that if it's your own sibling, and you're fairly young and, well, that wouldn't be interesting. You feel that way too. I didn't want to put words in your mouth, especially with your siblings sitting all around you.

27:14

Well, I think it's a normal response. But I told you we had that "Allcott Sinking Funds" so I thought I might as well try. And I worked very hard. I would work sometimes for 18 hours straight. I ruined both my thumbs in this effort. I had to write very hard because I had impression paper underneath. And I was working very fast because we have the "Alcott Sinking Fund." So I was telling you that when Mr. Niles saw the first draft that I sent, he thought it was dull. What was the point? But he gave it to his niece and she and her friends pronounced it splendid, and wanted more. So Mr. Niles said, "Could you write a few more chapters?" I felt I was finished. Oh my goodness, I just pushed so hard. This is why I was so spent and needed to come here for some wonderful rest at the Fairview. And when we had the Bartletts and my sister and her husband, the brats and my little nephews, well, it was just a very important time. Now, if you're looking for my letters, about this time period, once in a while, some say "Did you get a letter from Louisa about her stay in Gl-?" You won't find any. I was ready to stop writing for a little while and just relax and take some time. And I must tell you, I didn't know when I was here staying in the blissful, serene, lovely air of Gloucester. I did not know whether *Little Women* would really go or not. To my amazement it has done rather well. And then Mr. Niles wanted Part Two immediately. So I had to go work again, which is why I had to come back to Gloucester again, as well. I've come back two more times. I also got a chance to travel to Europe. I had gone earlier, before I wrote *Little Women* I had made one trip as a companion to Alice Weld. Well, that was a bit of a trial to be honest, but my way was paid, so of course, I wanted to do it. But in 1870, I was able to go on my own and Alice Bartlett came with me. She was one of the people staying here in Gloucester. So I would say that we made a wonderful bond here, and it's a very conducive place for bonding with your good friends and family. Have you, some of you read *Little Women*? Some of you have, some of you have not. I'm curious, especially for those who—you've read it, very good—some of you who have not read it, I wonder if I gave you the first few lines if you'd tell me what you think of it. Would you like to hear the opening lines? Well if you were to open the first page this is what you would read.

30:15

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo lying on the rug. "Oh, it's so dreadful to be poor, oh," sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

30:37

"I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy with an injured sniff.

30:54

“We’ve, we’ve got Father and Mother and each other,” said Beth, contentedly from her corner. And the four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at these cheerful words, but darkened again when Jo said sadly, “Haven’t got Father... shall not have him for a long time.”

31:22

She didn't say perhaps never. But each silently thought it, remembering Father far away where the fighting was.

That's how it begins. Now you know something about the reality of our family situation. You now know Father didn't go. So you may have a suspicion about what happened to me as a nurse. Can you guess? That telegram that comes to Orchard House in *Little Women* about Father being near death, and Mother has to rush off on the train to try to be at his side.

32:07

Josephine goes to the barber and has her hair cut off—her one beauty—so that the money is there for Mother to go to Washington city. All of those were very real elements in our lives, but not because Father had gone, but because I became deathly ill. The telegram did come to Orchard House, but it was about me. It was Father who got on that train, and hoped to see me still alive. And then when I was still alive, I had typhus and pneumonia. And I had been dosed with heroic doses of calomel, which is mercurical. Now, in 1863, the Union Army doctors, I think all doctors, really thought that this was the best thing. It's an emetic, and if you have a dreadful disease that there's no real way to cure, well, if you can just try to remove the disease, shall we say, that might cure you.

33:12

My physician today tells me that some doctors are questioning whether it is helpful to ingest large quantities of mercury. So I had a lot of difficulty, but Father managed to get me on that train. I was so delirious with a very, very high fever. I did not know that I was on a train. I did not know it was Father. I didn't know anything. They got me into my bed, in Orchard House. And again, for quite some days, I had no idea where I was. I could remember later some of the very strange visions I was having. None of it really made any sense. And sometimes it was blended with a bit of reality and it all came together in the oddest way, and then to everyone's amazement, I came back to myself. I thought, well, I must get out of this bed and I was so weak from being ill for so long and being bedridden, I couldn't even get out of bed. My legs wouldn't go. I willed myself to get up and I couldn't. I then thought well, I'll try to make myself presentable in the bed and they brought me a looking glass. I was horrified at what I saw. I didn't recognize myself. I'd lost teeth, I lost hair. Not only was the hair falling out, because calomel will do that, it may be if you take the very, very high doses of it, you do lose hair. Not only was I losing it from that, but one of the doctors had advised my mother to cut it very short because that would bring down the fever.

34:51

So I was shocked. My hair was gone.

34:55

And so you see how I changed things and took the emotion of that. Josephine, very distraught over here being gone, but at the same time trying to be brave—the fate of the nation doesn't depend on it! But all of this is how I felt because I had seen young men lose so much more than their hair. I thought well, this is nothing. But I also felt absolutely horrible to have my hair gone. So all of that got put into it. But I did change some things. So you understand now, perhaps, how it is real, as far as from the heart. And the personalities when I described Josephine, yes, that was me only, not half bad enough. Meg the oldest one (“Oh, it's so dreadful to be poor,”), my sister Anna. And my sister Anna, as a little bit younger person was very much always trying to be—well, I think the oldest in every family tries to be a little bit more like adults. “Oh, you children.” But Anna is wonderful, don't mistake. And then Beth, now, in *Little Women* she speaks last, but she is actually second to the last age and she's very shy and tender. She says, “We have Father and Mother and each other.” That was the character of my sister, Elizabeth. She's the only one whose name I do not change in *Little Women* because sadly, we lost her 10 years before I wrote the book. So I wanted that name to be remembered. Every time someone reads *Little Women*, I feel a little bit of my sister goes out into the world to the benefit of everyone who reads that story. She, some people have said, she was too good for this world. Couldn't you have made her realistic? She's too good. And I tell them, but that's how she was. I don't understand it. It's opposite of me. She was my conscience. When I would be so hard on my dolls that they would lose all their limbs and I'd toss them into the rag bag, my sister Beth would fish the dolly out, wrap it up under the blankets that no one could see what the poor little invalid was missing, put her in a little dolly carriage to take her out for air.

37:36

Just opposite me. Oh, how I treasured that girl and I know I will see her again one day.

37:44

When my sister Anna, who loves to act as much as I do, would be preparing one of our scenes for charity—we would always love to put on scenes from Dickens. You know, Martin Chuzzlewit—well maybe you don't know that one. Martin Chuzzlewit is probably Mr. Dickens' least known work, but I think two of the funniest characters he ever created are in that book. Betsy Prigg and Sairey Gamp, two gnarled up, Cockney nurses. And Anna and I had so much fun portraying them—they weren't the kind of nurse that I tried to be during the war. I really cared about my patients, but Betsy and Sairey cared more about what they can pour into their tea. And they take snuff—the children might not know what snuff is, but it's a little powder, it's kept a little gold box usually, and you just make yourself sneeze with it. It's strictly for sneezing. That's, that's the whole purpose of it—makes you sneeze. And in the old days, the days of King George III and Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, everyone, all the gentlemen would use snuff. But by the time Mr. Dickens was writing, the only ones still using snuff were some of these very odd, old ladies—you know the ones that would just be a bit laughable and maybe have a few little extra chin hairs and, and they'd have their snuff. They—well that's Betsy and

Sairey. Oh, would you, would you like to hear the opening lines of, of what my sister and I would put on? Now keep in mind that we would be preparing these little plays around the time that Beth was so very ill. And when she got to be really, really bad I, I said to my mother, we're going to stop those plays. We'd go out and try to raise money for the Soldiers Aid Society or the dumb Animal Society or some such thing, and we did raise quite a bit of money this way. But I thought no, I, this is too frivolous. And my sister's so seriously ill and my mother said, "No. It's good for her to see you getting ready. It makes her smile. And it's good for you. You keep doing it." And I can tell you there were times when two sadder girls, the nanny and myself, never existed. We would go off to do one of these plays... but when we got to doing it, mother was right. We would forget for a little while, and it was splendid. All right, well I'll show you what it was like. You have to imagine that my sister is going to come in the room. And I would be Sairey Gamp, she would be Betsy Prigg, but she's late again. And you have to imagine, now, tea things all set out, broken and chipped—not nice at all. Which is in contrast to the way Betsy and Sairey act, they all want everyone to think they're fine ladies. But all their things are rather worn and disheveled. And imagine that I'm wearing a great, big, white lace cap with gray crepes so it's all frizzed out so it's like wild gray hair. I put a bonnet on top of that; I'd have layers of clothes so I'm bigger than I am. And with the tea table there—can you imagine all that? I will now become Bets—Sairey Gamp waiting for Betsy Prigg. I would take a little wax, get some soot from the fire, and mix it in so it's good and soft and black. Black out a tooth, so that paints an image, doesn't it? Alright, I am now Sairey Gamp waiting for Betsy.

42:17

Oh, Betsy Prigg, don't be long. Well I cannot bear to wait! You know, if we should part, we might be enemies in our hearts.

42:37

You ought to come properly Betsy. I've prepared wonderful food for ya. I don't know where she's been. Enemies, in our hearts.

42:53

Well, that's the opening line. You probably couldn't understand a word of it, could you? I didn't care about that. I just wanted to make people laugh! My sister and I would try to speak in the dialect of the time and oh, we'd have such fun. And it seemed as if we were having fun then the audience would have fun. Didn't much matter what we did. My sister would come in with a large carpet bag, she'd take out the biggest cucumber she could find, plop it down on the table, and say to the audience, "And no [??] wouldn't have a cowcumber." And that was the first insult because that would imply of course that she couldn't make the lovely little cucumber sandwiches, that she wasn't providing a proper tea. And I was telling you that the insults went back and forth. And ultimately, some of the food went flying. You can see perhaps why some people thought we weren't quite proper. But you know, we could sell tickets for one of these little productions for as much as 25 cents apiece. That would raise some funds for your charity. So it was worth it and then we'd come back and we tell Beth all the details of it. And mother was right, it made her smile. So I was telling you that, even though losing Beth was one of the

greatest tragedies of our lives, our memories are beautiful. And I think of her every day, and she gives me strength as well. The youngest one in *Little Women* is Amy. She's based on my sister Abigail May, who likes to go by her middle name May. And I must tell you right now that I didn't do her justice in *Little Women*, because how could I have known when I was writing it, the talent that this girl would develop!

44:59

She did the first drawings for the very first edition of *Little Women*. Oh dear, when the editor saw them, he was rather horrified. He let them go out with the very, very first printing, but that sold out so quickly. 5000 copies were gone in two months. They were bringing out another edition immediately. He said, "We have to have a new illustrator. This book is going to go, Louisa; it's going to be a success. We can't have those drawings. Her people look like frogs."

45:31

Well, you have to understand that she was taking art classes in Boston. She was teaching a good deal in Concord as well, and she was doing very nicely considering that the female art students were not allowed access to all that the male students were allowed to learn their craft. This is why ultimately I sent my sister to Europe where they were allowing the young ladies to study from live models. And to witness dissection and see how musculature exists in the body. It all helped her to the point where if you see, for example, her painting that she calls *La Nègresse*, you will be astonished if you compare that with the sketches that she put on her bedchamber wall in Orchard House. The children always love to see those sketches. "Look, mother, she can draw on the walls!" Well she did have permission, but the difference in those human faces you will understand when you look at those a little bit of how my drawings in the first edition of *Little Women* look, but she has blossomed into a wonderful, wonderful artist. So I am very proud of my family. And I'm amazed because I changed names, as say with Beth gone, I thought, well, that's all right. With the others, I wanted to keep it a secret.

47:01

Did you know that everyone has figured it out now that *Little Women* [inaudible over audience laughter].

They come up the walkway! They knock on the door, wanting my autograph and they'll say, "Oh, is this the house of the *Little Women*? Might we come in?" And they're halfway through the door.

47:18

They figured out that I not only wrote the book there, but I set the book there. And they want to come in and walk through the rooms because they'll feel like they're walking through the book. Well, I suppose that's true. But if you're trying to write another book, it's a little bit difficult. I must tell you, I get a little porcupined about this, because I can't get anything done. But you know, you're not like those people. You are very hospitable. You've taken me in. And I have no idea about this young man with my carriage. You know, it just occurred to me; I was wandering around looking for where I might wait. And I did find you here. I don't know if he'll

find me, I may have to go look for him soon. Does anyone know what time it is? Does anyone have the time? What time is it? Well, you know, he might be coming any time now. So perhaps before I have to go search for him, I will answer questions if you have any. Because you're so hospitable. I will tell you this is an exception.

48:26

But if you have a question, I would be happy to answer. Yes.

Audience Member 48:34

Could you tell us, Louisa May—Miss Alcott, about your stay at Fruitlands?

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 48:37

Well, when I was 10 years old, one of Father's ideas—I, this is a good question for me to explain because it will help you understand why, another reason why it was good for me to change things in *Little Women* a bit. My father as a teacher had ideas that you might say were a little bit unusual. Where other teachers would say, "You must beat the children every day. A boy's not bad, now he's about to be, just go ahead and beat him."

49:06

My father wouldn't beat the children. He thought that children learn better if they weren't constantly afraid of being struck. My father, oh dear, you might be shocked by this; although you do see very forward thinking. My father would allow questions in the classroom, and I know what some of you are thinking: this, this is a horrible idea. Children should be seen and not heard. They must be trained that way. They sit there silent, unless they're called upon to stand up, recite the lesson they have memorized, and then sit down.

49:42

If you allow a child to think up a question, there is no telling where that will lead.

49:50

But you know, my father thought that questions enhance the learning. And it didn't matter who objected. It didn't matter how many children were taken out of the classroom. How much income was therefore lost? Father wouldn't compromise his ideals. Ultimately, in 1842, Father had another idea after having visited Ham, England, where a school had been named in his honor. There were some English gentlemen who thought, "Mr. Alcott's ideas are brilliant." And they founded a school on his principles. And Mr. Emerson said, "You must go visit." When he went and visited, they were so thrilled to have Mr. Alcott there, that they actually began to talk about creating utopia together. And Mr. Lane, who had financial wherewithal to make this a reality, came back from this trip with my father, and they bought a property at Harvard, Massachusetts, which they named Fruitlands in the hope that one day, fruit would be abundant there. It wasn't yet, but in June of 1842, we moved. I was 10 years old. And for seven months, for seven months, we tried to establish utopia. The most important factor was no living thing would be exploited. No animals would be used to plow; the men would pull the plows

themselves. No cotton would be worn; this would encourage slave trade. No silk would be worn because that would be worm slaughter, and they put the children in the silk factories. No wall—that would deprive the sheep. I know some of you are wondering, what did you wear? I can tell you all that was left with linen and have you ever worn linen very much? It's hot and scratchy in the summer and it's cold in the winter... doesn't keep you very warm. It was a difficult, difficult seven months and at the end of those seven months, that was the end of that utopian experiment. And it nearly finished my father's hope. He was always a hoper, but he came back from it, never quite at the same level of optimism, but still a hoper again. But it was the most difficult time we ever had in our lives. Very difficult. Yes.

Audience Member 52:10

Was that part of Transcendentalism?

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 52:12

Oh yes, my father—that fruitlands was completely compatible with Transcendentalism. Some people say well, what exactly is Transcendentalism? And I have been told that if you have 10 transcendentalists in a room, you will have 10 definitions. One lady said, “Well, it's, it's a little vague.” But I can say from living with Father that my experience—and also our dear friend, Mr. Emerson, who, who talked about the Over-Soul, which you could say is another word for God, or you could just say it's, it's—you know, you could think however, you want to think, that each individual has their own direct connection with this Over-Soul, and you find that connection if you go up through nature. My father used to say, “Go up through nature to God.” Father would use the word “God.” Some would just say the Over-Soul. But this, to me, is part of Transcendentalism. And each individual can do their particular way of living as long as they're not hurting someone else. And no one must criticize; you don't have to follow any particular prescribed way. You can think for yourself. So it's very controversial among some.

Audience Member 53:30

Very progressive.

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 53:31

Well, that's a good word. If, I suppose if you want to use a word for my family, it's say progressive.

53:37

I have signed letters, yours for reforms, of all kinds, [inaudible over audience laughter]. Because we were involved with dress reform, diet reform, educational reform, votes for women—everything you can imagine. Yes.

Audience Member 53:53

I have a question about *Little Men*. Was that based on your life in any way?

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 53:56

In, yes, in some ways. I will tell you, *Little Men*, which I wrote almost immediately after *Little Women*, was more fictionalized, because here's a piece I must confess to you. I am not married. I had planned that Josephine would not be married. She would be a literary spinster as I am. And young ladies would, would understand that that marriage is wonderful. They'd see Meg with her dear John, and that is very much based on my real sister, Anna, the one who stayed here with me. And that man, John Pratt, whom she married, is very much the model for John Brooke. Really, very much. And Demi and Daisy in *Little Women* are modeled after my nephews. Well, I mean, I'm, not modeled after... my nephews weren't born yet, but my nephews have taken that on now. They're both so cute. Even the one who says, "Well, I'm Daisy." Anna really had two boys and in the book it's a twin boy and girl. But because my editor said that "the heroine must marry; it would spoil the book." He said... you know, part one, and then I was going to write part two, he said, "The letters are pouring in. The little girls want to know what becomes of *Little Women*? Who do they marry?" As if that's the end-and-be-all of a woman's life. And we went back and forth; he said, "Now really, Jo should marry Laurie. This would be perfect." And it would be perfect, and that's why I couldn't do it. Nothing in my life has been that way. So I decided to compromise. I wouldn't marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone, but I'd create a funny match for her.

55:41

And I would put all of my father's educational ideas, his progressive thinking, into Professor Bhaer. And I kept the last laugh.

55:52

So it became natural then that *Little Men* would be Plumfield, and that was... my father never inherited the big house and had a big school. I wish that had happened; that would have been wonderful.

56:02

So that part got to be a little more fictionalized because of that. But I did take elements from my life... like naughty Nan in *Little Men* is my girlhood. That was little Louisa. So it, but, and a lot of the antics and the pranks in *Little Men* are absolutely taken from my young life and from my friends, my young friends, so yeah.

This young lady.

Audience Member 56:33

Did you become a nurse on your 30th birthday?

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 56:35

Yes, that's when I could apply to go. Yes.

Yes.

Audience Member 56:39

Yes, you had mentioned Mr. Thoreau and Mr. Dickens, and also did you have any other influences? Miss Austen from over in England, and also have you heard of an obtuse young lady from Western Massachusetts? Her name is Emily Dickinson and she very lightly published it, but I don't know if you have read it or seen any of her work?

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 57:03

I have not. But I must tell you our dear friend, Mr. Higginson is a good friend not only to us, but to this family, the Dickinson family. So I do know the family and I know they have a lovely young lady. I've never met her, but I'm told she is just my age. And that she does like to write but I've never read anything that she's written. I'm told she's a bit reclusive.

Yes.

Audience Member 57:29

When you were writing *Little Women*, did you write one draft or several?

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 57:34

No, I'd just cross things out and kept going because I was determined to get it finished. I wrote that entire piece in about six—the first part—six and a half weeks. But sometimes I was writing for 18 hours at a time. Just stopping for a little run and then back writing and that's why of course [gestures to fingers].

Yes.

Audience Member 57:59

Did you really burn your sister's hair when you were making it curly?

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 58:02

Did I really burn my sister's hair? I did one time, not quite as badly as I say in *Little Women*. You know, sometimes you exaggerate a little of the story for the effect. But yes, I did burn my sister's hair trying to curl it. Yes, that's not a very good sister is it?

58:19

Well I'll take one last question. There was one over here. Yes.

Audience Member 58:23

Are you a moody person? I remember visiting at your house and they said there's a pillow that you would put into the living room and it would tell whether you were in a good or bad mood.

Jan Turnquist/Louisa May Alcott 58:37

Yeah, and that pillow appears in *Little Women* as well. And it's still in our parlor. It's, it's sort of the shape of a sausage, and when it sits upright, that means I'm in a fine mood. And when it's this way, it means stay away from Louisa. That's exactly true.

58:55

Now, I don't want you to catch me in a bad mood someday, but I do want to meet you again. And I have to be honest and tell you that I can be a little topsy turvy when it comes to trying to remember people; there are a lot of you and there's just one of me, and I might not recognize you if we meet again. I could look at you as if I've never seen you before.

59:16

And when I see people I don't recognize coming up the walkway as I was telling you, I can't—if I want to keep working, to run to the kitchen, I get an apron on and I take the flower canister and I put a little dirt on, and I hurry to the front door and I wait because I know they're gonna knock. And when they knock, [in a Scottish accent] “Oh, you're here to see Miss Alcott are you now? Well, I'm sorry to tell you Miss Alcott's not at home. Good day to you.”