

[Eleanor Mayo \(1920-1981\)](#)

A Woman of the Quietside

NOTE: Research notes created in May 2022. Please excuse the ephemeral nature of links that are beyond our control.

Childhood

Born December 27, 1920 in Everett, MA to [Fred Sidney Mayo](#) and [Lillian Mullins Mayo](#).

Eleanor had two brothers and a sister.

The family moved back to Southwest Harbor [when Eleanor was 1](#).

[Her childhood home](#) on Wesley Avenue in Southwest Harbor is still standing.

Photo: [Eleanor at 4 years of age](#)

She attended primary school ([age 7](#), [age 9](#)) in Southwest Harbor and was active in clubs, performances. etc., with numerous mentions in the local newspaper.

[Eleanor graduated in 1938](#):

Her senior year quote was:

One on another,
against the wall,
Pile up the books.

-"The Blackbird," poem by Alice Cary

As a high school student, she was active in the Debate Club, Current Events Club, and more. She wrote for the school paper and was its editor her senior year; she also edited the yearbook her senior year.

Adulthood

[Eleanor](#) attended Bryant and Stratton Business School for two years, and was home for the summer, 19 years old, when her former high school teacher Esther Trask introduced her sister Ruth Moore to Eleanor. Esther thought they'd get along, since they were both writers. Ruth lived in California now, but visited Maine for a month each summer. Ruth and Eleanor indeed hit it off.

Ruth asked Eleanor to go to California with her, and Eleanor said yes. Eleanor attended the University of California and studied Journalism.

According to the Southwest Harbor Public Library's [Eleanor Mayo biography](#), after studying journalism at the University of California, "she worked on a pear ranch, in a boat yard, in the office of the British Purchasing Commission during World War II, and with "The Reader's Digest."

Their relationship and circumstances obviously enabled their creative practices, as they both wrote numerous novels over the next couple decades.

Building a Life on MDI: [Photo of Eleanor and Ruth looking at plans](#)

In "[A Literary Refuge: Ruth Moore and Eleanor Mayo](#)," Sven Davison writes, "Ruth's first novel *The Weir* was published by William Morrow & Co. in 1943, and Eleanor's debut *Turn Home* was published by Morrow in 1945... The film rights to Ruth's second novel, *Spoonhandle*, were sold to Twentieth Century Fox, which turned the novel into the film "Deep Waters," released in 1948.

The sale of *Spoonhandle* to Hollywood gave the couple the financial means to realize their dream of moving back to Maine, and in 1947, Ruth and Eleanor purchased twenty-three acres of shorefront property in...Bass Harbor. With the help of Eleanor's father Fred Mayo, a cabinetmaker, they set about building their home at 19 Lighthouse Road in Bass Harbor."

Muriel Trask Davisson, in "[The House that Ruth and Eleanor Built](#)," (published in The Newsletter of the Tremont Historical Society in 2005), notes:

They built the house themselves with the guidance and help of Eleanor's father, a builder by trade. They hammered nails, sawed lumber, shingled and painted. Only tasks requiring specialized skills, such as plumbing and wiring, were done for them. The initial house was modest with a large room doubling as living and bedroom, a small kitchen and a bathroom. Closer to the road they also built a double garage with one side for their car and the other serving as a workshop. The story of their home building is as true to Maine as the novels they wrote.

At the end of World War II with lumber scarce and funds short, they scavenged much of the raw material that went into the house. For \$225 they bought an old CCC camp building on Eagle Lake that provided dry wood for timbers and flooring. The seasoned pine was so hard that it made driving nails like "pounding in angle worms" according to Eleanor.

They bought 100-year-old doors from a second-hand dealer in Lamoine who thought the doors may have come from the old Thompson house on Thompson's Island. Some joists and timbers came from two century-old houses being torn down. Some of the lumber came from beachcombing. Thresholds for the doors were fashioned from a new, two-by-eight, 20-footlong piece of Oregon spruce that Ruth surmised in an article she wrote, may have been lost from some ship's deck load. They dragged it a half mile across the island where they found it and boated it home in their skiff..

While they were building, the Fire of '47 raged on the east side of Mount Desert Island. Ruth wrote that they often paused to watch the smoke rising over the mountains and wondered what would happen if the wind shifted. They moved in on Thanksgiving Day in 1947. They had no electricity or plumbing and carried water from the pasture spring, but they were at last at home in the house they had built.

Eleanor Mayo Bibliography

Turn Home (1945)

A review in the Bar Harbor Times, September 3, 1945: "The new book by Eleanor R. Mayo of Southwest Harbor, "Turn Home" which was off the press last week, is receiving many pleasing words of commendation in the reviews. This is Miss Mayo's first book and her townspeople are most grateful with its reception. "Turn Home" deals with the Maine coast and its people and has fine descriptions of scenery as well as clear delineations of local character."

Loom of the Land (1946)

A review in the Bar Harbor Times, September 19, 1946, "The reviews of the book are pleasing and Southwest Harbor is proud of its young writer."

***Tarnished* (screenplay, 1950)** Based on her novel, *Turn Home*.

October Fire, (1951)

Swan's Harbor (1953)

"In her handling of these typical State of Maine elements, Miss Mayo shuns both the 'by heck, dew tell' method and the grin-and-bear-it, Down East "Tobacco Road" school. She tells her story with freshness and understanding. Her sense of scene is always accurate: her Down East landscape is a perfect backdrop for the action - wide reaches of harbor, sunbitten meadows that face the sea, a white, weathered house, aloof in its salty acre. The sights and sounds of Maine life are here, as well as its sturdy heartbeat. She can see this hard-bright, oddly friendly country and breathe its aroma too. ... Miss Mayo is fourth generation State of

Mainer and therefore looks upon scene and people without the quaintly tinted glasses of less permanently residing literati, of whom the state has had perhaps more than its fair share. There's no objection to outsiders trying their hands, but Eleanor Mayo... is just one more illustration of the claim that when better Maine stories are written, ...Mainers will write 'em". - New York Times, March 29, 1953 - review by Samuel T. Williamson

Forever Strangers (1958)

Family: Photos of Eleanor and Ruth: [1](#), [2](#).

“Leonard and Joy Mayo recount the weekly family meal that they shared with Moore and Mayo, ranging from picnics to dinners out at [Annabelle's Seawall Restaurant](#) in Manset. Esther Trask and her children, George ("Bud"), Philip, Muriel, Emily and Brian, recall the hootenannies, the fishing trips, and many family parties in which Moore and Mayo were centrally involved. Both families agree that Moore and Mayo were 'right for each other.' 'They seemed like friends'; 'Their relationship seemed perfectly normal'; 'They were a couple from the beginning'.

“And, indeed, the two women were well-suited to one another. If Moore could sometimes be 'abrupt' or impatient, Mayo often smoothed things over. If Moore liked privacy and solitude, Mayo was the one who arranged their social life. If Moore preferred to spend her energy writing, researching, and gardening, Mayo ran the house and kept up with their investments. Both women enjoyed working in the gardens. The big vegetable garden was Ruth's territory while Eleanor managed her English garden. The women pursued craft and art work. Mayo, for example, made some of the furniture in the Bass Harbor house. She was a skilled photographer, and she was an accomplished silversmith. Moore painted, and polished rocks, some of which became part of Mayo's jewelry.” - [“Homesick for that Place: Ruth Moore Writes About Maine” by Jennifer Craig Pixley](#)

Home and Gardens

Pictured here is a chest Eleanor made, and a bookcase she likely built with help from her father. Photos courtesy of Muriel Davisson.

“The house and its outlying buildings are a testament to the two's diverse interests: antique glass bottles, Native American artifacts, old maps, fossils, and geologic specimens clutter every available inch. Whole rooms are dedicated to displays of collections organized and labeled, forming a home museum. The house was also the focus of social gatherings with their literary friends. They maintained close friendships with other female couples along the Maine coast and literary, publishing-world friends would visit from New York in the summers. They did, however, treasure their privacy... They constructed a secluded shore-side camp that Ruth could escape to and write undisturbed. Soon enough they settled back, once again becoming enduring fixtures in the fabric of village life.” - Sven Davisson, “A Literary Refuge...”



Serving the Community

“At the annual town meeting held in March of 1950, Eleanor was elected ‘second selectman, assessor and overseer of the poor.’ She was the first woman ever elected to serve on Tremont’s Board of Selectmen. She continued to serve the town in one capacity or another until the late 1970s.” -Sven Davisson, “A Literary Refuge...”

Eleanor also conducted oral histories of some of Ruth’s family members; transcripts of two are part of the MDI Historical Society’s collection.

Eleanor and Ruth displayed their collections of semi-precious stones and rocks at local libraries, and gave presentations to local groups on the subject.

As hobbies and interests orbited their personalities, their writing remained at their core.

“Eleanor was a skilled editor and read Ruth’s manuscripts before anyone else; their creativity was mutually intertwined.” -Sven Davisson, “A Literary Refuge...”

Death

Eleanor was diagnosed with cancer in 1978 at the age of 58, and Ruth nursed her for three years until she passed away from a brain tumor (1981). Her death doesn’t seem to have been mentioned in the newspaper.

According to Sven Davisson, in letters written after Eleanor’s death, Ruth described herself as having "lost her guts."

Eleanor is buried in Mount Height Cemetery, Southwest Harbor, Maine.

How are all these photos available?

According to the Southwest Harbor Public Library, home to the Eleanor R. Mayo Collection, not only was Eleanor an accomplished “photographer herself, [she] collected photographs to illustrate a planned history of Tremont, but was unable to complete it before her death... Her collection is most valuable because...she visited everyone she knew in Southwest Harbor and Tremont and made negatives of every picture in every photograph album and collection she could find. The extensive collection of Mayo’s photographs, taken by her and others, exists as negatives, contact sheets and prints, all done in her darkroom....

“The Eleanor R. Mayo Collection of more than 714 photographs was given to the Southwest Harbor Public Library by Ruth Moore, probably about 1988. Eleanor traveled all over Tremont to borrow old photograph albums and copy their contents. Selections of about 200 prints from the Mayo Collection were shown in local exhibitions for over twenty years. It was not until archivists at the Southwest Harbor Public Library were cataloging their Collection of Photographs that they opened [a wooden box, carved by Eleanor](#), to find over 700 negatives. It was at that time that the scope of Eleanor’s accomplishment became obvious. She had saved, and assembled in one place, an invaluable record of the lives of the inhabitants of the "quiet side" of Mt. Desert Island.”

Since her death -

Sven Davisson edited a collection of Ruth and Eleanor’s short stories. *When Foley Craddock Tore Off My Grandfather’s Thumb: The Collected Stories of Ruth Moore and Eleanor Mayo* (Blackberry Press, 2004).

Reprints of Eleanor’s books published by Sven Davisson through Rebel Satori Press.

For Book Club discussion:

1952

Nationally

During the early years of the Cold War

Korean War

Eisenhower elected President

Elizabeth coronated

First contraceptive pill was developed

Dr. Jonas Salk developed the polio vaccine.

Other books published in 1952: *Old Man and the Sea*, by Ernest Hemingway; *East of Eden*, by John Steinbeck.

“The Quietside”: Southwest Harbor, Bass Harbor, etc.

The working waterfront

[Dragger](#)

[Fish wharf in the fog](#)

[Vinalhaven II at launch](#)

[Dragger “Hornet”](#)

[Draggers at Beal’s Wharf](#)

[Men with lobster traps](#)

[Ray Bunker’s boat “Rambler”](#)

[Sardine carrier in McKinley](#)

[Unloading herring in McKinley](#)

[Lobster cannery’s crew](#)

[Unloading fish from a dory](#)

[Hauling seine](#)

[Loading lobster traps](#)

Underwood Sardine Factory: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)

Elsewhere in Town...

Movie theaters

- [Park Theater](#) in Southwest Harbor, [Neptune Theater](#) in Bass Harbor (closed in 1951), The Criterion in Bar Harbor, etc.
- *Chebacco, Volume VII*, 2005: “[When Hollywood Came Downeast](#)” by William J. Baker

Balls - Pioneer’s Ball like the Wayback Ball ([1](#), [2](#)) and the Gay 90s Ball ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#))

Swan’s Harbor

CHARACTERS (a list of all major characters, but not all minor characters included.)

Steve Swan

Ann

Lizzie

Art

Minnie

Jennie Chick

Arthur

Patty

Will Holmes
Hank
Franklin Pierce
Jacky Gott
Ansel
Carl Benson

Joe Luccio
Kelsey
Hilda
Jasper
Martha Pierce
Peter the Cat

SETTINGS and mentions

Steve's home
Wharf/boatyard
Sardine factory
Benj. B. Swan Lobster Dealers

Eloise, Steve's boat
Sally & Joe
Ice house near the wharf
The Gut

SCENES of note

The Annual Dinner at Steve's House
Art and Minnie's Wedding Night
The Pioneers Ball
The Fire

RELATIONSHIPS

Steve & Ann
Steve & Lizzie
Steve & Minnie
Steve & Art
Steve & Arthur

Steve & the fishermen
Steve & Franklin
Art & Jennie Chick
Lizzie & Ann

MISC.

Steve's mention of seeing the young boys all playing together during the summer, and how their paths would inevitably diverge as they became teenagers (p. 30-31)