

NOTES FROM THE LAUNDRY LINE

By Lynne St. Clare Foster

Lena Bulluck (Bullock) Davis was born October 23, 1882, seventeen years after the close of the Civil War. She died on Christmas Day, 1967 at eighty-five, three years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

It was through the eye of a little girl raised in the north where I experienced the south. It is partially from this lens that I offer my recollection of my grandmother, Lena Bulluck (Bullock) Davis. It is also from reflection I re-examine her presence and experiences.

As I read my own mother's statement written in the 2002 catalogue of Lena's retrospective describing her experience growing up I notice a mature reflection through a daughter's eye. I hope to continue this dialogue in order to begin to weave a complete tapestry of a complex, woman with unlimited talents. In addition, with the benefit of forty-years as a working artist, I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to reflect and re-examine Lena's life, her experience, her presence, her work and her legacy.

Lena was born in the first generation after the civil war into a world very different from today, particularly for women. In every house, the kitchen, the heart of the home, was the center where conversation took place, always in the form of storytelling... and the laundry line its extension. Before cell phones, internet, or answering machines, the laundry line was the press room for local news. Dialogue between women hanging family laundry spoke of love, death, children, and neighborhood tales.

These tales were spun like good yarn and spooled into a family's history. Those who could—and did—would pull a story out of thin air, and out of little experiences, from a trip to buy groceries, something said in the church hall, or comments on the farm on a warm summers day. A story was not necessarily always true but always loosely based upon truth and sewn into the teller's tapestry.

Lena's most profound stories were told through her paintings. They spoke of every day family events which reflected a time directly after the end of the Civil War and the end of the period of reconstruction, referred to in the South as the period of redemption. This was also at the moment of the birth of the Jim Crow era when segregation began to flourish. Lena's stories were visual documents and perfectly captured the Zeitgeist of this time in American history.

As a Southern woman, Lena fell into the tradition of homemaker and mother. As instrumental force in the financial support the family, she would supplement their income by selling flowers and eggs out of her back yard. The beauty of nature was a large source of inspiration in her work and her talents for quilting and sewing provided a foundation from which she developed her visual language.

She could design a dress from scratch solely based on observation. As a young beauty in the 1930s and 40s, my mother dreamed of a highly fashionable wardrobe that the family could not

afford on a farmer's salary. In order to help satisfy Betsy's dreams, Lena would take her window shopping at Belk Tyler's, in the center of Rocky Mount. Betsy stood gazing at the clothes displayed in the store windows, longing for them to hang in her closet. Lena, immediately went home and recreated the dresses just from what she could observe from the window display. This routine became a tradition. My mother would eventually have a wardrobe as stylish as one could imagine!

I recall a story from my mother the story of a famous trip to Washington, DC. My grandfather has just purchased their first car. From Rocky Mount to Washington was a journey of 233 miles, far enough that the distance that might have given most people pause, particularly when their vehicle was incapable of travelling faster than 30 miles per hour. Lena was not deterred. Without hesitation, she insisted on packing the family for a road trip. Lena's love for adventure never waned.

My mother would speak about the challenges Lena faced as a "woman ahead of her time". Being ordinary was not a part of her personality.

She developed rheumatoid arthritis in 1941 and afterwards, she was much more restricted to her home. But even after arthritis left her disabled, set in her well-designed wheelchair, she found ways to engage in life even from her house.

She became physically isolated but her adventurous spirit, which continued to rein in her head, was expressed in her imagination. Housebound, she continued her travels in her imagination and through books, poetry and her art.

The fact that she had a sixth-grade education did not hold her back intellectually. I recall as an 11-year-old girl who myself struggled with math, I watched as she lay dying from lung cancer at age 85 was learning what was called at the time new math..... or algebra.

Like many strong Southern literary heroines, Lena overcame many odds in order to persevere, though her Baptist upbringing called for her to hold back and deny her deepest desires. The limitations she felt made Lena impatient and, at times, volatile. A person of uneasy temperament as are many artists, her social graces were often hijacked by her passion for her work and overridden by the frustrations generated by her role as a woman in her social circumstances.

My family never spent Christmas in the South but gifts were abundant and always arrived in the form of big packages filled with luscious sweets, cakes, pecans, toys and handmade crafts. It was tradition to send them from the US postal service depot where my grandfather and my cousin worked. Loyalty spanned generations.

I also recall letters written by grandma Lena to me, particularly the many written at Christmas, describing in great detail our southern traditions. Coconut cake, pumpkin pie, turkey, butter beans, okra, Brunswick Stew, and a New Year's Eve oyster stew were among the families' traditional eats. Stories about joyful sounds, jingle bells, pinecone wreaths and Christmas trees decorated with lights, reindeer and Santa, delighted my senses.

Her letters describing the families' holiday reminded me that she did not attend any of the celebrations. She was always left behind at home. Her letters were written with such vivid conviction of Christmas day that if one did not know it would be easy to believe she was present at the festivities, rather than imaginatively reconstructing the activities watching from her house. I will never know if it was her choice to remain home alone because of her disability, or because being alone at home allowed her to bask in her creative world and paint.

I lived for the stories of the south. The tales my mother would tell, some funny and others tragic were like a tapestry she wove from her own imagination, itself a product of the South. Hours on end were spent telling and retelling stories of family, love, war, adoration, feud, addiction and moral standards.

Even today, I recollect Lena's home through sound and smell. The clip clop of the wheels of Lena's chair as she rolled over the threshold between each room in the house. The distinct smell of pipe smoke mixed and the mustier smell of old folks who inhabited that space.

My grandparents were, in fact, quite competitive with each other. Both were celebrities of sort in town. My grandfather, Arthur St Clair Davis, was Rocky Mounts "Uncle Sam". But each time Lena would make an appearance as a painter in the newspaper or a gallery show or museum, Arthur would find himself marching in a parade as he did at President Truman's Inauguration in Washington DC. The same was true in reverse.

The racial segregation brought about through Jim Crow was apparent in Lena's paintings. The people of color, dressed in colorful clothes, were always working even on Easter Monday, while people of privilege enjoyed their leisure time.

It was easy to find candy hidden in all corners of the house. She spoiled all of her grandchildren each in simple ways and in ways that would satisfy her sweet tooth. She would hold our hand while sneaking us into the pantry offering pieces of almond joy to us.

As a young girl I wasn't made aware of what it meant to be a southern girl. I heard my grandparents talk of their hopes of me going to college in NC

Lena frightened me. A woman in a wheelchair who to me was bigger than life. I visited once or twice a year and each time, I was both afraid and excited to see her. She was a force and a presence.

Lena was a child of the south and eventually a woman of the south. But she was hardly a Southern belle to the mansion born. She was a farm girl, a country woman, but if there was any Scarlet in her, it was in Lena's grit, perseverance and determination in the face of crushing personal and social burdens.

It is this that makes her such an icon of the everyday, ordinary world of the South.