Babs Merritt

IMAGES AND WORDS OF ELIZABETH MERRITT
an oral history study

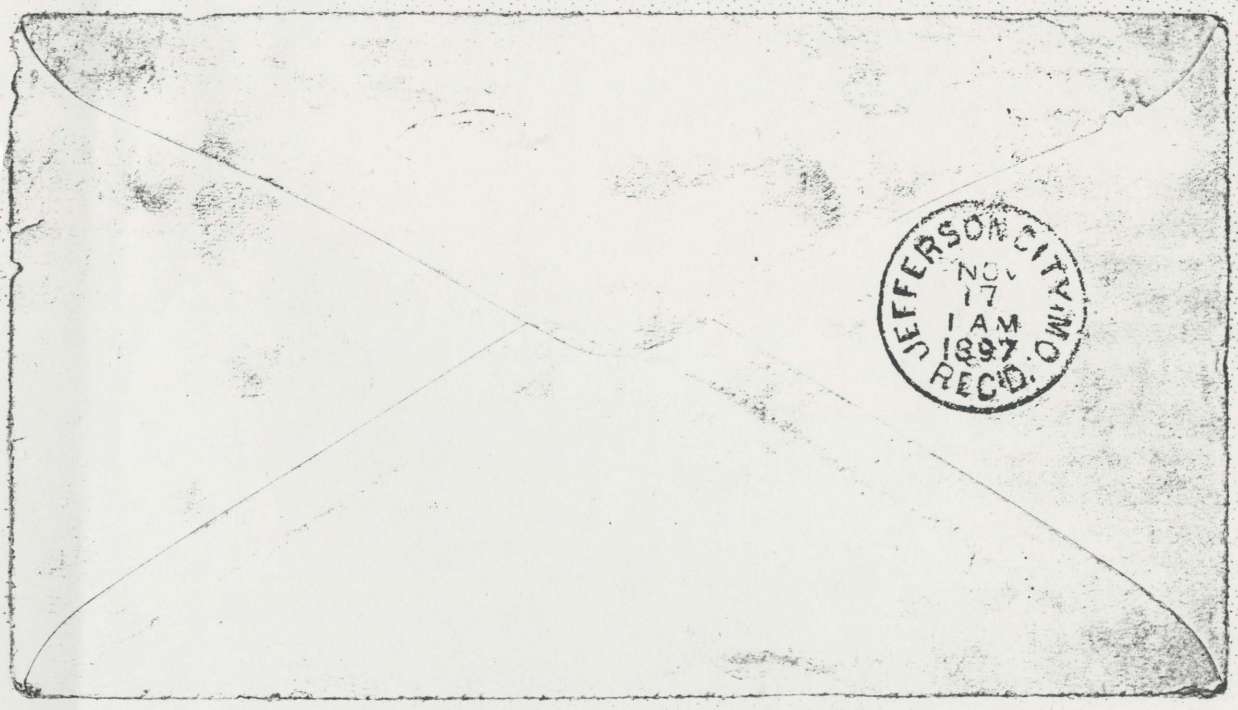
Mary Louise Merritt

2/3

For those who see
and hope
for those who don't.

After 5 days, return to
W. E. MERRITT,
GENERAL HARDWARE,
Lock Box 235,
MOUNT AIRY, N. C.

Mrs. C. Rockwell Key
Jefferson City
Missouri


JEFFERSON CITY, MO.
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OFFICE OF
W. E. MERRITT,
GENERAL HARDWARE.

Mount Airy, N. C., Nov 13 1897

My dear Mother

Mr M is trying his hand at putting the bab. to sleep so I will write to you tho you owe me lots of letters. The children had nothing more than colds and are about well again. I ordered me a velvet Velvet carpet for my front room fining my room. I have the carpet we got Mrs McNichols in my room & use it most of the time & keep the trash in there & can keep the front room a little respectable for company it makes the room so warm and nice Oscar had croup two nights but I think when the weather gets cold & settled he will not have it much Oscar is certainly a smart bright child takes the most interest in mills

and machinery of all kinds. Elizabeth is cute & smart you would be amused to hear her now - must do poddie (want go parlor) & nothing else will do her either. she can feed herself nicely with a spoon and wont let any one feed her at all any more. I sent you some bulbs several days ago. mine are not beginning to grow yet but hope to see the green sprout up any day. I wish you could see our comical baby she is not pretty but the cutest funniest baby I ever saw. she bothers Oscar so much he dont have any chance to play at all with his blocks building trains & sawmills - I send you a sample of some goods here is Smiths for 45 cts - 3-4 inches wide - I got a skirt off of it & it makes up pretty so if you need a dress I can send it & it is so light the postage will not amount to any thing hardly

OFFICE OF

W. E. MERRITT,

GENERAL HARDWARE.

Mount Airy, N. C., _____ 189—

My rose came tonight - I ordered a Pearl of the Garden - to bloom in the house & it is a nice big healthy rose I am very proud of it now if it will only bloom - Josephine Wade is at home again was away 3 days & her father went for her & they are going to send her away & get papers of divorce I understand - poor little girl I am sorry for her. I must go to bed now & write some time soon - Love to all -

Carrie.

After 5 days, return to
W. E. MERRITT,
GENERAL HARDWARE,
Lock Box 235,
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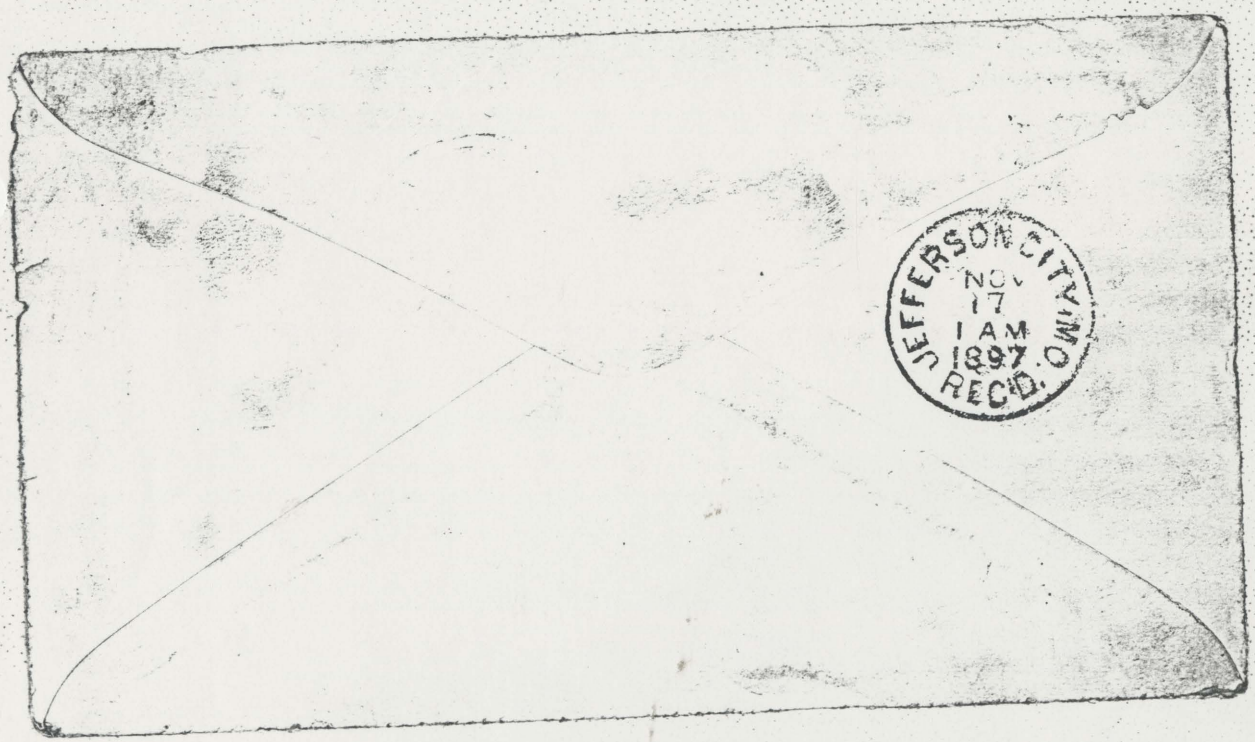
Mrs. C. Kochitzky
Jefferson City
Missouri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An Introduction to the Series:

History is one person's ideas about the past. Historical research often utilizes sources such as court records, diaries, census reports, or other written documents. Oral history, as defined by the Oral History Association, is "a method of gathering and preserving historical information in spoken form." This process of collecting history begins with conventional historical research and continues a step further by confronting a living source. The interview is the basic component of oral history. The following series of photographs and words are selections from an oral history study of my great-aunt, Elizabeth Merritt. My interest in oral history developed from an assignment given me in tenth grade to interview an old person, someone over sixty, about an event significant to his life and to the community. I talked with my great-aunt about her involvement with the flu epidemic of 1918. This past summer with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities I was able to spend time with her again. I researched local history and family records and I asked questions. She told stories. Mostly, we worked together reconstructing and recording her strongest memories. I have about 280 pages of verbatim transcripts from those interviews. From this bulk of material I have chosen passages which illuminate her early life in Mount Airy,

In June, 1901, the family moved into the house EB lives in now. She completed her secondary education in 1913 in Mount Airy and graduated from Greensboro College for Women in 1918. Later that year the flu epidemic struck Mount Airy. Elizabeth Merritt was twenty-two years old. In 1927 she received a Bachelor's degree in Library Science from Drexel Institute in Philadelphia. From 1927 to 1943 she did library work or was involved in progressive education, living almost fourteen years in New York City. In 1943 she was home for her parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. Her father was ill and had suffered a heart attack. She stayed to be with him and to help her mother. EB continued to live in her parents' house after her father died and gradually took over the household chores. Her mother lived to celebrate her ninetieth birthday. Currently EB lives in the Merritt house with her sister Katherine who joined her in July, 1980. This sketch is only the minimal biographical information necessary for a reader to be able to follow the selections of photographs and words.

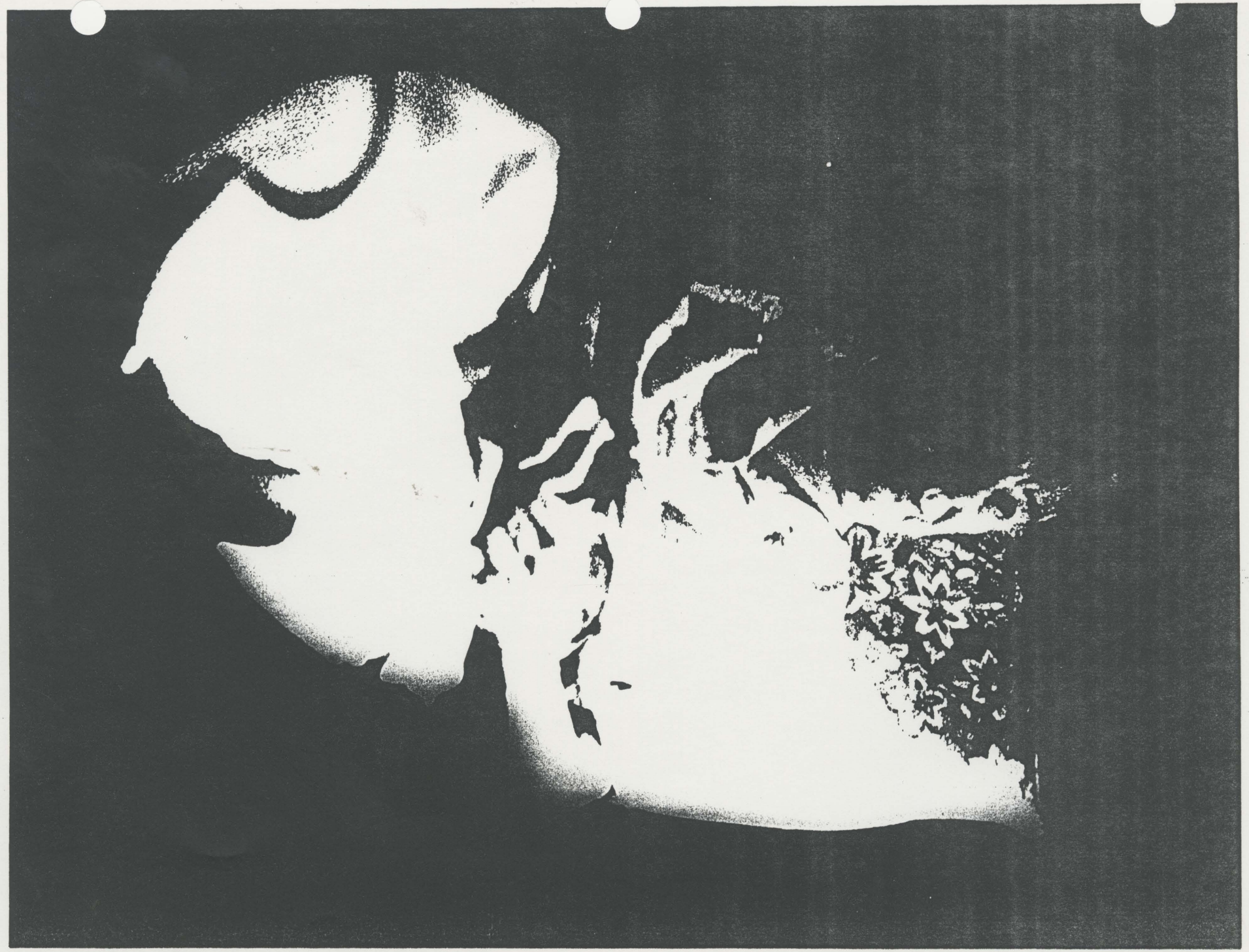
Mount Airy is located in piedmont North Carolina at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The town is in the northwest part of the state, five miles from the Virginia state line and three hundred miles from the Atlantic Ocean. The piedmont is an area broken into small farms by rolling hills and swift streams. This area was not settled by large plantation owners, but by independent small-farm landowners. An important stagecoach route crossed the mountains at

The following selections are from the interviews I conducted last summer. They are her words. The photographs are mostly EB, either as a young girl or in 1980. Others are her immediate family, her mother, her father, the house, or Mount Airy. The photographs I have selected are not intended merely to illustrate the passages, nor her recollections intended merely to supply details about the photographs. I am hoping that a more subtle interaction of the images in black and white, both words and pictures, will evoke a living sense of her history beyond the details.

M.L.M.

Claremont, California
May, 1981

We wore these thick cotton stockings. They wore out in the heels and toes and when they were worn out in the knees they had to be thrown away, but when they were worn out in the heels and toes they had to be darned and Mama would let me darn the stockings which were too badly worn out in the legs to keep and let me learn to darn that way and as soon as I could make a darn which was smooth enough for a child to wear then I could help darn the stockings.



I always felt like Grandma Kochtitzky taught me to read only because if I was reading and wanted to know something I would just ask her and she'd tell me. That was the way I learned to read, with Oscar's books and Oscar's help probably. If there were something that I wanted to know I would just take the book and ask Grandma. She'd always tell me. Mama was probably too busy drying the baby or feeding the baby or something.

Oscar + elizabeth

Of course we crossed the street when it was muddy on stepping stones. Did I ever tell you about the stepping stones? Well, there were no paved streets, no sidewalks, just a road and a little path on the edge of the road that pedestrians walked on and it was very muddy at times. Especially the road was muddy with the horses and wagons and things on it. At two places, I don't believe there were but two places, one down about where the Post Office is now and one right across the street in front of where Burke's Insurance Agency is now. There were big granite blocks, put, and some were dug and buried until they were stable and stepping stones and a long step, not too long because we could get across it. But it was placed so that the horse went between two of them and the wagons' wheels went between two of them. It was placed so you could drive a horse between two of the stones and the wagon wheels wouldn't, but the wagon wheels had hit them till they were kind of rounded on top and it was just really granite pieces that were sort of rounded on top and enough of them to get all the way across the street in the mud.

We children liked to give each other presents. One of the nicest birthday presents I ever remember getting was when I was about, I must have been nine or ten. Oscar climbed out on the roof. He fixed a little bag at the end of a fishing pole and got me two or three June apples that didn't fall and bust. See, they were ripe about the thirtieth of June and it was a great big tree. After they were ripe and fell off the tree they were always busted, but we ate them and enjoyed them, but these beautiful June apples that were just perfect. And he climbed out on the roof and took this long pole with a little sack on the end, wire around the edge and a little sack on the end of it, and got several that weren't broken. That I remember as the, just one of the nicest birthday presents anybody ever gave me.

We were all up and dressed and faces washed and hair combed and everything before breakfast. Everybody sat down to the table for every meal, three meals a day. There was none of this coming in munching in-between meals or coming in and getting what you want for breakfast and coming in your pajamas or what have you. But we were all up, were called, told to get up and get dressed, and when we were, most of the time when we were young and there were so many young children, there was a nurse to help us dress. A maid, a servant, who came in, well, they came at six-thirty or seven o'clock in the morning. Came, got the children, helped Mama get the children dressed and the cook, or Mama, got breakfast ready and it was put on the table and everybody sat in his own place and ate his meal.

Before we had vaccinations for typhoid fever there was a typhoid epidemic every summer in this area. A lot of people died of it every summer. Mama was very, very careful. We never had it but Mama was very careful about keeping us at home. Mama was always interested in trying to help people when they were sick or any other time, and if she knew of very poor people that had a case of typhoid fever in the family, I especially remember one summer when there was, I don't think, they probably had two cases in this small house over in the Junction area and every morning Mama would fill a half a gallon fruit jar full of either buttermilk or soup and another half gallon fruit jar full of cracked ice, because the people in, just didn't have any ice. We had it all the time but poor people just they were a lot poorer than you quite realize and they weren't used to it. And she'd put the fruit jar full of milk in one side of a big long flour sack over Old Nell's neck. I'd ride over to this house in the Junction area and call, I don't remember what her name was, but I would call her and she'd come out and take the sack off of Nell's neck and take it in and take those two fruit jars out and put the two that I had brought the day before, or two days before, into the sack. And after she had touched the sack and put the jars in, Mama warned me not to touch it because she was afraid of contamination. So when I got home she'd take that flour sack off and take the jars out and scald them and put the flour sack in the boiling water so that it was all scalded and sterilized for the next day's trip. And as long as there was anybody just really sick and they needed it, I'd go either every day or every other day.

Carrie K. Merritt

During the school year we had to get off to school before half past eight. The last bell rang at quarter to nine. The first bell rang at half past eight and we should be on our way before that because we had to walk all the way to Rockford School. It's almost a mile and if we didn't have more than fifteen minutes we had to run part of the way. And then at noon we had to come home for lunch, all the way from Rockford School. We had just one hour to get all the way home and eat our lunch and get all the way back again. So when we got home the dinner was almost always on the table. If Papa wasn't here, he was almost always here, but if he wasn't we children had to start because we had to go on and get, Mama didn't like to start a meal until he got here but sometimes we had to have just a beginning.

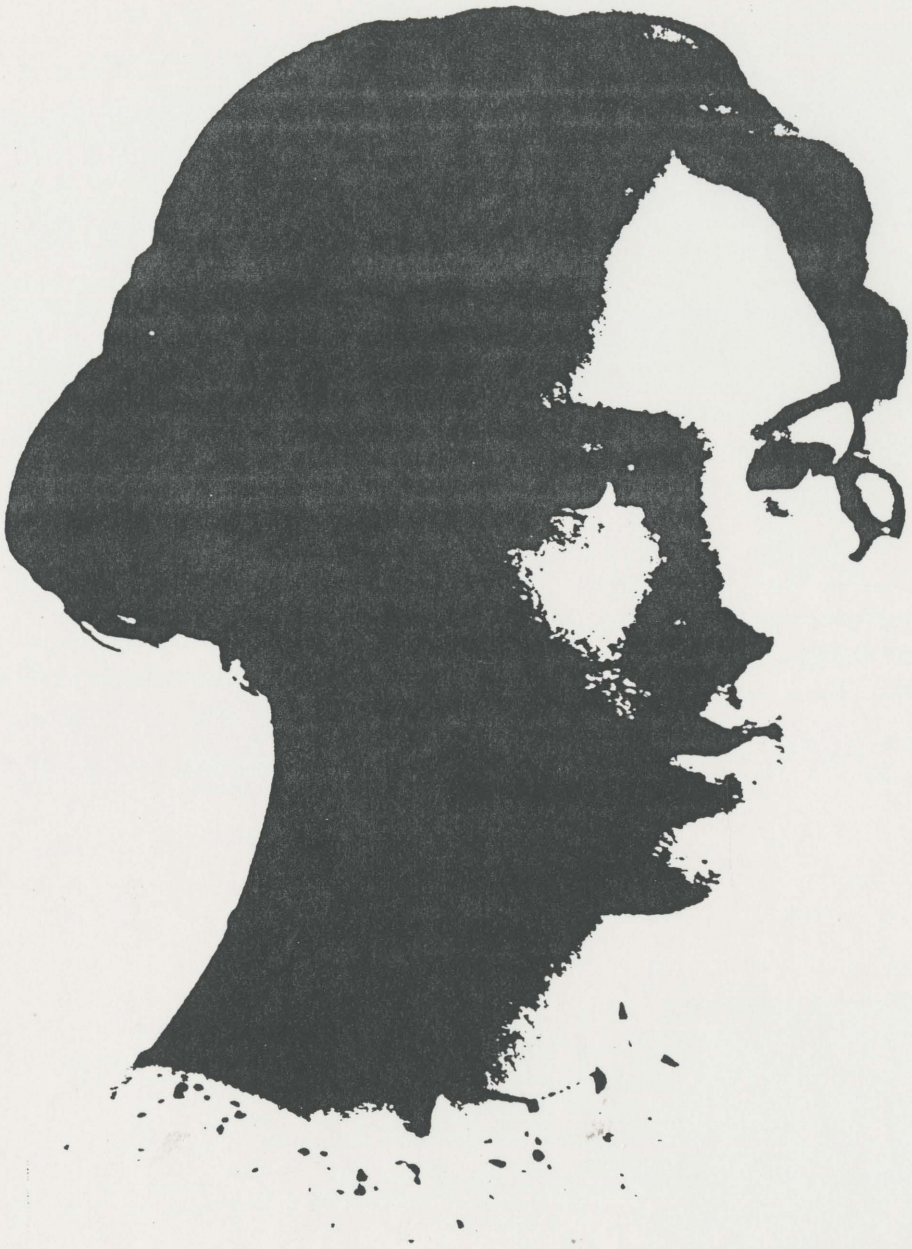
I remember kerosene lamps. And one, Grandma Kochtitzky had a very nice one that was her own in her room. It started, they exploded sometimes when the mechanism that you turned up the wick wasn't tight enough or something or the flame might get down in the container where the oil was. You know, it's a bowl thing and then, if it did, the lamp exploded. Grandma Kochtitzky saw hers beginning to explode and she raised the window and threw it out the window. Papa thought that was just a real act of heroism.

Old Nell never hurt any of us, never stepped on anybody, never let anybody fall off her back or anything. She was, but she was stubborn and had, when we were, I was eight or ten years old, Oscar, nine or eleven, whatever, you know, we wanted to put the bridle on her and ride. She would just hold her head up. She was in the pasture. She'd let us come around her, oh, yes. But she'd hold her head up til we couldn't reach it. We'd drive her over to the fence and climb up on the fence and she'd walk two steps away from that and go on eating. She didn't care how much you came around her and under her, any old way. She never stepped on anybody but she was, so Oscar figured out he'd take a running start and jump on her head while she had it down eating grass. Then she'd raise it up and he'd slide down her neck. And then she'd stand still and one of the other children would hand him the bridle. He'd climb back down to her head, put it on her.

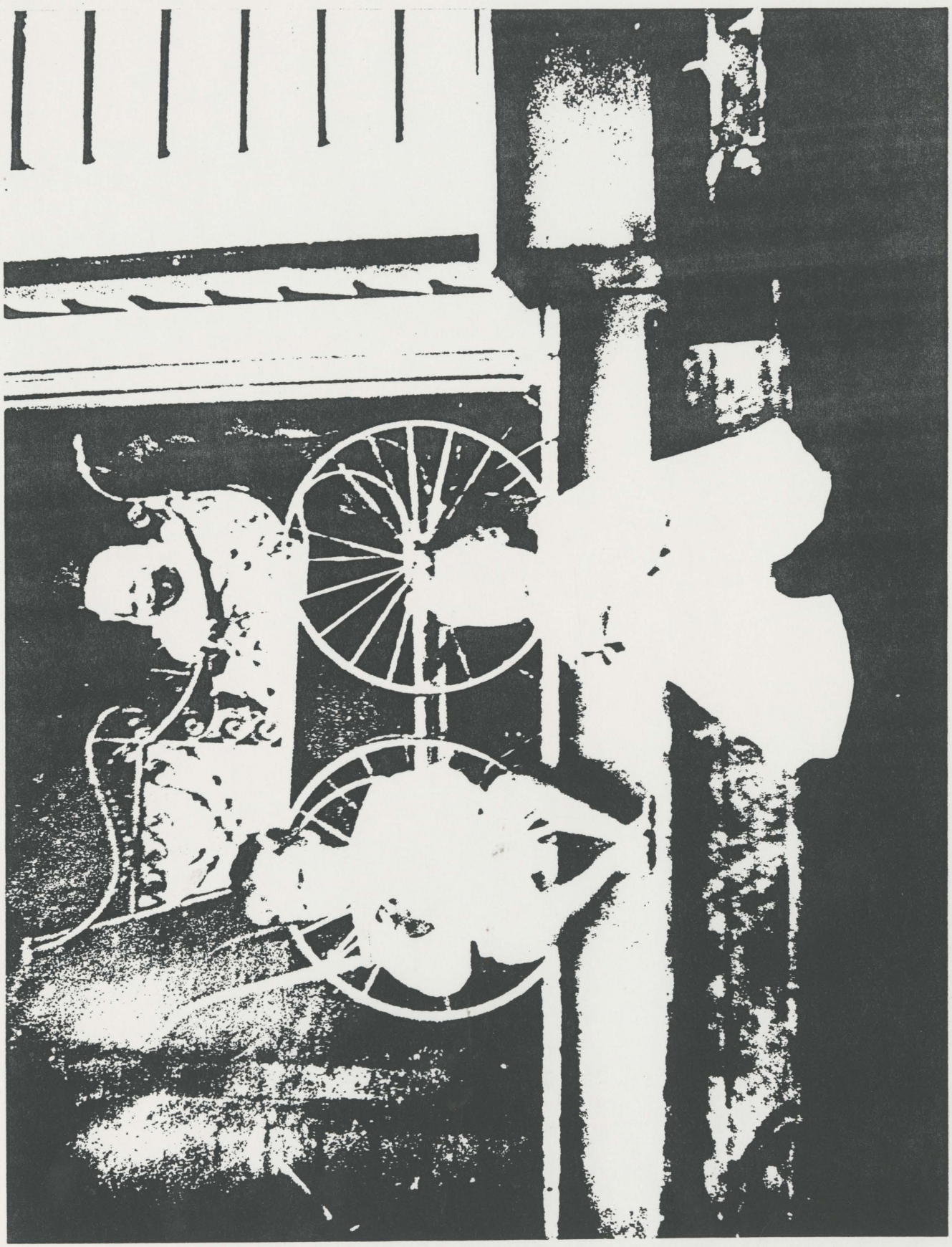
In nice weather on Sunday afternoons Uncle Cullen used to take us to walk in the woods. He knew all the plants and that's the reason all of us know a good deal about woods plants and where they grow, trilliums and that sort of thing because on Sunday afternoon he used to take us, not every Sunday, but we thought it was the most wonderful thing if he could take us to walk. We didn't have to go very far because it wasn't far to woods. I remember, you know up where the water tank used to be on Lebanon Hill? Well, all across the road from that was just woods, nobody living in it and it was used, down in there somewhere was used for what they called the bone yard and when a cow died or a horse died, they just dragged the whole thing up there and left it. It smelled, sometimes it smelled terrible and sometimes it didn't. But the most exotic plants would grow. He would find lots of interesting things and we children used to love to walk to the bone yard.

There were times when, well, I liked to read and if I was excluded from the games, I could read. I also loved to do whatever Mama was doing. I learned to sew and make buttonholes and darn stockings and all the cooking. I wanted to do whatever she was doing. I remember so well when she was making Katherine's underwear. Katherine must have been about four, so I was ten or eleven. Each pair of panties had to have six buttonholes in it to button it onto this undershirt. When I could make a buttonhole Mama would give me a scrap of cloth and let me try to make a buttonhole. As soon as my buttonholes were good enough she'd let me make them in Katherine's panties.

Every time Mama heard of some poor person having a baby, she would look around and find a piece of blanket or something that would help out to prepare for the new baby, the cooks and the help and people that really had very little. Well, Mama was so bent on giving away blankets that when I came home to live, I had to buy some new blankets for my bed. Because that was one thing she always was aware of, people being cold and she always would help if she could.



Mama, if there was going to be a baby, Mama would always give them a blanket or part of an old blanket and she'd save old soft sheets, old worn-out sheets and things and rags that people needed. They didn't have that sort of thing at all to keep the baby clean and that sort of thing. Mama was always, she'd always give them just practically, well, there was one story about Mama, Mama and Papa were poor as they could be when they were first married and I was a baby that was growing fast and a woman came by with a baby that didn't have a dress and Mama put me to bed til she finished the dress she was working on for me and gave, took my dress off and gave it to the woman that needed it.



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Old Nell was just perfectly trustworthy. I used to ride her and we'd go and I wanted to go further, Nell decided that's as far as she was going to take me. She went round and round the middle of the road. I pulled the reins. I had a little apple tree switch and I'd beat her with that and it didn't make any difference. Kick her, beat her, pull the reins and she was coming home, she was coming home. We'd turn round and round til I just finally gave up, let her come on home. She'd go again if I wanted her to but she wasn't going any further than that. It was almost as if she knew Mama was trusting her with taking care of the children. She decided that was as far as she was going to go, bring me back home. We'd start out again and she'd go again, but she wouldn't go, or sometimes she'd go again. I mean, if she thought that was enough, that was enough.

The buckwheat cakes that we had every single morning in the winter time was made with yeast. When she first started it she put some yeast and water and buckwheat flour and that's all, in a jar and stir it up and let it stand overnight in a warm place. We used to keep it on the hearth in the living room where there had been a fire all day. Then the next morning it would be all bubbly and stir the batter up and pour out some of it. She poured out as much as she thought she'd need for breakfast that morning, put a little black molasses in it to make it brown good, put some soda mixed up in warm water to keep it from tasting sour, and that's, I know that's, maybe a little salt, I doubt it though, anyway that's all that was in it, buckwheat flour and yeast and a little black molasses to make it brown better and to give it a little flavor. The soda, it makes it rise again. You had to be sure that your batter that you put the yeast in was thick enough. It wasn't just thin; it was thick enough, about as thick as the batter had to be to fry before it rose with the yeast and we had, and they served it with oodles of butter, lots of it, just floating in butter and syrup made with brown sugar and water, just cooked brown sugar syrup.

The flu epidemic is a good example of how the whole town and with no particular organization rallied to the support of everybody else. The first case of flu that I knew anything about was my mother. She got flu when the fair came here, early in October. We didn't know what it was. But she was quite sick with it and she was a very healthy person. She wasn't sick often. It took her so long to get over it. She just couldn't get back on her feet again. But that flu was bad.

I was teaching first grade up at North Main. It was my first year out of college. They, finally, there were so few children coming to school that the school board closed schools. We were closed for about three weeks, I believe, because there were so many children sick, and teachers. We couldn't teach school.

In the emergency hospital we had one or two deaths every day. It was really bad. It was in the old Commercial Club Rooms. There was the regular lounge, a big ballroom and a couple of small rooms that they used for card rooms or something like that. They had parties up there and also they used it as a club. It was just called the Commercial Club Rooms. We had cots in the ballroom, no possible chance of any curtains or any partitions or anything else. When a patient was really so sick we tried to put them in one of the little card rooms. They usually died in one of the little card rooms.

Mr. Bales was the Presbyterian preacher and he borrowed a truck which he used as an ambulance and brought people in. I remember that he brought, the reason that I think about Mr. Bales is because I was getting ready to go home one night and very tired and Mrs. Powell asked me if I could, said Mr. Bales was bringing in a man and his wife and two children and she asked me if I could bathe the children and put them to bed. Because they were all in bad shape when they were brought in. There was a little boy and little girl; they were six or eight years old, not babies. I got their dirty clothes off them and bathed them and got them into cots and as I was turning around to go there was a puddle under each cot. I had to go back and take care of that. They were canvas cots, you see.

Mrs. Powell in charge would know where you were worse needed. I know one morning she said, she told me to get somebody to go with me and go out in this Junction neighborhood. Irene Thompson went with me. We went there. Irene was a little older than I, but I was just out of college. We, there were several houses we went to, there with the children and mother and father all in the bed, just, and the mother would just get up and do what she could unless she was too awfully sick. We went into one house and the man and his wife were both in bed, the same bed, and she was groaning. She was very pregnant. She said her baby was coming. There was a real scare about babies being born during the flu epidemic. It must have been just an old wives' tale, I don't know, but everybody thought they were both going to die if the baby came during flu epidemic. So Irene and I both were quite young. Irene went to the kitchen and made a fire in the cookstove and put on a kettle of water. She said, "I don't know what they do with a kettle of water but everybody has to have a kettle of boiling water when a baby comes." So she went and put on a kettle of water to boil and I went nextdoor to see if, I knew some of the people there because a lot of the children in my grade in school came from that area, the Junction area. And I knew the people, the woman that lived nextdoor. I went in and I asked her to come in and take care of this patient and she said, "No, sir." She was scared of the flu and she wasn't coming in, she couldn't do it and she also said, "You'd better hurry, when she has a baby she has them right now." About that time I saw the Baptist preacher on the street, on the road. He was scared to death of flu and wouldn't go near anybody but he'd walk up and down the road asking. So I told him the situation and I can see him now. He was bandy-legged and he was going up that hill just running just as hard as he could tear to get a doctor. You see, we had no telephone in that area. So he was going to the first telephone to see if he could get a doctor to this woman. Well, the baby didn't come that night. Anyway, she just had flu, she didn't have labor pains.

But during the flu epidemic we had a baby. The people lived down in the Factory district, a man and his wife, both had flu. They had a baby that was just a matter of weeks old, he was just six weeks old. They had lost one baby, a two-year-old, with flu within the last week or so. They were both sick and this baby was not having any attention except from a neighbor woman who had a baby, coming in and nursing him when she could but he was just being in bad shape. I remember at six o'clock in the morning, I don't know who told the policeman to come to me here, but they came here and I answered the door. I guess they were supposed to be coming to Mama but Mama was sick and I was taking over so I went with the policeman and got the baby and brought it up here. They came to the front door before light in the morning to get somebody to take care of that baby. There wasn't any way to take care of it but to take it home with you. So I went down and got the baby and brought it up here. Bathed it and dressed it. The doctor, I don't know which doctor it was, but the doctor, I guess the doctor who was attending, maybe the doctor's the one that sent it, sent him up here, I don't really know, but anyway he had said to feed the baby Mellon's food which was a patent baby food at the time. So we got Mellon's food and fixed the baby the formula and we got him fixed up but he was pretty weak and pretty sick. Mama and Katherine took care of the baby while I nursed. I took care of the baby at night and nursed all day. Or went out and nursed. But I remember about the second night we had the baby, Mrs. Fulton who lived nextdoor, Mary Fulton's mother, came over here and she said, "How's your baby? What are you feeding your baby?" and I said, "Mellon's food." She said, "That's what killed my baby." So I went to bed that night with a sick baby with Mrs. Fulton saying that. In fact I didn't go to bed but, I mean, but I slept some, I guess. But the baby was upset because it hadn't had enough to eat nor regularity nor anything and so he cried a lot. At night I took him in the upstairs front room where Mama and Papa couldn't hear him cry and had a fire in that fireplace up there. Cold, but I kept a fire and that way warmed his bottle and took care of him at night.

Those little windows that I used to like to look out of in the attic, lie on my stomach and look out the windows to the mountains and then when the Sargents built their house we couldn't see it from anywhere else and I used to go up there and lie on my stomach and be so mad that the Sargents were building a house where I couldn't see the mountains.

We had a flower garden out here under, on the north side of the house where we grew all sorts of wildflowers. Well, we had an icebox. We didn't have an electric refrigerator, of course. We had an icebox in the dining room and instead of putting a pan under it to catch the drip, they had bored a hole in the floor and put a pipe and let it drip out into the yard which was such a good idea. It also kept this side of the house moist and cool and wildflowers would grow there and we had, well, we never could make trailing arbutus grow. We used to try to bring in the dirt from the woods and we did everything to try to get trailing arbutus but we never could get it to grow in town. But we got jack-in-the-pulpits and trilliums and maidenhair ferns and all that sort of thing. We had a good flower garden from the north, from the dining room on down along here of wildflowers, the ones that liked the shade and the cool.

We had places in the attic that we played. I had one alcove in the attic was where I had my doll furniture. It wasn't a doll house. It was big enough furniture for big dolls, beds and things and little chairs and stuff that I had and dressed them. That was my place until Oscar took it over to put spools and things on the wall making, well, he had a little steam engine, real, ran with alcohol and made the wheels turn and he put these spools on a nail, long enough nail that they'd stay on it with a band like, a string like a belt between and he'd make this little engine turn a whole wall full of spools. Some long strings that turned it slowly and short strings that turned it fast and then a whole wall up there was, well, it wasn't as big a wall as that right there, a space and he, but turning it with a crank with his hand was more, worked better than the little steam engine though he could make the steam engine do some. He could make the steam engine whistle as well as turn the things.

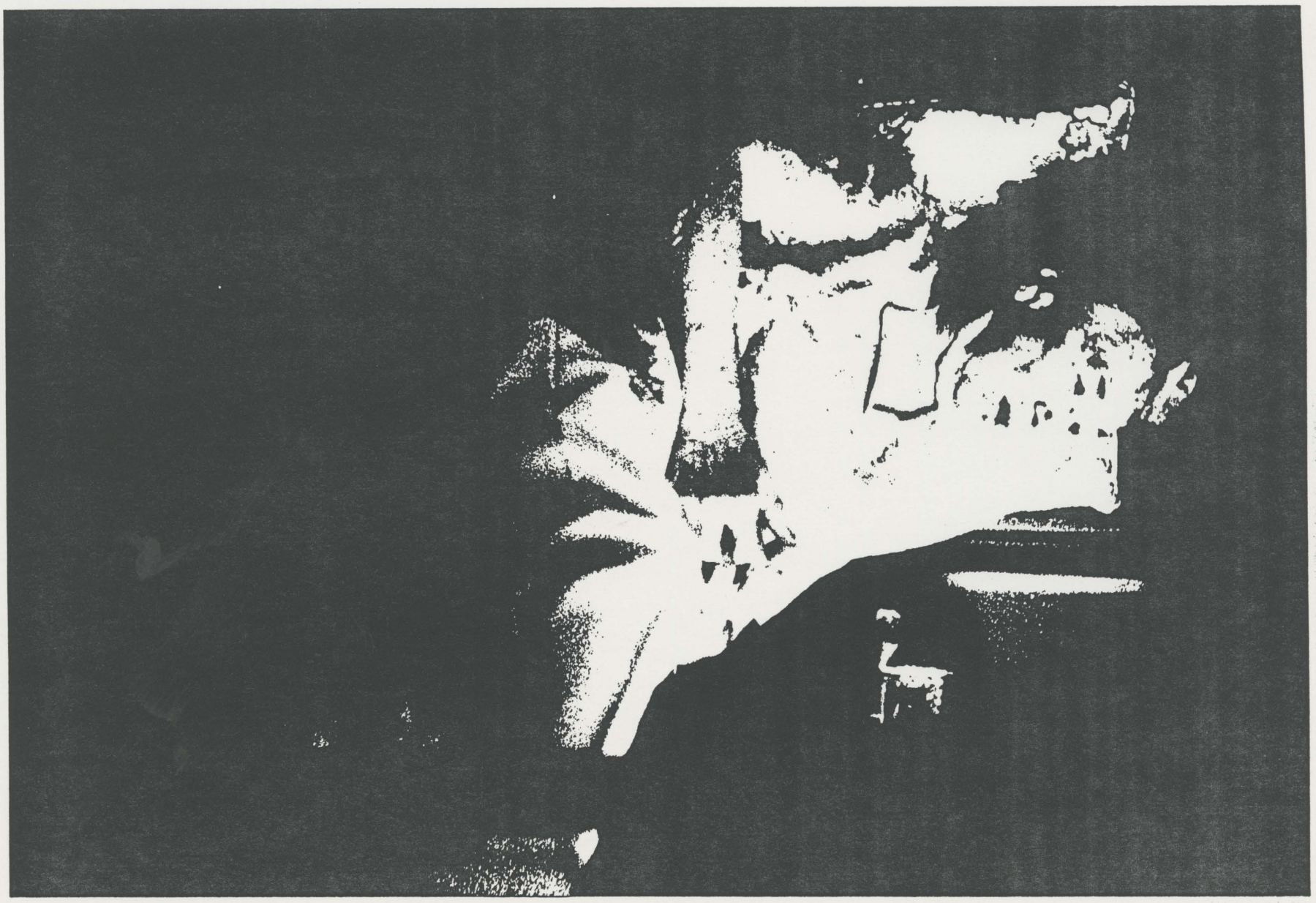
One time we had an old man working on the farm and he was afraid of snakes. He called them serpents and he came, every time he came to work on the farm in the corn or whatever he had his legs wrapped with gunney sacks and tied and gunney sacks around and tied right up to his knees to keep him from getting serpent bit. So the boys killed a snake and he had his lunch bucket in a vacant tenant house on the farm. There were, a little three-room house that nobody was living in at the time and he put his lunch bucket in the fireplace. There was no fire, of course, but he thought that was the coolest place because there's a draft or something, that's supposed to be the cold place in the house and they took this dead serpent and put it around his lunch basket. He was perfectly furious and started to leave, I mean he was going home <u>now</u>. And he wouldn't touch that lunch for anything and I remember so well that Papa persuaded him to stay on and I think he was ready to give the boys a good sound thrashing but he didn't, I know. Anyhow, I remember that we children took him his dinner, all of us. One had a bucket of buttermilk, one had a piece of pie, a great big piece of pie, one had a plate of beans and potatoes and what have you. And I remember walking down there sort of a parade of us to take him his lunch because the boys had played that awful trick on him.

We had foot races. We'd make a place and race. I used to try to instigate a foot race after every ball game because nobody wanted me on their side to play ball. I couldn't handle a ball, couldn't catch it, couldn't throw it, couldn't even pick it up. But I could win a foot race just, girls are at some disadvantage because it was Robert and Jeffrey Smith and Oscar and William, my two brothers, and me for the most part. There wasn't another girl my age anywhere around. The Thompsons nextdoor, and Irene was two years older and Mary was two years younger. They didn't like to play any of the games we played anyway. If they were over here they liked to play school and Irene had always to be the teacher, with no children, just imaginary, you know, teacher. It used to bore me to death, this playing school. There wasn't anything to it but, and Mary didn't care what she played, she wasn't too bright. When Irene and Mary were over here we played in the house. We played dolls some but they liked paper dolls and I didn't care anything about paper dolls. So we weren't too congenial, but the boys. We had games that I liked except that I wasn't very good at them.

I didn't start to school until I was seven and reading anything I wanted to read. But I had no phonics so I had to go to school, to stay in the first grade to get phonics and it seemed to me the silliest thing in the world. Who couldn't say, "ku-ah-teh, cat" without anything. I just, it was just so silly. But I didn't write well. My writing was very poor and cramped and as for the arithmetic, that was just stupid. Numbers, number work they called it, so, but, so I stayed a year in the first grade in order to learn "ku-ah-teh, cat" and it seemed, I remember it was so silly so I skipped the second grade and went on into the third grade.


HARDWARE
R.T. JOYCE
W W BUR

Grandma wore bonnets like Queen Victoria bonnets with the little velvet ribbon that tied under one ear, grosgrain ribbon in the summer and velvet ribbon in the winter and those funny little bonnets like Queen Victoria. There're still some in the attic because she bought a new one every spring and every fall. She never liked the new one. She always wore the one she had gotten used to and left that one in a box until she'd get used to that and wear it the next season.



Even now if I see a newspaper blowing on the street I want somebody to pick it up right away, it might scare the horses. I react every time I see a paper of any kind big enough to flutter on Main Srteet and sometimes a newspaper or big piece of wrapping paper or piece of plastic or something like that. Somebody ought to get that up because it might scare a horse. A runaway horse was one of the things that we were afraid of.

If we were fussing when we were playing games and things, somebody would say, "You're cheating" or "That ain't so" or what have you, you know, fussing at each other. Mama would come in and she didn't try to find out whose fault it was, it didn't matter. You were all, "You were all fussing, so everybody sit in a chair and don't say a word." We had to sit. "Each one in a chair and don't say a word." In about three minutes we were holding the chairs on our bottoms and walking around. Weren't saying anything, "MMMMMmmmmm" and that's all she wanted, was to stop the fuss. She didn't care what we did then, just to get you in a good humour. She wouldn't put up with fussing.

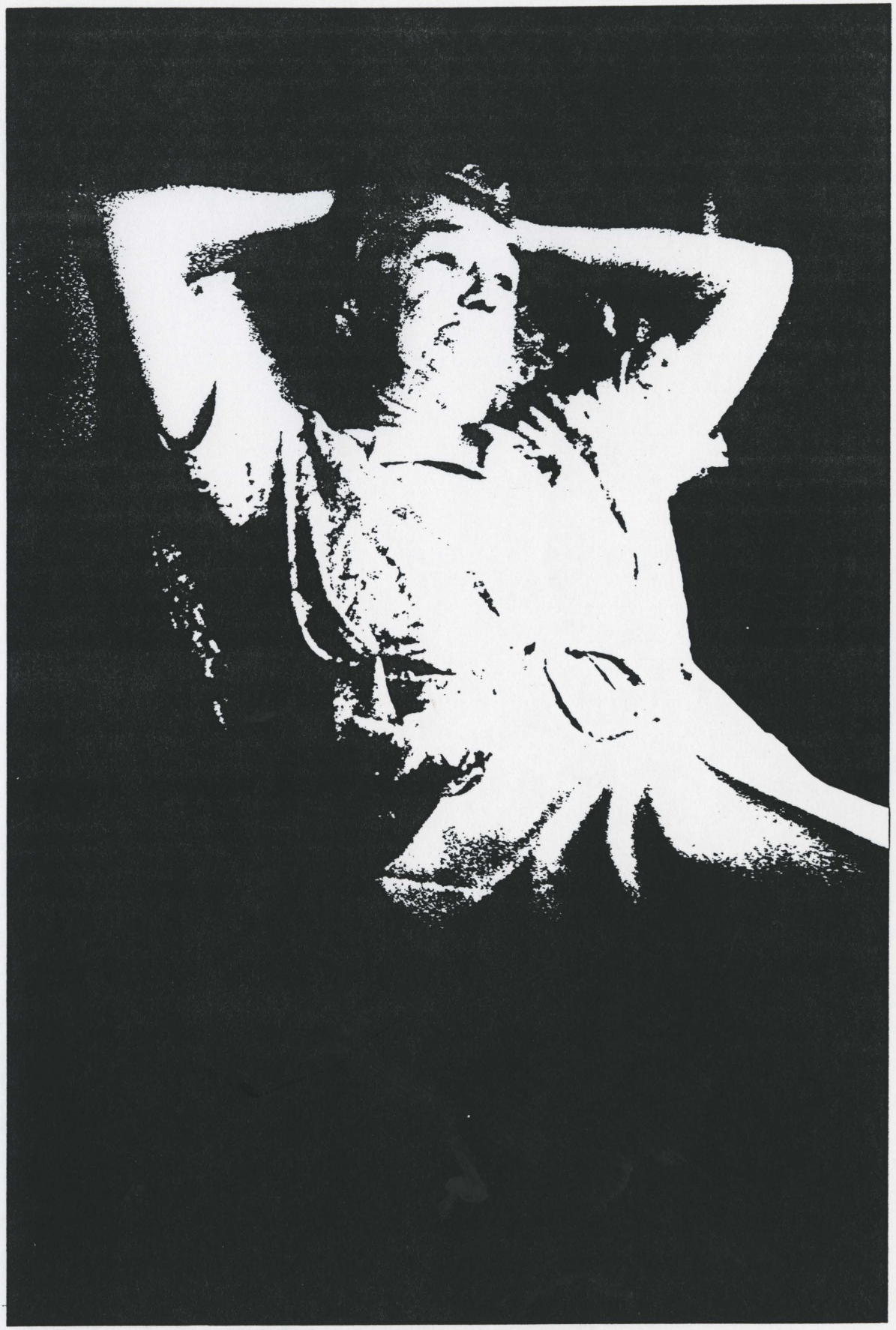
We all had chores. We had, you see, the house was heated with fireplaces and stoves, wood. We had to pick up chips. We hated to pick up chips, really. I don't know why. If Mama was out there it was kind of fun, but if she just sent us out to pick up chips, it was a task that we didn't want to do. We used to spend so much time putting a false bottom in the basket and then putting chips on that so, you know, getting some kindling wood or something that would make a false bottom. It would look like it was full of chips and it didn't have but half full. But we had big baskets and Oscar, as soon as he was big enough, had a hatchet and chopped kindling wood. I liked to do that too. I wanted to do everything the boys did. I wanted to do everything anybody did.

Grandma, well, she was the one that wore a checked gingham apron if she was doing dusting or churning. If she was, I mean, if she was doing that kind of work, but in the first place she dressed with a little white apron, a fancy apron which was part of her costume, daily, the little white apron. Over that she'd put a bigger white apron if she was sewing or doing that sort of thing to protect the little white apron that was part of the dress. Over that she'd put a checked gingham, over the white apron she'd put a checked, I've seen her have as many as four on at once. And the last one would be a pretty badly soiled gingham apron when she was doing something that would get her dirty. And she'd just put one on top of the other instead of taking off the ones that she had on first.

If a storm came up after we had already gone to school, and it was really very bad weather when school was out, Mama would let Dave hitch Old Nell to the surry and come to the schoolhouse and bring us home, which was an event, wonderful. In very bad weather when we had to walk to school Mama would fix us a lunch which we all hated to have to take our lunch to school. We would so much rather hurry home than to eat an old cold biscuit with ham in it or something. So far as I was concerned it wasn't only the food. I think the food was the least part of it, but it was the family coming home to meals. It made an awful lot of difference to me. I felt abandoned if I had to stay in school and eat a cold lunch.

When we were sick Mama put other beds in there and all the children were kept in that room. If we had mumps or measles or chicken pox or what have you, they were all in the same room where she could take care of us altogether and read to us together. When we had mumps I remember when we had mumps they were filling the ice house. The ice house was down, go straight down the driveway about half way down, I mean down to where the roses end now, near the end of the Ashby's yard and it was a great big frame building, not great big, a frame building and it had sawdust, the walls, I mean the planks were about this far apart and filled with sawdust so it was insulated with sawdust. Then the ice was packed in sawdust, just covered up in sawdust and the next piece of ice was put on top of that. It was just packed in sawdust to insulate it. They cut the ice in the wintertime when the ponds were frozen and people, some people had what they called ice ponds where they could cut ice in the wintertime and we didn't have one of our own, but Papa cut the ice off of somebody else's pond by arrangement and brought it here and stored it. I remember standing at the window and seeing them store the ice in the ice house.

I remember moving up here. I carried, Mama let me help move. William and I came by ourselves. I was five and he was three. She let us, I think she took us across the street. Maybe not because there was nothing but ox carts and if you watched carefully you didn't have to get run over. Oscar used to stand and say, "Wait, Sister." He called me Sister and he'd poke me behind him if there were an ox cart in sight. I remember standing on the sidewalk and waiting for him to let me cross the street. William and I, I remember vaguely William was supposed to help move too and he carried his little toy. They always had for the children what we called reins, horse reins. It was a yoke thing with some bells on it. We played horse with it. One child held the reins and the other ran as the horse. We both ran, of course. But he was carrying that and I was carrying a little pot of red geranuims. We came and moved into this house.



Words Following

This series "Images and Words of Elizabeth Merritt" can be appreciated from various perspectives. This essay offers some thoughts about the series and about the process leading up to it. The value of these particular comments is that they might compel one to reread EB's words and to review those photographs.

Oral history research and interview data can be presented in a variety of forms ranging from unedited verbatim transcripts to conventional histories incorporating other sources as well. One distinction made within oral history is between a project which examines a person and that which probes an event. Either study can use one person or many to be interviewed. This series is one way of presenting the material gathered using Elizabeth Merritt as the only interview source. The accuracy of her memory is not questioned; the interviews are her expression of the events of her life and their significance to her. The selections presented are not interrupted by the interview questions which elicited them. The presence of the oral historian is apparent only in the editorial choices: the transcription and punctuation of her spoken words; the choice of the final format; and the arrangement of the selections.

From collections held by the Merritt family and the local historical society, black-and-white prints were chosen and duplicated onto color slides which retain the

tonal range of the originals. In addition, current slides of EB were taken over the course of the summer. A photographic process was then used translating the slides into the images in the series. This process alters the images by eliminating the grey tones and producing high contrast, strictly black and white, photographs. Although exact duplicates of the originals are not produced, there are advantages to this photographic translation. On a merely practical level this process is less expensive than using photographic paper designed to print full-tone images from color slides, so more images could be included in the final series. Also, the intermediary negatives lend well to a multiple printing with metal plates if a more extensive publication is made.

But the greatest advantage of these high contrast images is the aesthetic interplay of pure black and pure white. Much of the detail is lost when the grey tones are converted to areas of black and white. The documentary aspect of the photographs is diminished and an abstraction, a design, is established. The contours of a face become geometric shapes. Textures are highlighted by a more definite pattern and by the framing of black or white areas. The viewer is allowed to explore these textured areas and to follow the paths from outside the image leading in. For instance, a white area on the edge of an image is an opening for the eye. Notice the portrait of EB (p. 27) with a large white area in the lower right corner. The broken black lines let one move from outside the image into the

right side of the face, up the ridge of the nose and into the triangle area of the forehead. Each image can be explored in this fashion with the eye following paths or dwelling in the open spaces of the black or the white.

This translation from conventional documentary-type images to abstracted design may parallel the process of memory which proceeds from a former external reality of inexhaustible detail to a rarefied subjective reconstruction with a peculiar integrity. Each of these images, like memories, are gestalts lacking extraneous detail and embodying their own unity. That is to say, EB's mind remembering like the oral historian's mind compiling this series (or even the reader's mind apperceiving this series) may work in the same way as this photographic translation. Just as a truth does not need to be diluted or adulterated through perception but may be distilled, each image is essential detail distilled.

Similarly each verbal selection is whole. At any point in the series one experiences the completeness of sensation through EB's words. Her perception of detail evokes a world of kerosene lamps, typhoid fever, and darning stockings rarely made tangible in conventional modes of historical inquiry. EB is a storyteller. Her talent stems from her strong memory for detail and her ability to select and arrange these details in a particular form. Events from her past are recalled in individual set narratives whether they are told for an interview session or during an afternoon visit weeks later. By now a specific story

might vary only slightly in word order or sentence structure over the course of several years. Within an interview memory is affected both by the interviewer's questions and by the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. In this oral history study the family connection has been an asset. The interviewer is familiar with EB's stories and was able to request ones which had not been told or to suggest particular ones at the beginning of an interview session. EB was not only comfortable with the relationship but possibly relieved to have her perceptions recorded and maintained for other members of the family and for later generations. This compulsion to express one's understanding of the past seems particularly strong between family members separated by a generation, great-aunt to grandniece or grandfather to grandson. Requests for a specific story would often lead to other recollections. For instance, the sub-series describing the flu epidemic of 1918 was told uninterrupted except for a few questions to define terms unfamiliar to the interviewer. These questions have been omitted to allow a continuous narrative.

Even when a recollection was interrupted by a question or comment, EB was able to begin where the story had broken off. In fact, in some cases she would interrupt herself to insert background information before continuing the story. The pattern of the narrative is rarely a simple chronological progression. Rather, phrases or whole sentences are repeated to provide a pause in the story, a way to mark time before moving on. Often the stories move through

related digressions before circling back to the core idea. These elements of her style are retained in the selections presented in this material. Each passage maintains the rhythm, the diction, and the sentence structure specific to EB. Punctuation marks were used to indicate EB's natural rhythm of pauses. Listening to this pattern reveals the full richness of her words; her voice need not be lost to the printed page.

Recalling and searching for particularly vivid passages the oral historian selected from the verbatim transcripts the stories that fit together as this series. The integrity of each member of the series is maintained as it was spoken in the interviews rather than manufactured by the editing process. Each photograph and each passage is a separate entity. The effect of the whole comes first from the interplay of the words within a selection or the interaction of black with white in a photograph, then from a kind of dialogue set up between one verbal passage and the photograph on the facing page, and finally from the sequencing of these pairs of images and words. This process of selecting and sequencing was largely intuitive. The aim was a cohesive whole, a distillate of Elizabeth Merritt's life in Mount Airy, North Carolina.

This life like any life can never be completely defined, but a sense of it may be conveyed by the effect of these photographs and words. Most of the stories are from her childhood. She describes both the daily routines: meals, clothing, discipline, or walking to school; and

single events of great importance: the flu epidemic, a birthday, or moving into the new house. The photographs are powerful images of the person and reveal characteristics supported by her words. Examine the expressions captured by the camera: a baby with her hand raised slightly; a young girl's face, innocent yet knowing; a solemn expression for a portrait; or a thoughtful look caught in a moment's pause while at play. The more recent photographs are also expressive: an impish glance; a quiet calm look; concentration on a crossword puzzle; or a delightful smile breaking into laughter. The range of expressions and the vivid descriptions reveal a depth and a perceptiveness which does not need further explication. The wonder of this person should simply be embraced.

A sense of Elizabeth Merritt extends beyond her specific personality traits to an understanding of humanity. Her experiences illuminate childhood, growing up, relationships to siblings and parents, sickness and death, and being old. For instance, her story about the June apples retrieved as a birthday present reveals facets of her relationship to her brother Oscar as well as his individual ingenuity. Also, in visualizing that passage one may recall their own childhood and a sibling relationship or a unique resolution of a problem. This passage is one example of the way any part or all of the series symbolizes the interactions of person, place, and time to effect the experiencing of life. The persons are Oscar and EB. Place is a June apple tree in Mount Airy, North Carolina, where unbruised

ripe June apples were a prized possession. Time is that moment in the distant past before the potential for fishing for June apples was rendered unlikely by television and supermarkets; that moment in each of their lives when Oscar was looking for a birthday present for EB; and that moment at play in a singular afternoon. These elements, person, place, and time, are not discrete features; each one creates and is created by the others. They are aspects of a whole, just as the passages and photographs form a whole. Just as the personal history of the reader, the series and the reader's emotional or intellectual response become a whole apperception. Just as all of life is whole.

Definitive concluding remarks about this work are impossible. The concepts presented in this commentary are not meant to dissect this work but to lead a reader to probe further.

LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS