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And This Is Della

By Leroy Thomas

My assignment this morning is to present a short eulogy that isn’t sad. I can handle the “not sad” part, but I’m not very sure of the “short” aspect since I have a great deal to say. Surely there’s victory that will help to overcome the sadness of the occasion—because of a life well lived. Steeped as she was in the study of the Bible and other great literature, Della could ask for a happy eulogy because she could sing with the Psalmist “Weeping endures only for a night; joy comes in the morning.”

Our professional association spanned three decades, and the things I remember about her set her aside as an extraordinary person.

I remember her foremost as a woman who had a joyful spirit, as one whose lilting laughter could make the heart glad. There were a few anecdotes that she especially enjoyed sharing. All of you remember the story of the saleslady who tried to sell “hand-did” handkerchiefs to Dr. Jencke in an exclusive store in Dallas. And what about the way Della delightfully reproached herself for being the untalented one of the Barnwell girls? How her eyes twinkled when she told about the way their dad introduced them: “This is Mozelle, our artist. This is Florine, our musician. And this is Della.” Later, his introduction could have been, “And this is Della, our writer and master teacher.”

In the same humorous vein, do you remember the one about some of the women in Della’s group—including Florine—being on a trip in Dr. Bellamy’s car? Florine was driving and was being aided too much by a backseat driver, so musician Florine came up with an appropriate ditty. Della always enjoyed this story because it gave her a chance to sing: “Oh, this is the Bellamy bus, so leave the driving to us!”

As I have said, she was a writer too. She enjoyed the challenge of doing rhymed couplets for special occasions. For instance, while on a Crink tour of
Nova Scotia in 1964, she kept a journal of the trip in couplet form. As notable as the one hundred verses, however, were those verses she wrote to correct the errors made by a typist. These excerpts serve to demonstrate the poet's ability to manipulate words, and I present them in her honor:

When I read the jingles I wrote on the trip
And noticed the errors, I almost did flip.

I know Sir Cedric's typist was pushed for time
And had other tasks besides proofreading my rhymne.

But I teach writing and am embarrassed no end
To see many mistakes in the jingles I penned.

Now please dear ones, notice before October 4
For by then I may have found some more.

In Stanza Two, I have a hunch
That one needs a comma after lunch.

And o me, o my, there's a comma splice
In Stanza Five, and that ain't nice.

Freshmen get failed for doing such,
And for that error I'm sorry much.

In Stanza Sixteen, let's keep in mind
Only three dots or a dash after kind.

And it's a dash I wanted after us.
Oh I know I shouldn't raise a fuss.

In Stanza 37, our friend Louise
Carries her bag over her shoulder with ease.

I don't want my freshmen to shift in tense;
I call that an error quite immense.

Oh yes, Stanza 39 is where another error is.
O gosh! O golly! Oh gee whiz!

Now I know these jingles aren't literary pieces,
But my looking for errors almost never ceases.

I hope to make myself clear as I go along
In case one of my students should read my song.

Other kinds of mistakes in the jingles you see

But those of rhythm and meter were made by me.

Now I must get back to my dear ol' school work,
For I n'er will desire my duty to shirk.

Oh yes, the slang and the appearance of ain't
I use because, of course, I'm no saint.

She also did serious articles for her church's journal and for WESTVIEW.
In fact, she extended a great deal of assistance to WESTVIEW during its early years of publication.

I remember her, in addition, as a master teacher who cared for her students and always encouraged beginning educators. She seemed to have an affinity for athletes who were preparing to be teachers—maybe because she was married to a teacher who was a former football player. She would surely be pleased to know that her copy of COLLEGE ENGLISH is being given to Tight End Felix Melendez, SOSU's Academic All-American.

Her appreciation of literature also went deep. Her study of its thematic implications was extended into her private life. For example, since she liked daisies, she had them in her garden and used them as a decoration motif in her home. She was once jokingly accused by a colleague of being able to extract forty essay topics from a single line of poetry or prose.

Her great literary loves were William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Willa Cather, and Carl Sandburg. She was especially fond of Faulkner's Dilsey, who is representative of the prevailing spirit of man; of Welty's Edna Earle, who, despite obstacles, still loves life; of Cather's Antonia, who comes to a love of God, mankind, and the land. The aspects of Sandburg that drew Della to that Chicago poet were his indomitable spirit and his realistic attitudes toward life and death, as expressed in his "Southern Pacific":

Huntington sleeps in a house six feet long.
Huntington dreams of railroads he built and owned.
Huntington dreams of ten thousand men saying "Yes, Sir."

Blithery sleeps in a house six feet long.
Blithery dreams of rails and ties he laid.
Blithery dreams of saying to Huntington "Yes, Sir."

Huntington, Blithery sleep in houses six feet long.

There's nothing sad about a woman who loved her God, her husband, her other family members, her friends, her students, her job—and who for almost forty years possessed the joy that a satisfying professional life brings. I join you in saluting her.