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The Sisters Gillentine

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MEMORIES

by Mrs. Dick Dudley

The Sisters Gillentine

Miss Sallie and Miss Mary Gillentine taught many years in Hollis, but students all over the Southwest knew them by reputation.

Miss Sallie Gillentine was born in Spencer, Tennessee September 6, 1887 and later graduated there from Burritt College where her grandfather had been one of the founders. She also attended and graduated from the University of Oklahoma.

She studied at the University of Colorado, the University of Florida, and did special work in children's literature and art at Tulane University.

With this background, Miss Sallie came to Harmon County in 1907 and began a teaching career that spanned 49 years. She taught in Olustee, Fairview school

1907-1908; Lincoln Consolidated school near Eldorado in 1908-1909 and 1911-1912; and in New Orleans, Louisiana 1909-1910. In 1912, she began teaching in Hollis and retired here in 1956 after having been a primary principal and teacher. In this long time, Miss Sallie was never late and absent only once, during the flu epidemic of 1918. Few can equal this life of service. Twice, Miss Sallie was called to Oklahoma City to be honored at the State Fair. In 1956, the grade school was named the Sallie Gillentine School in her honor. Most of her pupils held a "standing room only" celebration on this

occasion. During all this time, Miss Sallie was faithfully serving as a teacher of small children in her church. It would be hard to estimate how many little hands she has so carefully guided in the making of the A, B, C's. She disciplined with love and kindness. Many a child can remember and often mentions how she cupped her kind hand under his chin and corrected his ways with gentle words while he looked into her eyes. Usually children walked away with the resolve never to do that again.

It was not at all unusual during World War II to see some young man in uniform come in at 4:00 o'clock to see Miss Sallie. Nearly always it was the desire to express appreciation for some kindness or special training that brought him there.

She has left a legacy of beauty to Hollis schools in the form of large murals on the walls of both Sallie Gillentine School and Hollis High School. The High School Alumni Association honored her by placing an oil portrait in the hall of the school that bears her name. Many local residents will long cherish bits of her art work in their homes. Miss Sallie often said "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away. But old teachers live on in the lives of their students."

Miss Mary taught in college for five years before coming to Hollis in 1919, where she taught literature and Latin. In all, she rounded out fifty years of teaching. Constantly accused of being partial to boys she halfway admitted it, while at the same time denying it. The girls said, "Oh! we don't mind, she's good to us, too." Anyway, she could spend hours showing letters, cards, and gifts she had received from all over the world. Wherever her boys were scattered during the war, came scenic folders, gifts, and remembrances. She received a Japanese Primer, German Classic, and "The Lady of the Lake," done up in Scottish plaid from that eerie land. Of an ash tray from Stratford-on-Avon, she said, "Just what am I supposed to do with an ash tray?" Plainly she was pleased to be remembered by a serviceman who was thinking of an English class and an inspiring teacher back in the USA.

When called upon to write a college freshman theme on "My Favorite Teacher," many came up with a "Miss Mary theme." It was bound to happen sooner or later that three Hollis girls turned in "Miss Mary" themes, all in the same class. They were called into the professor's office concerning the incident; one girl explained "Well after all, we just

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Miss Mary Gillentine



Miss Sallie Gillentine

At recess he refused to move. He lay on the ground beside me. At break time he would not drink his milk. He put his face at table level, his nose to the milk. Suddenly his arm shot out, index finger extended. "Bang" he said as the milk spilled on the table.

"Darrell, what is wrong? Why are you angry with me? Why are you trying to make me mad?"

"That's how I am going to do it! Bang!" he said excited and pleased with himself. "That's how I am going to kill myself."

"What!"

"I am gonna get the rifle from the closet and kill myself."

"But Darrell, we need you. We need you to help take care of the fish."

"I'll get the shell out of the drawer. I'll put the shell in the chamber, put the gun between my eyes and pull the trigger."

"Darrell, we would miss you so much. We love you and want you to be with us."

"You lied. There is no Santa Claus. He is not bringing you nothing. And he is not bringing me nothing. There is no Santa!"

Twelve pairs of young eyes watched us.

"It's like a game. Oh, Darrell, pretend. If you could have a present from Santa, what would it be?"

"A truck. The truck in Cassidy's window. With a little trailer and a boat behind."

"Let me dry your eyes. Let's clean this up and go back to class."

Darrell got his truck. He knew where it came from and I knew he knew. It was a silent joke between us.

Darrell's brothers, the Sluggs' natural sons, were arrested on drug charges. They were tall, swarthy men who resembled their mother. They had children the age of Darrell. A farmer saw them slashing the tires on the witness' car. He found his show pigs with their throats cut the day of the hearing.

I went to the local Lions Club, the Kiwanis Club, and my father to finance the operation for Darrell's eyes. People were reluctant to donate when they heard who the needy child was. I explained the assistance would go only to the child, not the family. I secured pledges for Darrell's operation with the out-of-state doctor.

I told Mrs. Sluggs the money was available. She was to bring me the bills and they would be paid.

Mrs. Sluggs brought Darrell in after his stay in the hospital. He was the cleanest I had seen him. He was wearing glasses.

"You know, they said he was seeing two of everything. Can you imagine that?" I could.

The Sluggs family did not use the funds to pay for the operation; they took care of it themselves. Not long after the operation, Darrell came to school one day with his glasses held together with tape. He was very upset. He had tried to repair with tape the damage done in his fall from the horse. Mrs. Sluggs asked for assistance replacing the glasses. That was all of the financial aid they utilized.

Coloring became Darrell's favorite activity. He scribbled like a child half his age, delighted at the visual process. He had to acquaint himself with a world he had felt and heard but not see.

I asked the students what was the smallest thing they could imagine. After seven years of teaching kindergarten, I expected answers like a mouse or a kitten. Darrell answered, "An atom." I asked what was the largest thing he could imagine. He replied, "The universe."

The service center psychologist tried to test Darrell. He scored too low to rank. He would chatter about where he was or what he saw but he would not answer the questions. Next year, first grade, he would be with an older, less patient, teacher and 25 students at once. I introduced him to the special education teacher.

Two afternoons a week he went to her room. He liked that. She gave him candy and he got to find out what was behind one more closed door.

In addition to seeing physical objects, Darrell now seemed to see clearly his social position. Before he had defended himself by seeming retarded. But it was a general defense. He didn't realize there was any life except the rough one he lived. With better vision and contact with other children, he knew for the first time that everyone did not live as he lived. He became angry.

In April Darrell developed sores around his mouth. I purchased impetigo medicine. When he arrived I would disinfect and medicate his sores. The lesions did not clear; they spread over his body. I called Mrs. Sluggs every other day until she saw I was as determined about this as I had been about his eyes. She took Darrell to the doctor.

Darrell was in the hospital for a week. Vague talk circulated of cancer, high blood count, and blood disease. He attended little school for the rest of the year.

I transferred to another school at the end of the school year. When I visited with my former colleagues during the next year, they commented how much they missed me. "We had to hire an extra teacher just to keep Darrell in class. That is a fulltime job." Darrell had taken up room inspection again, and the first grade teacher did not see it as a sign of curiosity and intelligence.

At the tri-county speech contest, a year and a half after I left Anthon, I heard of his death. Darrell was killed by a shot from a pellet gun. He and a ten-year-old nephew were said to be alone at the time.

He suffered no more abuse; he did not die slowly of cancer; he did not die of rot lying in the dog pen. Did he carry out his early plan? Or did his hospitalization finally raise too many questions about his condition? Details of the death, as of his birth, are very sketchy, but he knows is beyond one more door.

* * * * *

I now teach in a private preschool. All of the students are present on tuition basis; kids like Darrell don't attend. It is an unreal world, a sterile environment. Some of my students suffer from receiving too many things and not enough affection. Some of them have been roughly handled. But all of them have someone to look after their physical needs; they each have enough to eat and a place to sleep. Seldom do I go to bed worrying about one of them, and I do not dream about any of them.

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happen to love her best." Miss Mary said, "It may be apple sauce, but it keeps things clipping."

Miss Mary was known over the state for her leadership in the English Council which she served as Secretary. She was featured speaker at O.E.A. meetings, banquets, and graduation exercises. Among her other responsibilities were Latin council representatives and Harmon County O.E.A. President.

Oklahoma honored her Teacher of the

Year. Writing poetry was one of Miss Mary's hobbies. She was a member of several groups in this field. At a meeting of Burritt College alumni one of her poems about mountains was read as a surprise to her. "That received more applause than did Riley's 'That Old Sweet-heart of Mine'," Miss Mary laughingly said. In fact she always laughed when she spoke of her poems.

A portrait of Miss Mary hangs in the Hollis High School hall as a gift from the Hollis Alumni Association.

A community-wide event was held in Miss Mary's honor upon retirement; there was standing room only. This was honoring Miss Mary and Miss Sallie; they were presented a silver service from the Sallie Gillentine faculty and pupils. Whether teachers are born, not made, or vice versa, the Gillentine sisters qualified on either score, pupils agreed.

(adapted from PLANNING THE ROUTE, publication of the Harmon County Historical Society.)