

LOUISA RHOLETTER BUTTS

Louisa (pronounced Loo-eye-za) Rholetter married Silas Noah Butts in 1905. However, many of the people who know stories of Silas today do not know her name, can not remember it or never even knew that Silas was married. Louisa, however, served as the maternal role in their large adopted family, and as such, had a daunting task. Louisa, when remembered, does not carry the complex legacy that Silas' name holds. But, with what is remembered about Louisa, it is clear that without her, Silas would not have been the man he was, much less the man he is remembered or misremembered to be.

Louisa's role at the mountain orphanage was complex and vital. The first thought that comes to mind is the food preparation that took place in a household of up to twenty five people. Several people recall certain details of the cooking that went on in the house. Randolph Phillips, their nephew, remembers:

I can remember them a-cooking, and they cooked beans in a big ol' pot: a big ol' wash pot on the outside, especially in the summer time. I guess, because it would heat the house up or what not. You could smell those beans a-cooking. But I remember, they had a big stove in the house and he had a great big ol' long table. I think it was more or less boards put up. They had a fireplace at the end of the kitchen

and they done a lot of cooking on that fireplace—just about most of it, I guess, except for the winter time. They'd crank that ol' stove up in the winter time, but they was so many kids, they probably cooked on both ends, you know. The best I can remember, I've eat in that kitchen many a-time because daddy would go there and get liquor because Silas made and sold liquor.³⁹

Even with all the orphans to feed, a family as large as the Butts', as well as visitors, would probably account for extras at the table. Clem Smith vividly remembered eating with the Butts family as well, along with the cases of cornbread as big as a small table top.⁴⁰ Years later, a nephew to Silas recalled:

Silas killed half-a-dozen hogs at a time and the kitchen table of the Butts' home measured about 14 feet long. Cornbread was cooked in pans measuring a foot across and three inches deep. Four or five cows supplied the huge family with butter and milk. There was always plenty of food on the Butts' large "eating table."⁴¹

It is easy to imagine the amount of food that was required to feed all of these people. It is not so easy to imagine, though, the amount of work required to be that self-sufficient for such a large number of people.

³⁹ Randolph Phillips, 12 June 2003.

⁴⁰ Clem Smith, 25 February 2003.

⁴¹ Alexander.

Many people who remember the food preparation at the Butts' farm tend to remember these events near the end of Mrs. Butts' life. Louisa would then not have been the only cook for the "family." Barbara Haynes recalls that Pearle Sheppard would "cook the meal, but him [Silas] and his wife [Louisa] sat down and 'et first, and when they 'et, then all them kids came in and 'et."⁴² Evelyn Walker remembers their help as well. "She always had two or three women in the kitchen preparing the meal for everybody. And they fixed the meals after she told them what to fix," she recalled.⁴³ All of these recollections come nearly fifty years after Silas and Louisa's death. Therefore, the people who still remember these instances are few, and naturally what they remember is when Silas and Louisa were old. And as Clem Smith pointed out, "She [Louisa] was a good cook before she got crippled up."⁴⁴ Louisa's health hindered her from her kitchen duties in her older age. However, as Evelyn Walker pointed out, Louisa would still be in control of what was going on in her kitchen.

⁴² Barbara Haynes, personal interview, 19 April 2002.

⁴³ Evelyn Walker, personal interview, 13 June 2003.

⁴⁴ Clem Smith, 25 February 2003.

Louisa's work went far beyond the kitchen, though. Claude Gaillard recalls that "she would take the boys and take them out to the field and work them. She would. Silas didn't do it. In other words, he was either selling whiskey, or making it."⁴⁵ When Evelyn Walker was questioned about this, she replied that "He [Silas] didn't do nothing."⁴⁶ Louisa's position as a woman, responsible for many children in a remote Appalachian setting, may have required that she be in the fields with the children anyway, but the absence of Silas in these fields illustrates her extraordinary burden. This seems to be another factor that Silas used to his advantage and yet Silas is given more credit in bringing up all those "orphan" children than his wife.

When John Bigham traveled from Columbia, South Carolina, to Brasstown to find Silas, he found Louisa as well. Bigham came because he had heard of Silas, not Louisa. His article in *The State*, however, speaks of Louisa in abundance. When Bigham arrived at the Butts' farm, Silas was not at home, which gave Bigham the opportunity to visit with Louisa. Bigham described her as

⁴⁵ Claude Gaillard, personal interview, 21 February 2003.

⁴⁶ Evelyn Walker, 13 June 2003.

"a keen person of an intelligent nature and our visit interrupted some letter writing activity which she had been accomplishing without glasses although she is approaching 70 years of age." Further into his article, he acknowledged that "Luisa [sic] would not consent to pose [for a picture] until arrayed in her best dress and this was a signal for the boys to vanish indoors and emerge later with clean overalls on and hair slicked down to the scalps."⁴⁷ This rare glance at Silas' wife reveals several interesting characteristics. First of all, unlike Silas, Louisa could obviously read and write. Her ability to do so is attested to in her neat and delicate handwriting that appears in court documents. Also, Bigham's article indicates that Louisa was a lady of pride and manners. Despite her ruffian husband and remote location, she felt it necessary to wear her best for the picture. One step further reveals that the children's notion of doing the same is reflective of her influence on their behavior and her role in their lives. As Evelyn Walker put it, "She [Louisa] went about the house looking after the kids, made sure they had clean clothes on, a bath, and that... That was just like her own kids to her

⁴⁷ Bigham.

you know, 'cause she didn't have none."⁴⁸ One can only wonder, though, if Silas had been home that day, how much would Bigham have written in his article about her?

As mentioned above, Louisa is remembered to have been crippled, at least to some degree in her older age. Several people recall that, "Louisa was kind of crippled... She had something wrong with her legs. She limped when she walked,"⁴⁹ and "She didn't never work too much, she's old when we lived down there. She got out and done what she could."⁵⁰ Clem Smith attributed this to the fact that she "fell and broke her hip. She couldn't do much."⁵¹ It is unclear at what point she became crippled, but she did live until 1958, when she was 75 years of age.

Louisa's maternal role in the hills of Oconee County, despite her unique situation in a make-shift orphanage, must not have been too unlike other women in the region. In the study, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941*, Melissa Walker

⁴⁸ Evelyn Walker, 13 June 2003.

⁴⁹ David Pitts and Johnny Ballenger, 13 June 2003.

⁵⁰ Barbara Haynes, 19 April 2003.

⁵¹ Clem Smith, 25 February 2003.

looks into many characteristics that would have influenced Louisa's life. One example of the difficulties of their lives came from the shift many families experienced from subsistence farming to a participation in a market economy. Due to this shift, Walker notes that "While men were responsible for field work and large-scale livestock production for the market, women managed most of the farm's subsistence activities." She goes on to explain that in the upcountry South, "Men rarely assisted with tasks more clearly labeled 'women's work,' such as laundry and cooking, but farm women often assisted their husbands with field work, reflecting the high priority that commercial agricultural activities received."⁵² Louisa must therefore have been crucial to the maintenance of her home and "family."

This shift from subsistence agriculture to market participation is evident in the Butts' lives in the number of recollections that remain in Oconee County about Silas' truck farming. Further evidence of this shift is seen in one specific court record, *Piedmont Motor Company vs. S.N. Butts*. It appears that Silas

⁵² Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 22-23.

appeared in court in 1926 due to the fact that he had not fully paid for a car he purchased in 1924. The total amount for the car was \$321.20 The amount owed was \$35.60.⁵³ Melissa Walker notes that, "the drastic fall in farm prices after World War I ravaged the upcountry South's small farmers."⁵⁴ However, twenty years later, Silas supposedly purchased \$10,000 worth of War Bonds and at his death, his Probate Records show he still owned \$5,000 in Government Bonds. Obviously, the Butts' financial stability improved over the years. This shift probably paralleled the shift from subsistence to market agriculture. There is no doubt that between liquor and produce sales, fueling as well as fueled by, a large family helped the finances of the Buttses.

Melissa Walker goes on to explain the importance of women's roles, such as Louisa's, saying, "Women were primarily responsible for the complex, reciprocal support that had formed the basis for rural 'social services' for generations."⁵⁵ Louisa seems to fit this description. With

⁵³ *Piedmont Motor Company vs. S. N. Butts*, 1926.

⁵⁴ Melissa Walker, 35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

land to farm, Louisa's "responsibility" in the community seems to have created her maternal role in her "family."

Another technique used by women like Louisa during the inter-war years was the creation of boarding houses. Whereas the Butts' farm was not a direct profit-making "boarding house," the idea that the family had to do something to survive is similar. Melissa Walker provides several examples of families who created "low-capital" boarding houses and even "grew truck crops." She provides a fitting analysis when she writes:

Not only was rural industrialization producing a mixed economy that provided new off-farm jobs for both men and women, but the collapse of the agricultural economy and government interventions to aid victims of that collapse were restructuring the region's agricultural system, pushing subsistence farmers into commercial agriculture or off the land.⁵⁶

In this inter-war period with a changing economy, taking in children fulfilled the needs of others as well as the needs of Silas and Louisa.

What little is remembered about Louisa is often quite the opposite of what is remembered about Silas' personality. When Barbara Haynes, who lived in one of Silas' tenant houses, was asked about Louisa, she

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70.

replied, "You know, I don't know anything about that lady. I just knowed she was an old lady. But she was sweet as she could be."⁵⁷ Evelyn Walker, who had nothing good to say about Silas, recalled that Louisa Butts "was a good woman. Never done anything wrong."⁵⁸ Randolph Phillips remembers her in Silas' shadow, much in the same way, saying, "When I was around, she had very little to say and I didn't really ever hear her say anything... She was old timey."⁵⁹ However, John Bigham, reported that Louisa "turned out to be a good talker."⁶⁰ This does not seem to match other descriptions of her. This could be for several reasons though. Was it because Silas was not home that day and she felt more at liberty to talk? Were the other people's descriptions of Louisa quietness just because they were children at the time? Was Louisa being her mannerly self with the reporter, as he also described? In any case, these descriptions describe the woman who was married to Silas Butts for fifty one years, yet they also describe a lady who seems to have been the

⁵⁷ Barbara Haynes, 19 April 2002.

⁵⁸ Evelyn Walker, 13 June 2003.

⁵⁹ Randolph Phillips, 12 June 2003.

⁶⁰ Bigham.

opposite of Mr. Butts, and is therefore, not as remembered.

Louisa Rholetter Butts lived less than two years after Silas died. In the *Keowee Courier*, her obituary was headlined, "Mrs. Silas Butts Taken By Death" and she was described as "a well known matron of the Long Creek community."⁶¹ It goes on to briefly mention the fact that she and Silas raised many children during their marriage. The obituary, however, is nowhere near the length of Silas' at his death, nor is it on the front page, as were many of Silas'.

One power that Louisa would have been able to use, to a certain extent, against Silas, was brought up by Evelyn Walker. In her own words, she states, "But what he [Silas] done, was use the kids... the girls, a different one every night. And his wife caught him and they never had no children. She wouldn't sleep with him... She wouldn't do it."⁶² This places Louisa as a victim in her home, with very little control over the situation.

Louisa Butts obviously played an important role in the Butts' adopted family. Her duties seemed to span from

⁶¹ "Mrs. Silas Butts Taken By Death," *Keowee Courier*, 15 January 1958.

⁶² Evelyn Walker, 13 June 2003.

the kitchen, to the field, to entertaining unexpected guests. Whether or not this is cause for her to stand out from other women at that time is not the point. What can be gained from this is the fact that during her life, and ever since, she has remained in Silas' shadow, so much so that she is most often forgotten. Louisa seems to be another variable in Silas' life that, all together, gave him the opportunity to create a lasting impression on the Upstate of South Carolina and beyond, whether he is "misremembered" or not. However, with so little information about Louisa, who is to say that she too is not misremembered?