

The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

Lillian Smith: Activist and Neighbor

It's a fairly certain bet that in mid-twentieth century Rabun County the only person to exchange Christmas cards with Eleanor Roosevelt and to keep Martin Luther King, Jr.'s number beside her phone was Lillian Smith. What did her Rabun neighbors think of the first white woman in the South to call for an end to segregation? Was Smith seen as the nice lady who ran a summer camp for rich girls or as the celebrity author of a scandalous best-seller about interracial romance?

Born in Jasper, Florida in 1897, Lillian and her parents and siblings moved to Rabun County when she was fifteen. Her parents, and later in 1925 Lillian alone, operated Laurel Falls Camp, a summer camp for well-to-do young girls. Her writing career began with a small literary magazine she co-edited as an outlet for liberal writers, and she herself often contributed articles on race relations.

In 1944, her novel, *Strange Fruit*, scandalized the nation and especially the South with the love story between a World War One veteran and a black woman. The book sold millions of copies worldwide but was banned in Boston and

Detroit. The postmaster in Atlanta refused to send the book through the mail because he termed it "pornography." Readers in Clayton carried it in plain brown bags to avoid detection.

Lillian Smith's social activism extended to the operation of her

progressive...administrations of our public affairs that we have ever had," by Andrew Ritchie. When Lillian's novel, *Strange Fruit*, was dramatized for Broadway, her brother Frank and other locals were instrumental in providing financial support for the play.

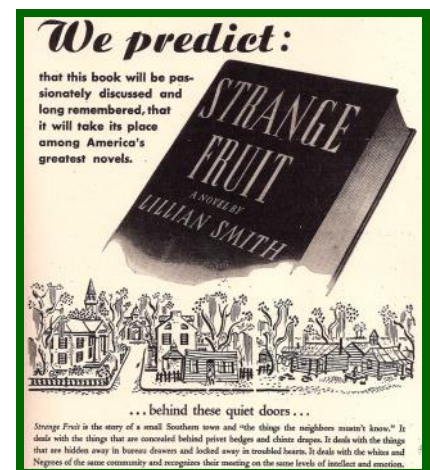
Lillian Smith received the Georgia Women of Achievement Award in 1999. At the induction ceremony, she was described as "controversial ... but she steadfastly maintained the strength of her beliefs and ... to write and speak openly against racism and segregation." Smith's 1956 letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. was also quoted. "My warmest greetings to you and your congregation," she wrote, "and to your people, who are my people too; for we are all one big human family. I pray that we shall soon in the South begin to act like one."



Lillian Smith with some Clayton neighbors at Dover and Green's Drugstore on South Main Street.

summer camp. Miss Smith's intent at Laurel Falls, as she wrote to a camper's mother was, "to wake up the little sleeping beauties that our Anglo-American culture has anesthetized or rather put in a deep freeze." She helped the daughters of upper-class Southerners begin to question their world and to envision change.

Smith's extended family became prominent members of the Rabun community, particularly her brother Frank. Frank A. Smith was elected Rabun's CEO in 1937 and was described as "one of the most



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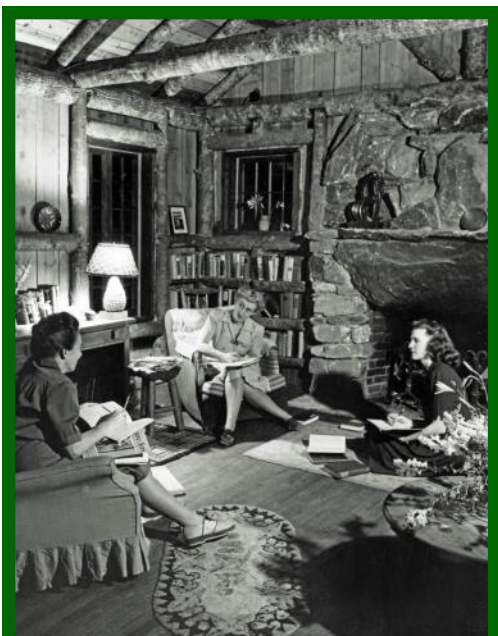
Page 2

Reaction to Arson

“Did I write you that ‘the rough ones’ set our place on fire twice this past February? The first time, they almost succeeded: they set the woods down in the cove; the wind was blowing straight up toward the little rock house where you stayed. When I discovered it, Paula happened to be in bed with flu; I was down in the dining room writing; saw smoke gathering on the mountain but had a slow reaction, thinking it was mist; suddenly realized it was smoke. When I stepped out of the dining room the entire hill was black with smoke, I was afraid Paula was in a burning house and ran there; then I realized it was the forest and I could hear the fire just below the parking space. Paula was asleep! We called fire department and forestry fire department and since Clayton is headquarters for the forestry conservation corps in this area, they were here in ten minutes with all their modern machinery for handling big fires. They worked hours and got it under control. ...Somehow, it broke me up rather badly. I wanted to leave and never come back. It was difficult for me to remember the *majority* of the good people, the sweet neighbors, who worked to help and protect us.

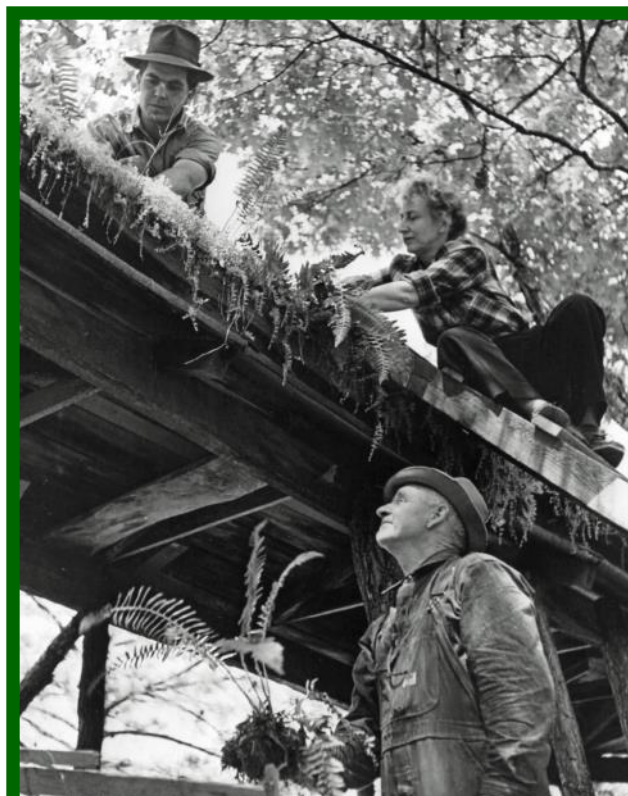
Letter to a friend, December 1958

How Am I to be Heard: Letters of Lillian Smith



Smith with her partner, Paula Snelling, and a secretary in her cottage at the camp, early 1950s

In Her Own



Lillian Smith with workmen at her Laurel Falls summer camp, circa 1950

Two white boys had set the fire. There was no publicity, no trial; the boys and their families were “whisked out of town” and taken to another state. Lillian was inclined to see the incident as a simple case of juvenile delinquency, but on at least one occasion she admitted thinking that it was “mixed...with feelings about me and my work.” In the summer of 1954 the black and white Baptists of Clayton (thirty-two blacks, thirty-six whites) had held a “sing” in the gymnasium on Old Screamer, and on the Fourth of July Lillian had invited a group of forty-five children, black and white, “all poor, all rural,” for a hot dog and ice cream supper. These were not the first biracial meetings on the mountain, of course, but before the participants had not been from the neighborhood but had been “city people.”

Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South
Anne C. Loveland

in Words...

“Tomorrow night I talk to the Music Club of Clayton on Writing Novels. I wish you could eavesdrop. And next week to the Cornelia (a town 40 miles from here) Kiwanis Club on Gandhi and India. It is only Atlanta that still snubs me in Georgia. Here in Georgia the rural people have treated me with more esteem than the so-called liberals in Atlanta. North Georgia completely accepts me. I talk to the various Women’s Clubs, Men’s Clubs, etc. in all the little towns. They simply take me and my book for granted in an odd kind of way.”

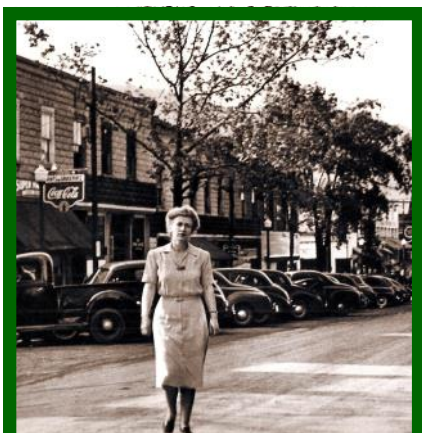
Letter to a friend, February 4, 1948
How Am I to be Heard: Letters of Lillian Smith



Smith with grocer, V.C. Dickerson in his store on North Main Street in Clayton, circa 1950



Smith with her brother, Frank, supporting the county’s first bookmobile.



Crossing South Main Street in Clayton, circa 1955

“Lillian did not take kindly to criticism of *Strange Fruit*, but her reaction varied depending on the source. She was able to dismiss the fulminations of what she referred to as ‘the lunatic fringe of the fascist groups and the white supremacy crowd.’ She admitted being hurt by the cold treatment she received in Atlanta and elsewhere in the South. ‘I was...frozen out; people were rarely nasty-rude...just froze me out, stared through me, wouldn’t wait on me in stores, etc.’ On the other hand she was able to see the humor in the way the Clayton library reacted. She told Charles Bolte ‘that it was unthinkable for the Clayton library to shelve the book, equally unthinkable for it not to catalogue the book by Clayton’s leading citizen, so she and the librarian did a deal: Lillian gave the library a copy and then checked it out herself, and never returned it. Never got an overdue notice.’”

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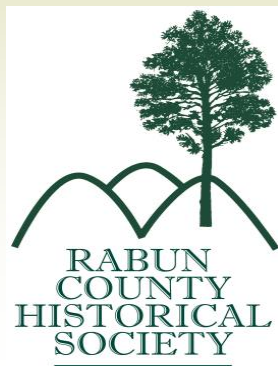
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Anniversaries of Note:

- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment



Lake Rabun—100 Years
Mathis Dam was completed in spring of 1915



Tallulah Falls—130 Years
Rabun's first incorporated town in 1885

Rabun County—196 Years
Only four years until our bicentennial!

