

Talking to Lucy Gray about black history and the mural.

Lucy Grey is 96, She has been a prominent member of the north end community for many years. Lucy lived diagonally across the street and a little to the west of the mural being installed on park street thirty one years ago. She voiced some strong opinions about the art of the mural and its representations at the time.

When Angela Rivers, the mural artist was speaking about the mural, on site, during her recent 2009 visit, sponsored by the University of Illinois Architecture Dpt. I mentioned to Sam Smith, a younger prominent member of the Afro-American community and staff member at Krannert Center for the Performing Art was present He may also be a member of the AME church. He was interested in the project and what Angela had to say. As we walked to the church we chatted and as one who had had a lot to do with initiating the project I commented to Sam that we had had a lot of north end support for the mural. People from the neighborhood would stop their cars in the street and cheer the project on. Even so, I added, we had one respected lady who lived nearby who had some rather strong opinions about some aspects of the art work. The citizen was Lucy Grey. I wasn't sure if Lucy was still around but she is and I regret that I didn't think to contact her when Angela was here. I am sure she would have had some interesting things to say about the mural and drawn on her many years of experiences to contribute to Angela's historic mapping workshops.

Lucy is relatively light skinned so, to us, her comments were understandable. She could have "passed" as white but didn't, probably because she was married to a black person. More likely she grew up in a black community and was more comfortable being a part of it. She especially felt that "the whites of the eyes were too white and the blacks too black" and she said so. We felt that her statements were a rather strong considering the purpose of the mural but we enjoyed her saying so. The mural was essentially to provide an interesting work experience and opportunity for youths who might not have otherwise had summer jobs.

When Angela visited the mural to talk about it rained so the assembled audience migrated to the conveniently opened Bethel AME church nearby and the talk continued there. Sam Smith commented that I should be cautious as to what I said about Lucy because Lucy was a member of the church and yes, she was still rather opinionated. Just so long as I knew. Later, Sam, picked up for me about the question of the eyes and skin color at Angela's Mumford Hall presentation by asking Angela what was the intent. Angela responded that the contrast and drama was purposeful so north end people could relate to the mural as a feature of their community.

Relatively recently Lucy felt it was time to move to a retirement village so she is now at the Cambridge Village in Urbana.

I had had other community contacts with Lucy. She was at one stage a member of the Champaign Historic Museum when it was on University Ave. I was not on the Board but I worked some with the museum. Lucy was indeed a helpful and concerned citizen and she knew everyone on the north end. She was also a member of various boards including the YWCA. She was also a neighbor across the road with the Rivers family whom I think were Angela's grand parents. I think her father was Al Rivers who was on the U of I Police Force along with Dave Cook, the (white) manager for the Hirschfeld Furniture Store nearby on University Ave. There was also Al Rivers and whom I think may have been Angela's father. One of the Rivers family if I remember correctly lost his life in what might have been an "in the line of police duty" police action. (The Rivers family history needs to be documented correctly.) There was a little park between the Rivers house and the mural on that side of the street that was sort of a "Rivers" park owned by the Park District. That park has now become a parking lot that serves the AM & E church on the south west corner of that block.

When at the Contra Dance festival last week I sat next to Lucy for a while, not realizing it was she. She was watching an informal gathering of musicians clustered around a piano. I had a brief conversation with her and moved on to the dance hall. Later Lucy came into the dance hall and sat next to me on

the bench. I heard her name but I still didn't twig who Lucy really was. One doesn't expect to find too many members of the north end community in a contra dance setting.

Lucy had been brought to the dance by Anne Robin and Nancy Melin who care for her. When they came to take Lucy home at about 11 o'clock Anne invited me to a pancake brunch at their place next day I said "Certainly, I'll come after my radio program." I also know Nancy's sister Cary who was here from Wisconsin for the event. Cary married Dannel McCollum's nephew a year or two ago. Cary was elected to the county board and held that position till she got a university teaching position in English as a Second Language at a University at Eau Claire, Wisconsin. We had a lot to talk about too because our lives had passed on many occasions.

I rolled along to Anne and Nancy's place on Sunday and met up with other guests. Anne is a medical doctor involved with the organization of med school teaching programs where I am a member of teaching team as a specimen and as special purpose instructor. Nancy, Anne's partner is a Social Work Specialist. They are both supportive of many community interests, including prairie preservation. Anne has a son who is profoundly palsied and wheel chair bound who needs fairly constant care for his survival so she they have to handle that situation too.

A man I sat next to me who was brought up on a family farm near Indianola where we once tried to acquire a rail bed for a trail between Villa Grove and Westville. We didn't get the rail-bed but we did get to know most of the farmers and community people along that corridor so we had lots of thoughts to exchange. The rail bed traversed a coal field so we also got to know mining interests. This man's family had sold their mining rights to the coal company.

The day was cold but active. The bird feeder was conversation piece.

After a while a call came in from Lucy Nancy picked Lucy up after she had been shuttled home from the Bethel A M and E church. She explained that had been delayed because the church shuttle van got bogged in ice

Lucy was ready for pancakes. At 96 she has not lost her appetite. She has lost most of her hearing but she can still converse directly, one to one, or in a small group. She is also aware that she has lost some of her short-term memory but she has retained a lot of her long term memory. By the time Lucy was set-up for pancakes and French toast and coffee I realized to realize who Lucy was.

I was sitting across the table from her. From that angle she could hear quite well. I reminded her that she had once wagged her metaphorical finger at me and told me about the eyes being too white etc.

Jenny was laughing in the kitchen. Jenny is part of the Anne/Nancy extended family and she was doing most of the cooking and these people everyone know Lucy's style.

Jenny, as she explained later, is an ethnic a pure-bred Chinese American with a heritage of northern China so she is a little heavier than most light weight Chinese. She has a small Cuban dog which she hopes to certify as a friendly medical associate that can be taken into hospital ward to reduce heart spikes and the like. Jenny, like me, doesn't have a "real" job. How do we know that? Because, although we were quizzing Lucy about her background she was also quizzing us. Jenny happens to be a CASA (a Court Appointed Social Advocate) so I suspect she has an informal job of some importance. Lucy, on the other hand always had a job, first at Kaufman's Clothing Store then when they closed she worked at Kuhn's Clothing store till she decided to run an antique and collectables store for ten years and that she really enjoyed. Then she retired. She has had many other irons in the fire including from age 18 she used to sing for a radio program where people used to take call in requests that she would sing right here and then.

We got talking. Where did Lucy grow up? In Paris Illinois. Grandmother was Indian. Grandma was the local midwife and medicine person who had a herbal collection and expertise that doctors would use from time to time when they were stumped. The herbs were not pleasant to take but they were

effective. Grandma was named Lucy and that is where Lucy got her name. I think grandmother mother may have been married to a negro. Lucy Gray's mother, Grandmother Lucy's daughter was part English and Irish and blue eyed. She married a curly headed negro. She had five daughters and two boys all were similar complexion which is not always the case in mixed blood families. Some members of the children had blue eyes. Lucy said the boys were what you in those times called sissies.

I suspect probably because they had a petticoat government for games and other activities.

There were two black churches in Paris and Grandma and her family and daughter and her family belonged to one of these churches. I think the methodist. The second generation had five daughters and two boys. Lucy Jr felt the boys were kind of sissies probably because they were brought up under a petticoat government for games and a lot of other things.

The family sang at church then formed a family singing group that became popular and travelled to places like Danville.

I asked Lucy if she knew what her Indian grandmother's tribal background was but she didn't know. I also asked if grandmother came from the south and Lucy didn't know that answer either. I asked because I was aware that Villa Grove up the road thirty miles had an underground railroad. I think Indians may have moved with their black associates on that railroad so I was asking but Paris didn't seem to have an underground railroad that Lucy was aware of.

Daughter with the English/Irish background and blue eyes was married to a black man whom she loved but he drank and that was a problem After the children were older she told her husband she loved him but she was going to leave him if he didn't straighten up and she did. She married another black man. There were no children by that marriage.

Through the church the family met with the black families from Broadlands who were depicted in Angela's mural design. The family name was Smith.

Was Lucy's family related to the Smiths of Broadlands? They were the early black farmers depicted by Angela in the mural. "No, but the Smith family used to come to the Paris Church and Lucy fell in love with one of the sons, not George but "the other one". They were both "hansom devils". One young woman from Danville announced that she was going to steal Lucy's Smith brother boy friend and she did so and Lucy Jr. lost out because she didn't pay enough attention to what the other young woman told her.

At this point I have to add that there were Caucasian Smiths at Broadlands and I wondered if the Caucasian Smiths gave their name to the black Smiths which was a common thing for slaves and black employees. I will have to ask Bill Smith of Savoy, a retired professor of recreation at Eastern and long time Savoy Village Board member who has a Broadlands heritage.

The black Smith family of Broadlands was well known. John Coleman now 82 who grew up in Sidney as a farm child came from a Sidney family who used to play cards at Longview with the black Smith family. There are no black families left in the Broadlands area but the community is familiar with that heritage.

Lucy graduated from Paris High School. There were five blacks in the graduating class. She came to Champaign when she was 18. She sang with a radio station for many years and met her husband here.

Lucy had one child, a boy, who has a family and Lucy now has grandchildren, great grandchildren and recently a great great grand daughter.

Husband was an alcoholic and he passed when the child was only eight? But before that they had been active in boarding black students who could be allowed to room on campus. They had two houses largely for that reason.

Why Park street? I thought that might be because it was at that time on the more southern fringe of the north-end community and close to white people. But no. One day Lucy noticed a group of people standing round a house on Park Street one. The house had been empty for seven years. She established that the house was about to be sold at auction. Lucy realized that the sale price was low so she bid as a novice and won but she had no money. She was however well enough established to be able to go to a member of the Busy family and get a loan. Lucy had worked for him and his two children after he and his wife had divorced. So she got a loan.

Lucy and her husband rehabbed the house with a view to housing five negro students in the upstairs of the house. That worked out very well. All the students got honors and two of them are still alive and they still communicate with Lucy. With their success in mind husband bought another house at auction that is located opposite the mural. As far as I can tell Lucy still owns both houses. When they first owned these houses there was no Girls and Boys club down the street. The churches and the families and extended families were responsible for the upbringing of children, The schools were important but they didn't get involved in bringing up the children. The schools were where you learned if you were lucky and the quality of learning made learning possible.

Lucy's son is an alcoholic as are some of his children. Husband is in Stanton? Place (it is a big tall building that looks west over the new bone yard development.) but he doesn't want to communicate with the family so they don't push the issue.

Lucy moved out of her house when she felt she was not longer doing a good job of looking after herself. The current tenants aren't doing a very good job of maintaining the house. The second house is being well looked after.

I know many of the old time black family names and many of the people. My mention of them expanded Lucy's long term memory and we could have gone on for a long time. We transferred from the dining room table and pancakes to the living room and a fire. Lucy is quite mobile with the aid of a stick. She was befriended by Jenny's small Cuban dog of a breed that is known not to shed much and to be very tolerant and friendly. The dog was all over Lucy but she could handle that. By this time most of the other visitors had left and it was time for me to leave too.

By this time Lucy had extracted most of my background and castigated me for not having a written record of my history and was extracting hers and especially as I have no children. None of this recording stuff. These things have to be written down. I had told her about the scanning of photographs.

The omission in the story is just how did Anne and Nancy get to meet up Lucy and that is another story .

One day Lucy heard heavy equipment arrive outside her house. The matter seemed to be urgent so she ran outside into the street in her night dress and house coat . The answer to her inquiries was that they were about to remove the brick street. She said "Oh No" " I'm going to call the mayor who ever that might be." Dannel McCollum answered. He arrived on the street and forthwith and stopped the activity and I think that might be where Dan started his mission to save many of the brick streets of Champaign!

Well Dan told Vashti, his mother, of Supreme Court School Prayer fame about this rather strong willed woman on Park Street Vashti was impressed. The result was that Vashti walked into Lucy's antique store to meet this woman. She invited Lucy to dinner and therein grew a friendship that lasted until Vashti passed a few years ago. They were buddies and Lucy got to see all of Vashti's 51 award winning sound-over travel slide shows. It has seen some of these slide shows and the

pictures are like out of the National Geographic, arctic and all. Lucy was a willing listener and commentarian to the end. And Vashti's mind never did give out. It was her body that left town when she was about 92.

The McCollum family has continued the friendship and Anne and Nancy and Gary and Scott McCollum are part of that family so that is how Lucy at the ripe old age of 96 was at the contra dance enjoying the scenery even if she couldn't dance or hear too well.

As I left Anne was bringing in her severely palsied son Miles and that is a whole another thing to know that Anne and Nancy and Anne's ex husband have to be able to handle that situation and still get involved in a lot of community affairs.

That is part of my story for the day.

The other story involved our guest on the radio program. Our guest was geologist Scott Elrick. He has a fascinating story about the geology underneath our glaciated landscape. He is more or less a paleo botanist with a geological mind. He has been part of a team that has been researching an ancient carboniferous age forest that has been exposed by coal mining.

Scott is local. His family is a pillar of the Christian Science Church. I know father, and sister Lynne (Elrick) Scott although I did not know till Sunday that they were all related. When we, as Heartland Pathways, decided that it was time to hand the Rattle Snake Master 5 K -10 K run over to the Grand Prairie Friends Lynne, was the person from the GPF board who came to negotiate the transfer. We weren't in a rush because after initiating the race and running it for 7 years we had gotten to know an extended family of friends. We also wanted to see that some of the prairie educational objectives of the race would be maintained, The transfer has been wonderful and GPF has done better than ourselves in the use of the race as an awareness and fund raising vehicle. GPF gives out plants as well as pictures. At the last run they had about 150 people running around Meadowbrook. Lyne and Scott both have two children and amazingly enough Scott's wife Ellen is teaching my radio cohost Bill Saylor's daughter at Dr Howard School. As Scott left the radio station father called. I know him because an associate of both of us, a Christian Science person, passed and I attended the funeral. Scott is an interesting story teller so we are going to have him back again next week.

So how is that for community interaction all in one morning? It is what helps to keep our activities together.

Thought you might be interested. The Lucy bit could probably be boiled down to a few lines if you wanted to include a comment in the mural report.

David.