

Effie Waller Smith is a most unlikely “Neenah Notable”  
by JoEllen Wollangk

Effie Waller Smith is a most unlikely “Neenah Notable”. She was a remarkable black poet in the early 20th century with a story unlike any other Neenah resident and her story was unknown to everyone, except her daughter Ruth, until long after she had died.

In Neenah, Effie has only recently been recognized as a poet who, not only revered her Appalachian home and its landscapes, but “pushed readers to reconsider and perhaps reject hierarchies of race, class, gender and place.”(1) She expressed both feminist and environmental awareness and addresses both racism and classism as well. Examples of her poems that show this are included as descriptions about her life and experiences.

Effie was born in Pike County Kentucky in 1879. Both of her parents had been slaves before the Civil War and both had taken the surname of their owners. Her mother, Sibbie, had been purchased along with Sibbie’s mother by Col. Ratliff. The family was part of a group of slaves being sold near Pikeville, and Col. Ratliff, who did not own any slaves but who sympathized with them, went to the sale to try to keep the family together. While he could not afford to buy the entire family, he was able to buy Sibbie and her mother, and they lived with him until after the Civil War when the mother died. Sibbie married Frank Waller in 1873. Frank Waller was born in 1845 and had been a slave on the Waller estate in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. He became a skilled blacksmith, farmer and businessman, speculating in property and accumulating a sizeable estate. Both of them also highly valued education. (2)

Effie only occasionally refers to race in her poems. In *In an Mountain Graveyard* she hints at the struggles of diversity and interracial understanding when she says

Of the graves, are bits of glass  
That with white shells mingled lie  
Smile not, ye who pass them by  
For the love that placed them there  
Deemed that they were things most fair.

The placing of bits of glass, shells and stones on graves was part of a mourning ritual for some African-American communities. (3)

The poem *The Sword in its Scabbard* reveres the Union soldiers that fought in the civil war as

The grass is growing verdant  
Over the many graves  
Of heroes, who fought to free  
The toiling, suff’ring slaves. (4)

But she shows amazing understanding and generosity in *The Lone Grave on the Mountain* where she ends the poem about the grave of a confederate soldier whose family has no idea where he is buried with

So let us to-day bring flowers,  
And tenderly strew above  
The dust of the sleeping soldier

These tokens of our love! (5)

Effie's parents had established a farm on Chloe Creek 4 miles from Pikeville Kentucky. This was an area that was primarily white but it appears he was successful and well respected in the community. Four children were born to the couple, Alfred in 1874, Rosa in 1875, Effie in 1879 and Marvin in 1882. They were a deeply religious family and they enjoyed a close family life of simple pleasures, berry picking, popping corn and telling stories. (6)

The three eldest children all attended and graduated from Kentucky Normal School for Colored Persons in Frankfort, Kentucky, and became teachers of "unusual Mentality", according to Mary Elliott Flanery who wrote the introduction to Effie's book of poems "Songs of the Months".(7) There is a record of an Alfred Waller from Pikeville, Kentucky as a student at Ohio Wesleyan University in 1899.(8) This may be the same Alfred, as the age is approximately right, they both come from Pikeville, and ironically his middle name is Tennyson, possibly foretelling the families appreciation for poetry and Effie's future passion. Alfred spent most of his working life with the railroad. (9) The only information on Rosa is a comment that is attributed to a Rosa Waller in Pikesville, Kentucky that praises a hair straightening product. (10)

Little is know of Marvin, the youngest, partly because he died 1903, but Effie wrote the following poem about him.

*My Brother*  
(1882-1903)

Dead! And he has died so young.  
Silent lips, with song unsung,  
Still hands, with the field untilled,  
Lofty purpose unfulfilled.

Was that life so incomplete?  
Strong heart, that no more shall beat,  
Ardent brain and glorious eye,  
That seemed meant for tasks so high,  
But now moulder back to earth,  
Were you all then nothing worth?

Could the death-dew and the dark  
Quench that soul's unflickering spark?  
Are its aims, so high and just,  
All entombed here in the dust?

O, we trust God shall unfold  
More than earthly eyes behold,  
And that they whose years were fleet  
Find life's promises complete,  
Where, in land no gaze hath met,  
Those we grieve for love us yet! ( 11)

Effie is definitely the most well-known of the family.

In the very early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Effie's poetry gained followers in her community and was published in the local newspapers. One of her patrons was Mary Elliott Flanery, a woman who had deep interests in politics and in fact became the first woman elected to a Southern State Legislature in 1922 following women being granted the right to vote in 1920. (12) She, and other Pikeville residents likely helped finance Effie's first book "Song of the Months." (13)

Effie also gained very early national recognition being one of the examples of successful African Americans in Reverend Pipkins book "The Negro in Revelation, in History, and in Citizenship" a study of the contributions of African Americans in the United States and the world, published in 1902. (14)

Reverend Peter Clay a person of "considerable local repute" also wrote a poem for Effie

*To Effie Waller*

Far up among the mountains,  
Where rivers leave their fountains,  
And happy birds send forth their merry thrills;  
There dwells a little poet,  
Though few there be who know it,  
Whose voice is an echo from the hills.

You may not like her station,  
For she is not Caucasian,  
Yet God with music touched the singer's heart;  
And thoughts in liquid measure  
Doth flow out like a treasure,  
To charm us with the poet's mystic art. (15)

Mary Elliott Flanery included this in her introduction for Effie's book. (16) And Effie responded in the book with

*Answer to Verses Addressed to Me by Peter Clay*

Backward down the stream of time  
My wandering mind now floats,  
When I a hoyden country lass,  
In homespun petticoats

That reached down to my ankles bare,  
Ankles bare and brown, too;  
Not browned by summer suns, for birth  
Had giv'n to them that hue.

I think now of those days when hills  
And vales with music rang,  
Of which in crude, uneven,  
Yet rhythmic, words, I sang.

And I'm thinking, poet friend,  
How you have oftentimes,  
Admired with pure unselfishness  
Those simple, homely rhymes.

For 'tis the genius of the soul  
(Though underneath a skin  
Of dusky hue its fire may burn)  
Your unfeigned praises win.

On, that earth had more of beings,  
With generous minds like yours,  
Who alike, true worth and honor  
To the black and white secures.

Accept, dear poet, then, my thanks  
For your glowing words of praise,  
For the simple, homely, faulty rhymes  
Of my early girlhood days. (17)

Effie had started with poems being published in local papers, and then published two books through vanity publishers and the support of patrons. Ultimately, she had poems published in popular national magazines including Putnam's Monthly and Harpers Magazine, one of the nation's most prestigious literary journals. (18) This was an amazing accomplishment for an African American woman only 50 years after the end of slavery.

Effie's personal life was not on hold while her poetic star was rising. Effie spent the 16 years following her education, teaching and writing poetry in Kentucky and possibly in eastern Tennessee. She was known as the singing poet of the Cumberland's and it is said she would take her students out early on particularly nice days and spend the rest of the day looking at birds and flowers in the mountains. (19) Her love of the Cumberlands is expressed in the poem

*To the Cumberland Mountains*

O, Cumberland! O, Cumberland!  
My own dear native hills;  
For you, my dear old Cumberland,  
With love my bosom thrills.

Your ridged and towering cliffs  
What a beauty, what a wonder!  
Which have withstood for centuries  
The lightning's flash and thunder.

Summer funds your craggy peaks  
No caps of whiteness wearing,  
From base to crest you greet the eye  
With green majestic bearing.

In childhood's days upon your slopes  
How oft my feet have wandered;  
How oft o'er your sublimity  
My childish mind has pondered.

With joy I've plucked the flowers that bloomed  
Within your dells and dales;  
With eagerness I've watched the streams  
Plash through your wooded vales.

And I have seen within your vales  
The timid, cowering dove;  
I've seen the eagle wing his flight  
Your lofty heights above.

But not solely for your beauty,  
Nor because my home is here;  
Not for these alone, dear mountains,  
In my heart I love you dear.

For within your soil lies buried  
'Neath the spruce pines and the flow'rs,  
The only love of my lost youth,  
Of my childhood's happy hours. (20)

Effie declared both traditional values as seen in *Apple Sauce* and *Chicken Fried* which applauds her mothers cooking and feminism in the poem *The Bachelor Girl*, and *The Hills*, which honor independence and physical activity for women. (21)

In 1904, Effie married Lyss Cockrell who was likely a transient railroad worker. They were divorced less than a year later when he left Effie to live with another woman. (22 )

In February of 1908, Effie married Charles Smith, a young man two years her senior, who she had gone to school with in the Colored School District in Pikeville. (23) She writes about Charles in the poem

*On Receiving a Souvenir Postcard*

On the little desk before me  
A pictured post-card lies,  
Fondly I'm looking at it  
With saddened tear-dimmed eyes.

The postman came this morning  
And brought this card to me,  
It was sent from Kentucky, where  
My childhood's home used to be.

The rustic scene in black and white,  
Imperfect tho' and small,  
Engraved upon this post-card,  
Might not interest you at all.

You may not care to look at it,  
What matter if you don't;  
Your not having any interest, for  
This pictured post-card won't.

Make less for me the memories  
And thoughts of "ye olden tyme,"  
Freighted with love and tenderness  
And which to-day entwine.

Fondly around my yearning heart  
As with tear-dimmed eyes I gaze  
At this bit of scenery and think  
Over my childhood days.

I think of one in particular  
Who has figured so much in my life,  
One whom I was playmate in childhood  
Afterward sweetheart and wife.

There's the winding Sandy river  
And the "Big Rocks" by its side,  
Where together we've sat fishing,  
Or looking across the tide.

Have wondered at the steamboats  
Painted in colors gay  
On the other side of the river  
Smoking and puffing away.

Or at the town in the distant  
Sometimes we'd sit and gaze  
And dream bright dreams of the future—  
Air castles of childhood days.

And if our thoughts and opinions  
On matters would differ then,  
We'd fall out and quarrel, but always  
Would forgive and make up again.

There's the "forks" in the old country road  
Shaded with sycamores cool,  
Where each afternoon we parted

On our way home from school.

And he, always courteous and gallant  
With manly pride and grace,  
Would carry my books and lunch pail  
To this our parting place.

Those days are gone, forever gone,  
Those care-free days of childhood,  
Yet, I would not call them back to live  
Over again if I could.

For he, my childhood's playmate,  
My girlhood's lover and chum,  
Still walks life's pathway with me  
And for many years we've come

Sometimes through darkened valleys,  
Sometimes on the mountain's height,  
Sometimes 'neath cloud-hung heavens,  
Sometimes in the sunshine bright.

We are closely united now,  
For we're married and we feel  
Each other's interest more keenly  
And we're chums and lovers still.<sup>24</sup>

They had a child who died either at the end of 1908 or in early 1909. They separated and she filed for divorce in July of 1908,<sup>(25)</sup> but we don't have any evidence that the divorce was ever finalized. How this coincided with the death of their child is also not known.

*To A Dead Baby*

Pale little feet, grown quiet ere they could run  
One step in life's strange journey; sweet lips chilled  
To silence ere they prattled; small hands stilled  
Before one stroke of life's long toil was done;  
Uncreased white brows that laurels might have won,  
Yet leave their spacious promise unfulfilled—  
O baby dead, I cannot think God willed  
Your life should end when it had scarce begun!

If no man died till his long life should leave  
All hopes and aims fulfilled, until his feet  
Had trod all paths where men rejoice or grieve,  
I might have doubt of future life more sweet;  
But as I look on you, I must believe  
There is a heaven that makes this earth complete.

Charles, her husband, was a deputy sheriff and was murdered in 1911 when he accompanied the sheriff to serve an arrest warrant on a moon shiner. Although the parties were arrested, they were acquitted of the crime in a trial that lasted less than one day. (26) Effie had a great deal of sadness in her life.

Effie also wrote several short stories and published her last poem in 1917. As a very prolific poet in her early years, it is rather strange that she seems to have stopped writing, or at least publishing, poetry after 1917. In an interview with Ruth Smith, David Deskins reports that Ruth had a box of poems from later years,(27) but I have no idea where those would have gone. It would be fascinating to see poetry written later in her life.

Effie's father died in 1916 and was buried in the DILS Cemetery in Pikeville, Kentucky. This is believed to be the first integrated cemetery in eastern Kentucky and is also the resting place for the infamous Hatfield's and McCoy's. He is shown as being buried with his wife Alvindia. (28) But, as Sibbie was buried in Waukesha, this raises some questions. The cemetery also claims that Frank Waller was an aide to Stonewall Jackson and in fact served Jackson his last meal. As the military definition of aide, spelled A I D E, is -a military officer who acts as an assistant to a superior officer, this seems to be questionable. Stonewall Jackson was known to be very good to the African-Americans, so it may be possible, but Frank was black and though he might have served meals, I believe it is doubtful that he was an aide, with an e, to a Confederate General. As Frank took the surname of his master in Virginia, there may well be a Frank Waller who was white and was indeed the General's aide.

Sometime in 1918, a group called the Metropolitan Holiness Church Association sent canvassers to the Kentucky hills to perform mission work. (29) Effie was impressed with the zeal of the group and she and her mother moved to Waukesha, Wisconsin before 1920 to join them. This was a splinter group of Methodist who broke away from the Methodist Church in 1900. It had number of offshoot locations, though it was headquartered in Waukesha and had a large facility there known as the Fountain House. They were also known as the "Burning Bushers." (30)

A quote from "Preserving Texas history" where one of the other Metropolitan Holiness Church Association congregations had settled states, "The colonists gave up all their worldly possessions upon joining the church and lived communally. They had a communal storehouse and ate in a common dining hall. No class distinctions were recognized. Contact with outsiders was kept to a minimum, but visitors were welcomed and treated hospitably. Liquor and tobacco were forbidden. Those who committed transgressions against the colony's strictures were not punished, but were taken to the church and prayed and wailed over. Most of the colonists' time was occupied with work and worship. Religious services were intense emotional experiences. One local resident later remembered that the "Bushers" would even turn back flips in church and roll around on the sawdust floor." Much of the service was devoted to singing, during which the congregation jumped up and down. Because of this practice, the group was sometimes called the "Holy Jumpers." (31) Similar descriptions were published in local Waukesha papers on the style of worship.

Effie and Sibbie became increasingly disillusioned and decided to leave the Metropolitan Holiness Church Association in 1924 and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in Waukesha. (32) According to an interview with Ruth Smith, Effie's adopted daughter, they had to sue the church to retrieve the money they had turned over to the church when they had joined. (33) They did get their money back and Effie and Sibbie bought a private residence in Waukesha (34) where they lived until 1927 when Sibbie died. Effie's brother, Alfred, then came to live with her as he had retired from the railroad. He died in 1934 and he and Sibbie are both buried in the Prairie Home Cemetery in Waukesha. (35)



In the early 1930s, Effie had also constructed an enormous rock and flower garden. The garden was well known in the area and she had a garden ledger that showed thousands of people came to see it. (36) Her appreciation and possible inspiration for her garden is also shown in her poem

*An Old-Fashioned Garden*

Oh, to wander at will in a garden,  
One of my grandmother's day;  
One that my grandmother tended,  
Where old-fashioned flowers held sway!

Snowball and flowering almond,  
Zinnias gorgeous in dye;  
Lilacs scented and purple  
Which regal robes outvie;

Great silky, blood-red poppies,  
Phlox and sweet William galore;  
Morning glories and holly hocks lusty  
In those happy days of yore,

Blossomed profusely and sweetly  
In splendor and showy array,  
But most of those old-time beauties  
Are not in favor to-day!<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, back in Kentucky, one of Effie's former students, Polly Mullins Ratliff was ill with goiter. Polly and Effie were very close due to the teacher/student relationship and the fact that Effie had lived with the Mullins family for an extended period while she was teaching. It was a common practice to provide teachers room and board in the homes of the students. (38)

Polly had a daughter, Ruth Ratliff, who was born in October of 1917. Polly's husband, Ransom Ratliff, was a white coal miner. Polly Ratliff was an ardent Pentecostal and even though she was suffering from goiter, her faith prevented her from seeking medical help. She knew she might not live long and asked Effie, that if she died, would Effie adopt Ruth and make sure she got an education. (39)

Polly died in 1927 and Ruth and her brother went to live with their maternal grandparents and some bachelor uncles in a two-room log cabin. In 1928, her father remarried, but Ruth did not get along with her stepmother. Unlike her brother, Ruth continued to live with her grandparents as her grandmother needed her help with the cooking and huge piles of laundry from the coal mining uncles. (40)

Ruth lived within sight of a white school, but as her mother was "colored" she was not allowed to attend even though her father, Ransom Ratliff, was white. Ruth walked 4-5 miles to the segregated school and the distance made her attendance rather irregular. Ruth spent 3 years in 3rd grade and was only in 6th grade by the time she was 17. (41)

About this time, Effie returned to Kentucky to visit friends and relatives. She saw the state of Ruth's education and she offered to keep her promise to Polly by adopting Ruth and taking her back to

Waukesha with her. Ruth's father saw the wisdom in this and although the grandparents objected, Ruth moved to Waukesha with Effie in 1935. Effie enrolled Ruth in 7th grade in the Waukesha public school system and this was the turning point in Ruth's life. (42)

In 1937, at age 20, all of the paperwork was completed and Ruth was formally adopted by Effie and took the last name of Smith. (43) Although Ruth was considerably older than her fellow students, she continued her education in Waukesha and graduated with the class of 1941. (44)

Ruth had been raised in the Pentecostal faith, specifically the "glossalalist", or the speaking in tongues, form where there was a dependence on faith healing; and snake handling was used to prove ones sincerity of belief. Effie was a devoted Methodist, but Ruth searched for the denomination that offered the more fundamental doctrines of her Pentecostal background. (45)

Ruth was limited in her search as neither she nor Effie had ever owned or driven a car. All of the churches she visited had to be within walking distance. She eventually settled into the Trinity Lutheran Church of Waukesha. Although she had already been admitted to the Moody Bible Institute to further her education, her pastor convinced her to transfer her application to Concordia College, a school he felt more closely followed the scriptural doctrines of the Bible. She was accepted and on Sept. 2, 1941 she arrived at the school. (46)

After writing her entrance exam and paying her fees, Ruth was assigned to her dorm room. Before she could settle in, she was called to the college presidents office. Her race had once again prevented her from getting the education she had earned and she was forced to leave without even spending one night on campus. She returned to Waukesha the next day. (47)

Her pastor was shocked and contacted Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota. They assured him that her race would not be a problem and soon found a girl's dorm with a vacancy. On Sept. 5, she was installed in her new school and her race was not an issue for the next 3 years until she graduated in May of 1944. (48)

It was a common practice for the President of the college to meet with members of the Synod to find placements for the graduates. 1944 had additional openings due to male teachers and students being inducted into the service during WWII. Even though all of the positions were not filled, Ruth was not given a placement, though it is not documented, her race likely had something to do with this. She returned to her job at Sears. Later that summer she was offered a position at a missionary school in Cleveland, Ohio and in August she moved there to take the job. (49)

After seven months of service, Ruth asked to be released from her contract. She did not believe that the members of the congregation really wanted the kind of school the Missionary Board had envisioned and she returned to Waukesha in 1945. (50)

Once again she returned to Sears, but her real goal was to be a teacher in a Christian school. She asked the Board of Education of the Wisconsin Synod to place her name on a call list, and recognizing that her race might be an issue, asked that "partly colored" be listed following her name. She did not need to get her hopes up if her race would once again be a problem. (51)

Trinity Lutheran School in Neenah had just had a teacher resign in order to get married. Rev. Schaefer, the pastor, asked for a call list and found out that both a daughter of one of his congregants and a sister

of another of the teachers at Trinity Lutheran knew this Ruth Smith. They both provided fine recommendations and he proposed the church hire her to the President of the Synod Board. The President of the Synod objected strongly, believing that because she was "colored" the students would not respect her and she would be ineffective. (52)

Rev. Schaefer took the recommendation to the School Board to hire Ruth Smith and after a lengthy meeting, the School Board unanimously resolved to extend the call to Miss Ruth Smith. Ruth did not hesitate long before accepting the position and about six years later the President of the Synod, who had been so against calling her, even apologized and confessed he had been wrong about her and mistaken in his advice. (53) In the early 1950s, Effie was struggling to take care of her home and gardens in Waukesha due to age and her glaucoma. She moved to Neenah to live with Ruth. Although a devoted Methodist, Effie took instruction in the Lutheran faith and joined Trinity Lutheran in 1954. She was a member there for the rest of her life. (54) Ruth and Effie first lived in an apartment near Washington Park, but the noise of the children bothered Effie, so in 1952 Ruth bought the house at 770 Congress St. Effie passed away in January of 1960 and Ruth lived there until her death in 2005. (55) Ruth taught at Trinity Lutheran School in Neenah for 34 years until she had some health issues and it was recommended that she should not stand for extended periods of time.(56)

I lived across the street from Ruth and Effie and as I was just 12 when Effie died, I only vaguely remember her. I remember a very tiny African American woman who was very religious and was seen to hand clip the grass at the sidewalk with a scissors, something that Ruth also did.

Footnotes:

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