

2010 Fall Meeting of the Edgefield County Historical Society

Celebrating the Life and Works of Braidwood “Braidy” Lester Holmes (1890 – 1966)



5:00 P.M., Saturday, September 25, 2010
Joanne T. Rainsford Discovery Center

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2010 Fall Meeting Program

Invocation - Rev. George L. Brightharp

Welcome - Mary Altalo, President

Pledge of Allegiance

“The Spirit of Edgefield”

Report on the State of the Society – Mary Altalo

Membership Update

Christmas Gala Fundraiser- Carrie Monday

Joanne T. Rainsford Discovery Center

Volunteer Contributions and Coordination

Facilities Renovation for Theatre and Gallery

Historical Society Movie/Lecture Series

New Exhibits - Trica Glenn, Archivist

Strom Thurmond Exhibit

Preston Brooks Exhibit

Edgewood Exhibit

Historic Homes Exhibit

Publications

The Life and Works of Braidwood “Braidy” Lester Holmes

Biographical Sketch - Bettis C. Rainsford

Keynote Speaker - Dr. Benjamin Boatwright Alexander,
Professor of English, Literature and the Humanities,
Franciscan University, Steubenville, Ohio.

Benediction – Rev. Jasper Lloyd, Sr.

Reception

The Spirit of Edgefield

(Air: The Bells of St. Mary's)

The Spirit of Edgefield,
Whatever betide,
Is calling her children,
From far and from wide;
In city and village
Or far out at sea,
They hear her voice calling,
"Come back, sons, to me!"

The Spirit of Edgefield
Is calling today
Her young men and maidens,
Her youth, to the fray
To build a great nation
As strong men of yore;
A challenge she offers:
"Go forward once more!"

Old Edgefield, dear Edgefield
Thy children all love thee;
Thy great men, thy good men,
Wherever they be,
Turn back to the scenes oft'
Remembered in story
Thy children all come back,
 come back
To thee, to thee.

Old Edgefield, dear Edgefield
Thy children all love thee;
Thy great men, thy good men,
Wherever they be,
Turn back to the scenes oft'
Remembered in story
Thy children all come back,
 come back
To thee, to thee.

Hortense Caroline Woodson (1896-1990)
Officer of the Society for Half a Century

Braidwood “Braidy” Lester Holmes

(1890-1966)
“The Edgefield Bard”

*By Bettis C. Rainsford, Historian
Edgefield County Historical Society*

In the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University are found a biographical sketch and notes, manuscripts of a few poems and one of the published books of poetry of a remarkable Edgefield man of the early twentieth century. Thanks to the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts & Letters Fund, these documents, which tell the story of the early life and works of Braidwood “Braidy” Lester Holmes of Edgefield, are carefully preserved for future generations. They date from circa 1921 and provide an intriguing glimpse of this most interesting Edgefield poet, who has been largely forgotten in his home county. The Edgefield County Historical Society is pleased to bring to the attention of the present generation the extraordinary life and accomplishments of this native son.

As an African American man at the time of the ascendancy of Jim Crow laws, Braidy Holmes was a remarkable person – extremely well educated, articulate and ambitious, with an unusually sensitive nature. Raised in the white Trinity Episcopal Church and educated at the African American institutions of The Edgefield Academy and Allen University, he became the author of at least two books of poetry that testify to his remarkable literary talent. *The Idol Hour* was published in 1919 while Braidy was still associated with Allen University. Twenty-three years later, in 1942, *Twilight Reflections* was published in Edgefield. Both books demonstrate that his talent went beyond that of a mere dilettante, and indeed qualify him as a significant poet in American literary history.

That he has not been more universally recognized is the result of the limited exposure of his works, especially given the fact that during the time his works were published, few were inclined to give credit to a black man from a rural county in South Carolina. Unable to make a living as a poet, he pursued careers as a farmer, a taxi driver and a manufacturer of concrete tombstones. He encountered several major difficulties in the course of his life, but, in spite of it all, he retained the ability to see and appreciate the simple and beautiful things in our world. His example is inspiring to us and his poetry insures that he will be remembered for generations to come.

Birth and Family Background

Braidwood “Braidy” Lester Holmes¹ was born circa 1890² in Edgefield to a family with interesting roots in the county. He was the son of C. W. Holmes, who died on July 24, 1924.³ His mother’s name we do not yet know, but his poem, “Well Thou Knoweth, Mother,” indicates that he had a deep devotion to her.⁴ He was adopted at the age of six months by his grandmother,⁵ but appears to have retained a good relationship with his parents as his poems would seem to indicate. We have had an extremely difficult time finding any information about his parents other than his father’s initials⁶ and death date.⁷

¹The full proper name of Braidwood “Braidy” Lester Holmes was difficult to find. As he was born before 1915, when birth certificates in South Carolina were first mandated, there is no official government source for this information. He always signed his name as simply “B. L. Holmes.” However, he was widely known as “Braidy,” with most sources spelling the name as “B-r-a-d-y,” which is the common spelling of that name. However, Miss Hortense Woodson, a long-time Edgefield historian and president of the Edgefield County Historical Society, spelled his name “B-r-a-i-d-y” in a manuscript version of a newspaper article that she wrote at the time he was seeking to publish his second volume of poetry. Miss Woodson was very precise in her work and would not have used this spelling unless she had a basis for doing so. Since he always used “B. L. Holmes,” it was difficult to know how Holmes himself spelled his name. However, in his poem, “Sallie’s Little Cricket,” published in *The Idol Hour*, p. 18, we find that he spelled it “B-r-a-i-d-y,” thus confirming that Miss Woodson’s spelling was the correct one. We still did not know what his middle initial “L” stood for, or what his full first name might be. The answers were found in the records of Trinity Episcopal Church. There, in an entry dated May 7, 1950, we find his full name set forth: “Braidwood Lester Holmes.” In several other locations in those records we find other versions such as “Braidshaw,” but these names appear to have been scratched and replaced with “Braidwood Lester Holmes.” We had not found an earlier confirmation of his full name until we discovered the materials at Yale University, which confirm from circa 1921 that this was indeed his full correct name.

²His obituary in *The Edgefield Advertiser*, March 9, 1966, states that he died February 28, 1966, at the age of 76, which would put his birth in 1890. A printed page from the Old Edgefield Genealogical Society, which does not give its source, puts his birth in 1894. In the estate of his grandmother, Maria Holmes, who died in 1934, Braidy is listed as being 40 years of age at the time of her death. This would confirm his birth year as being 1894 (file 171/6729, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County). In the estate of his aunt, Shidie M. Simmons, who died in 1935, Braidy is listed as being 48 years of age at the time of her death. This would indicate his birth year as 1887 (file 170/6684, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County). He first appears in the census in 1900 where he is listed as being 12 years old, having been born in 1888. He is missing from the 1910 census, but in the 1920 census he is shown as being 35 years old, suggesting that he was born in 1885. The 1930 census puts him at 40 years old, indicating that he was born in 1890. With all of these various dates from these different sources, we have made our best guess that he was born in 1890.

³*Twilight Reflections*, B. L. Holmes, self published, 1942, p. 20.

⁴*The Idol Hour*, B. L. Holmes, p. 7.

⁵“The Edgefield Bard,” anonymous biographical sketch, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁶The 1870 census shows Maria and Charles Holmes with a seven-year-old son named “Criss.” Could this be C.W.?

⁷We have been unable to obtain a copy of his death certificate from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), which would have his father’s and mother’s names and the places of their births. DHEC refuses to release this document to any but a family member, based upon the statute governing such records, which mandates their privacy for fifty years following the death of the subject. We have been unable to find any family member to assist us in getting this document.

Braidy was the grandson of Charlie Holmes⁸ and Maria Holmes.⁹ He was greatly beloved by his grandmother as evidenced by the fact that she remembered him alone among all of her grandchildren in her will, in which she left him four acres of land.¹⁰ His devotion to her was shown by the poem he wrote at the time of her death¹¹ and by the prayer bench he built as a memorial to her, which he placed in Trinity Church.¹² Maria reputedly enjoyed a close relationship with the Pickens family at Edgewood Plantation.¹³ According to her death certificate, she was 91 at the time of her death in 1934. This would mean that she was born in 1843. Her father is listed on the death certificate as Edmund Stevens who was born in South Carolina. Her mother's name and place of birth are missing, with only the letters "D. K," meaning "don't know," written in their stead.¹⁴

Maria, at various times, lived in a house that she owned on Pickens Lane (now Edgewood Road), adjoining Edgewood Plantation.¹⁵ We have not been able to find when she acquired the property, but we did find an 1849 deed, in which the property was sold by Thomas B. Harvey to Edney Boss, "a free woman of color."¹⁶ Ms. Boss apparently still owned the property in 1884, as she is indicated as the owner of

⁸ 1870 census, Horns Creek Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina, which shows Charles and Maria as a married couple with children. See also the Death Certificate of Shidie Simmons, Braidy's aunt, July 22, 1935, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, which lists Charles and Maria Holmes as her parents. We also get Charlie Holmes's name from the records of Trinity Episcopal Church, where Maria is sometimes referred to as Mrs. Charles Holmes (see confirmation record February 3, 1884) and from a manuscript newspaper article by Miss Hortense Woodson about Leila Holmes Oliphant in the Woodson papers of the Edgefield County Historical Society. Leila, a healer of the sick, was the daughter of Charlie and Maria Holmes and an aunt of Braidy. She was first a member of Macedonia Church and later a member of Pleasant Grove. There is no mention of her being a member of Trinity Episcopal Church; however, she was a witness for the baptism of an African American member of Trinity Church (see records of Trinity Episcopal Church for the baptism of Ben Ramey, May 12, 1911).

⁹ *Twilight Reflections*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁰ In her will, dated January 26, 1931, Maria left Braidy four acres on the Modoc Highway, where he lived until his death. Estate File 171/6729, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County.

¹¹ *Twilight Reflections*, p. 29-30.

¹² This prayer bench is inscribed as follows: "To My Gran'ma, Maria Holmes, By B. L. Holmes, Trinity Episcopal Church, Edgefield S.C., October 12, 1937." As new fold-down prayer benches were being installed in the Church in the early 1970's, this bench, together with all of the other old benches, was being thrown away. Bettis C. Rainsford extracted Braidy's bench from the pile being sent to the trash dump and preserved it. About this time, the late Mrs. Eulalie Salley of Aiken gave him a remnant of Oriental carpet which was all that was left of a beautiful rug which Mrs. Salley had on the floor in the drawing room at Edgewood, her historic mansion which she had moved from the Pickens Plantation in Edgefield. The carpet had been given to her by her dear friend, Lucy Mercer Rutherford of Aiken, who is best remembered as the girlfriend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It had once adorned the floor at Mrs. Rutherford's ancestral home, Westover, the Byrd home on the James River in Virginia. This remnant of carpet was just the right size to cover the prayer bench and replace the old cloth covering which was tattered beyond use. Thus, Braidy's prayer bench, dedicated to his "Gran'ma," is now adorned by a piece of carpet, historic in its own right.

¹³ As told to the author by his mother, Mary Cantelou Rainsford (1910-1972).

¹⁴ Death Certificate of Maria Holmes, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.

¹⁵ Her estate file (Estate File 171/6729, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County) shows that she owned this property at her death.

¹⁶ Deed Book 10, p. 447, Edgefield County Archives.

that property on a plat of the adjoining property.¹⁷ Strangely, the 1849 deed was not recorded until 1887. Although no record of Edney Boss's death or any estate file can be located, it is perhaps likely that the recording of the deed in 1887 was a result of the effort to bring resolution to her property following her death.

As we contemplated how Maria might have acquired the property, we speculated that Edney Boss might have been her mother and that Maria inherited the property from her. Indeed, the census records show that Edney Boss did have a daughter named Maria. The 1850 census lists Edney Boss as being a mulatto woman of 35 years of age, born in Virginia, with seven children: Benjamin (16), William (14), Henry (12), Calvin (11), Elvin (10), Elizabeth (8) and Maria (2). All of these children were born in South Carolina, meaning that this "woman of color" had apparently come down from Virginia at least as early as 1834.¹⁸ No husband appears in the household. (Is it possible that Maria's father, Edmund, was a slave at Edgewood, the adjoining plantation of the Pickens family? The papers of Francis Pickens may reveal the answer to this question.¹⁹) The 1860 census lists Edney as a mulatto woman of 55 years of age, engaged as a "washerwoman." That census lists only three children: Elvon [sic] (17), Betsy (13) and Maria (10), with Elvin listed as a "mechanic."²⁰ Thus, the 1850 and 1860 censuses indicate that Maria was born in 1848 and 1850 respectively.

After the Civil War, Maria's brother Elvin was apparently still living with his mother in the village of Edgefield and was married to a former Edgefield slave.²¹ In 1867, at a mass meeting of freedmen that also included several prominent members of the traditional white planter elite, Elvin announced that he was going "to enlighten and serve and to teach the freedmen their rights and interests." He cautioned the former slaves against expecting social equality with the whites, but implored them to "stand up for that political equality which is now . . . [theirs] by law."²²

Maria appears in the 1870 census living with her husband, Charles, in the Horns Creek Township, with four children, Criss (7), Pierce (6), Shidy (3), and Hatty (1). Charles is shown as 30 years old and a "Farm Laborer," Maria, 25 years old and "keeping house," Criss and Pierce, "attending school" and the two daughters, "at home." Also living in the household is a 20-year-old male by the name of "Mandy Joshua," who is listed as a farm laborer.²³ Maria does not appear again in the census until 1900, when she is listed as a head of household, 65 years of age, a farmer, born in 1835 and having six persons living with her: Shidy, a daughter (30), Hattie, a daughter (28), Leila, a daughter (25), Joe, a servant (21), Brady, a son [sic] (12), and

¹⁷ Original plat by M. H. Mims, dated 1884, in the possession of Albert E. Rainsford, Jr., Edgefield, S.C.

¹⁸ 1850 census, the District, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

¹⁹ This will be a time consuming task which the author has not yet been able to undertake.

²⁰ 1860 census, the District, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

²¹ 1870 census, Horns Creek Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

²² *Edgefield Advertiser*, 17 July 1867, quoted in Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions, Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina*, University of North Carolina Press, 1985, p. 228.

²³ 1870 census, Horns Creek Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

Sallie, a servant (9). The three oldest daughters are listed as teachers, Joe and Brady as farm laborers and Sallie as “in school.”²⁴

Maria’s husband, Charles, is not shown in Maria’s household in this 1900 census, but a Charles Holmes is listed separately in Wise Township where he is shown as a head of household, 55 years old and married for 30 years, but with no one living with him.²⁵ Does this mean that Maria and Charles were separated and living in separate households, but still married? As to what happened to Charles, we find a note in the Yale Collection that states that “gf died when left Allen” [sic].²⁶ His death seems to be confirmed by a death certificate of a Charles Holmes, 80 years of age, who died on February 28, 1917, in Edgefield. He is shown as “widowed.”²⁷ Maria was still living at this time, but if indeed they had been separated for over twenty-five years, it could have been thought that Charles was widowed. At Macedonia Church, adjoining the grave of Maria Holmes is a grave marked by a concrete tombstone which reads “C.M. Holmes.” No date or other information is given.

In the 1910 census, Maria Holmes is listed as head of household, 65 years of age, a farmer with only a daughter [sic], Sallie (18), living with her.²⁸ In 1920 she is listed as a head of household, 75 years of age, a farmer with a grandson Brady (35), a granddaughter, Sallie (25), a great-granddaughter, Bessie (5) and a great-granddaughter, Lee (3 ½) living with her.²⁹ In 1930, she is listed as a head of household, 85 years of age, a farmer with a daughter, Shidie (56), living with her.³⁰

In 1891, Maria purchased from W. H. Folk, a prominent lawyer and planter of Edgefield, a tract of 25 acres of land on the west side of town that were part of the “Promise Land” [sic].³¹ The acquisition of this 25-acre tract in 1891 might suggest that Maria had recently inherited the money to purchase it. Could this inheritance have come from Edney Boss who died circa 1887? Maria apparently lived on this property in 1900, for we find an article in *The Edgefield Chronicle* which states “Mrs. Maria Holmes, colored, living at or near ‘The Promised Land’ tells us that a hog has strayed into her premises, and that she has said hog in keeping – a white hog with three black spots.”³² That she would take the trouble to have the notice of

²⁴ 1900 census, Wise Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

²⁵ 1900 census, Wise Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

²⁶ Manuscript Notes, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

²⁷ Death Certificate of Charles Holmes, February 28, 1917, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control. Another Charles Holmes, 80 years of age and widowed, died on September 21, 1925.

²⁸ 1910 census, Wise Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

²⁹ 1920 census, Wise Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

³⁰ 1930 census, Wise Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina.

³¹ Deed Book 19, p. 646, Edgefield County Archives. Confirmed in the Manuscript Notes, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

³² *Edgefield Chronicle*, July 5, 1900. That this was published in the *Chronicle*, rather than the *Advertiser*, is probably because, as an Episcopalian, Mrs. Holmes may have been on friendly terms with *Chronicle* editor, James T. Bacon, who was a life-long member and long-time organist of Trinity Episcopal Church.

this hog published in the newspaper so that its rightful owner could reclaim it tells us something of her character. The records suggest that Maria never moved back to her mother's house on Pickens Lane, but she continued to own that property until she died.³³ After her death, the Pickens Lane property was sold in 1936 to Albert E. Rainsford, Sr., and is now part of the Rainsford Holmewood tract.

As one who was reputedly close to the Pickens family, who were loyal Episcopalians, Maria Holmes became a member of Trinity Episcopal Church and remained a member of that church all of her life.³⁵ In the records of Trinity Episcopal Church we do not find her baptismal record, but we do find that she was confirmed in the church on February 3, 1884.³⁶ We also find the record of her funeral on April 22, 1934.³⁷ Additionally, her daughter, Leila Holmes [Oliphant], was a witness for the baptism of another African American member of that church.³⁸

In her Last Will and Testament which was dated January 26, 1931, Maria lists her children as Frank P. Holmes (who apparently had moved to New York City by 1936), Shidie Simmons, and Leila Oliphant.³⁹ As noted above, another son, C. W., Braidy's father, had died in 1924. We believe that another daughter, perhaps Hattie, married a man by the name of Davis, as there were grandchildren with this name.⁴⁰ Maria was buried in Macedonia Church cemetery.⁴¹ Her estate file does show that a tombstone was purchased and erected for her, and it remains at Macedonia until this day.⁴²

There has been a suggestion⁴³ that Charlie Holmes, Braidy's grandfather, had been a slave in Charleston in the household of Professor Francis Simmons Holmes (1815-1882), a member of the faculty of the College of Charleston and Curator of the Charleston Museum. During the Civil War, as Charleston lay under siege, Professor Holmes fled to Edgefield, bringing with him for safe-keeping all of the artifacts of the Charleston Museum. He had come at the invitation of his friend and brother-in-law, George Trenholm, Secretary of the Treasury of the Confederacy and the

³³ There is some indication that Maria's daughter, Shidy Holmes Simmons, lived in this house. See deed of B. L. Holmes, et. al., to Frank P. Holmes, dated August 10, 1936, recorded in Deed Book 33, p. 524, Edgefield County Archives.

³⁴ Masters Deed Book 4, p. 181, Office of the Clerk of Court for Edgefield County.

³⁵ As told to the author by his mother, Mary C. Rainsford (1910-1972), who had been a life-long member of Trinity Episcopal Church.

³⁶ Records of Trinity Episcopal Church, Tompkins Memorial Library, February 3, 1884.

³⁷ Records of Trinity Episcopal Church, Tompkins Memorial Library, April 22, 1934.

³⁸ Records of Trinity Episcopal Church, Tompkins Memorial Library, May 12, 1911.

³⁹ Estate File 171/6729, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County.

⁴⁰ Estate file of Shidie Holmes Simmons, 1935, (Estate File 170/6684, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County).

⁴¹ Records of Trinity Episcopal Church, Tompkins Memorial Library, April 22, 1934. *African American Cemeteries*, Vol. 1, Old Edgefield District Genealogical Society, p. 62.

⁴² Estate File 171/6729, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County.

⁴³ This information comes from the author's conversation with Dorothy Hart "Dot" Mims on August 4, 2010, but so far no firm documentary evidence has been found to substantiate it.

person upon whom the character Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind* was reputedly based. Trenholm had bought Darby Plantation, four miles east of Edgefield, from Governor Milledge L. Bonham, and thought that this would be a safe haven for Professor Holmes and his family. According to the suggestion, Charlie Holmes, Braidy's grandfather, came to Edgefield with Professor Holmes, remained in Edgefield, marrying Maria, whom he may have met through the Holmes family's association with Trinity Church and adopted the Holmes name after the War.⁴⁴

Early Life

Of Braidy's early life we know little, except what we glean from "The Edgefield Bard," the two-page biographical sketch with accompanying notes in the Yale Collection, and from what Braidy tells us in his poems. From his poems one gets the impression that he had a happy childhood and was very close to all members of his family.⁴⁵ "The Edgefield Bard" states that he was adopted at the age of six months by his grandmother, Maria Holmes. Further, we are told that he had one brother and six sisters,⁴⁶ one of whom died about 1915, and was memorialized by Braidy with a poem, "To Our Little Gussie." This poem was first published in *The Idol Hour*⁴⁷ and then revised and included in *Twilight Reflections*.⁴⁸ He also makes reference to Gussie in "To Our Father – C. W. Holmes."⁴⁹ "The Edgefield Bard" tells us that some of these siblings "are in 'machinery' in Gary, Indiana" and "some of them are elsewhere – farmers of wood sold by the stick and haulers of water in wagons." The author of "The Edgefield Bard"⁵⁰ concludes: "It is clear that Braidwood Lester Holmes alone of the family arises from the predictable level into the unexpected."⁵¹

⁴⁴ Since Charles Holmes is shown in the 1870 census as living in Edgefield County, married to Maria and with a 7 year old son, the record would suggest that he married Maria soon after he arrived in Edgefield. An autobiographical sketch of A. Baron Holmes (1842-c.1900), son of Professor Francis Simmons Holmes, mentions the names of three devoted servants who were with the Holmes family in the fall of 1865: Isaac, Sue and Dabs. He further notes that Sue had "two boys." Could one of these boys have been Charlie, grandfather of Braidy? Files for Francis Simmons Holmes and A. Baron Holmes in the possession of Bettis C. Rainsford, Edgefield, S.C.

⁴⁵ See, for example, "The Hand of Time," in *The Idol Hour*, p. 41.

⁴⁶ From the Estate of Shidie Holmes Simmons in 1935 (file 170/6684, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County), we find that Braidy's surviving sisters were named Olia, Inez and Bernice and that his brother was named Emmons. This record suggests that Braidy was the oldest child, with Olia being five years younger, Inez eight years younger, Bernice ten years younger, and Emmons thirteen years younger. We know that one sister "Gussie" died in 1915, but this leaves two sisters unaccounted for.

⁴⁷ *The Idol Hour*, pp. 46 and 47.

⁴⁸ *Twilight Reflections*, pp. 32 and 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁰ It is unclear who the author of "The Edgefield Bard" was, but we do not believe that it was Holmes himself. It may have been a mentor at Allen University, perhaps a person named "Talley Addison," whose name is written in a pencil note as the printer of *The Idol Hour* in the Manuscript Notes, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. See Note 64 below.

⁵¹ "The Edgefield Bard," a biographical sketch, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Braidy was taught at an early age by his aunt, Shidie Holmes, to read and then to form letters, using *Appleton's Readers*.⁵² Very soon he began to cast into poetic form verses dealing with the chores on his grandmother's farm. At the age of six or seven he wrote "Minding Grandma's Cows" and continued to write a few poems every year thereafter. His first formal education began when he entered The Edgefield Academy, which was located in Edgefield across from Macedonia Church. The school was a two-mile walk into town from his home in the Promised Land. There, in a building of only two rooms, two teachers instructed eighty or ninety students.⁵³ The author of "The Edgefield Bard" comments that at this stage of his life "it may be imagined [Braidy] dreamed of a higher work than ploughing or scalding hogs in a barrel under the November sun."⁵⁴

In the fall of 1909, he was enrolled in the seventh grade at Allen University in Columbia.⁵⁵ There or elsewhere he apparently studied German, for he wrote a poem in 1912, "Loblied Der Venus," in German. He included it in English translation ("Thou Goddess of Love") in his first book, *The Idol Hour*.⁵⁶ He remained at Allen, working his way through, until 1912⁵⁷ when he went to Jacksonville, Florida, for the years 1912 and 1913. It is not clear why he went to Jacksonville or what he did while there.⁵⁸ In 1914 and 1915 he was involved in "Public Work," but we do not know what this work was or where he did it.⁵⁹

In April of 1915, he married Sallie Bird [sic], who shared his life for more than half a century.⁶⁰ Her grave is next to his at Bethel Church in Edgefield. Sallie is also mentioned in a number of his poems.⁶¹ The records of Trinity Episcopal Church spell her maiden name with a "y" instead of an "i," the former being the more common spelling of the name in Edgefield County. Several of Braidy's poems make reference to "Sallie Brown."⁶² Could Brown have been another name of Sallie Bird, or

⁵² *Appleton's Readers* were a series of books first published in 1887, which were designed to teach children to read.

⁵³ "The Edgefield Bard," a biographical sketch, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ We found his attendance at Allen University initially in the manuscript article of Miss Hortense Woodson referred to above (See Note 1). In the records of Allen University we find that in 1908-1909 "Bravewood [sic] Holmes of Edgefield" was a seventh-grade student. At that time Allen University had students from first grade through college. Other than this instance, the archivist at Allen University has been unable to find any references to him. See also "The Edgefield Bard," a biographical sketch, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁵⁶ According to its archivist, Allen University taught only Latin and Greek, and not German, during the years Braidy would have been there. *The Idol Hour*, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Manuscript Notes, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* His time in Jacksonville, Florida, is memorialized in his poem, "My Sweetheart of Jax, Fla." *The Idol Hour*, pp. 22-24.

⁵⁹ Manuscript Notes, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ See, for example, "Sallie's Little Cricket," *The Idol Hour*, p. 18.

⁶² Both "The False Lover" (p. 19) and "That Summer Evening" (p. 36) in *The Idol Hour* refer to a lover named "Sallie Brown."

was this another person from his earlier years? It is also interesting that the census records beginning in 1900 show Sallie, “a servant,” living in the Maria Holmes household. The 1910 census lists Sallie as “a daughter” and the 1920 census lists her as “a granddaughter.” Could this “servant,” “daughter,” and “granddaughter” have been the Sallie whom Braidy married? Could Braidy have married the servant girl who became his adopted sister?

In May of 1919, Braidy’s first book of poetry, *The Idol Hour – Poetic Works of B.L. Holmes*, was printed. Our evidence for the publication date is a pencil note in the Yale Collection, which states, “Book Idol Hour May 1919 printed by Talley Addison, Allen Univ.”⁶³ One might assume that this Talley Addison was associated with Allen University in some capacity, either as a member of the faculty or as an administrator.⁶⁴ Perhaps this person was Braidy’s mentor and was the author of “The Edgefield Bard.”

At the time Braidy was finishing his education and publishing *The Idol Hour*, there were very few opportunities open to young black men, except getting behind a mule on a farm. In the Miscellaneous Records in the Edgefield County Archives, we find a rent contract dated April 14, 1919, between B. L. Homes and Henry Mims, in which Braidy rented from Henry Mims for the year 1919 “a certain half horse farm” of 10 acres in Wise Township. For rent he was to give Henry Mims “400 pounds of good middling lint cotton, put up in merchantable bales and delivered at Edgefield on or before November 1, 1919.”⁶⁵ Thus, we know that the young Braidy Holmes had begun his career as a cotton farmer.

Later that same year, on November 25, 1919, Braidy purchased from B. B. Bouknight, J. H. Bouknight, W. M. Bouknight and Emma B. Bouknight seventy-one acres of land on the west side of Edgefield, adjoining lands of his grandmother, Maria Holmes. For this land he paid \$1,775.⁶⁶ Thus, he was beginning to spread his wings as a farmer.

Two years later, we find in the February 9, 1921, edition of *The Edgefield Advertiser* an article announcing that “Brady L. Holmes, Edgefield County’s colored poet,” had

⁶³ Manuscript Notes, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁶⁴ We have been unable to determine whether Talley Addison was a member of the faculty or an administrator at Allen at the time Braidy was a student there. However, we find that Talley H. Addison was a member of the Board of Trustees of Allen University representing the Piedmont Conference in 1939. He is also listed in that same year as being on the Faculty Committee for the Catalogue. We are still searching to determine what role he may have had in the period when Braidy was at Allen. Resolution of the Board of Trustees of Allen University, February 25, 1939, and the *Allen University Bulletin*, April, 1939, Allen University Archives, Columbia, S.C.

⁶⁵ Miscellaneous Book J, p. 295, Edgefield County Archives.

⁶⁶ Deed Book 27, p. 793, Edgefield County Archives. See the confirmation of this transaction in the Manuscript Notes, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

been charged with forging checks.⁶⁷ From this article, we know that by 1921 Brady was already known for his poetic works. We also learn that Brady had carried a bale of cotton to Johnston and sold it to one of the local buyers. The article goes on to note that Holmes was suspected of forging checks on the account of this buyer, not only at this time in 1921, but also in 1919 and 1920. The article does mention, by way of explanation as to what he may have done with the money he allegedly took, that he went “on a trip to Baltimore where it is said he took a course in medicine.”⁶⁸ This suggests that Brady had an ambition to do more with his life than grow cotton. This ambition, combined with his obvious intellect, could have positioned him to make a real mark on the world had his opportunities as a young black man in the early twentieth century not been so limited.

There is no reference to Brady’s indictment or conviction in the records of the Court of General Sessions in Edgefield County.⁶⁹ However, we do find in the jail records that B. L. Holmes was put in jail on February 2, 1921, and remained there until March 11. In the column headed “By Whom Released” is the notation “2 years in Pen/Gang.”⁷⁰ Could he have been indicted, tried and convicted and without reference being made in the records of the Court of General Sessions? The answer to this is probably not, and thus we are left with the possibility that some kind of deal was worked out to get Brady off the hook.

While the newspaper article does not identify the cotton buyer, it is likely that the buyer was B. B. Bouknight, one of the siblings from whom Brady had purchased the seventy-one acre tract of land in 1919. Bouknight was a prominent cotton dealer and farmer in the county. We find that some months after his arrest, Brady deeded the 71 acre tract back to Bouknight “for one dollar and other valuable consideration.” O. B. Anderson, prominent local leader and Court Stenographer for the Circuit Court, was a witness to this deed.⁷¹ Perhaps Anderson had interceded in getting Bouknight to drop the criminal prosecution and to take the land back in settlement for the forgery. Some years later, after the death of Bouknight, Brady

⁶⁷ *Edgefield Advertiser*, February 9, 1921. The full article is as follows: “Charged with Forging Checks. Brady L. Holmes, Edgefield County’s colored poet, is in jail charged with forging checks on banks of Johnston. About ten days ago he carried a bale of cotton to Johnston, sold it to one of the local buyers and received a check therefor in the usual form of cotton checks issued by the buyer on his local bank. Holmes made a close study of the signature and forged the name of the cotton buyer to two checks on one of the banks of Johnston and received the cash for them. The original and genuine check which was given him in payment for the bale of cotton he brought back with him to Edgefield and had one of the banks here to cash it. Upon investigation it was found that similar forgeries had been committed in 1919 and again in 1920. It is believed by some that the other forgeries were committed by Holmes. It is alleged that he has handled considerable money in the past two or three years. Some of it being spent on a trip to Baltimore where it is said he took a course in medicine. It is probable that Holmes will have to face the charge of forgery at the March term of court.”

⁶⁸ Manuscript Notes, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, makes a reference “Just from Baltimore” [sic].

⁶⁹ General Sessions records, Office of the Clerk of Court for Edgefield County.

⁷⁰ Jail records for February and March, 1921, Edgefield County Archives.

⁷¹ Deed Book 28, p. 521, Edgefield County Archives.

wrote a poem titled “Bouknight (In Respectful Memory of Mr. B. B. Bouknight, ‘a very good man.’)”⁷² Then, in 1939, after the death of Anderson, he wrote another poem titled “To Mr. O. B. Anderson, My Friend and Counselor.”⁷³ These are the only two poems in either book where individuals, other than family members, are memorialized. Perhaps these two poems testify to the resolution of the 1921 difficulty in which Braidy found himself.

In the jail records we also find that Braidy was arrested again in 1924 for forging a check. He apparently remained in jail from October 30, 1924, until January 14, 1925, when his jail fee was paid and returned to the county treasurer.⁷⁴ We have found no further information about this episode in the jail records, the records of the Court of General Sessions or the newspapers.

While searching for Braidy’s records in regard to these forging incidents, we came across another entry in 1935, in which Braidy found himself in jail for assault and battery. He spent only two days in jail and there is no further information as to what took place.⁷⁵

Later Life

In later years, Braidy was a taxi driver in Edgefield. He maintained his stand in front of the Edgefield Mercantile Store (now Crouch Hardware) on the town square. According to Miss Hortense Woodson, it was there that he thought up verses to write.⁷⁶ Later, in the 1950’s the taxi stand was moved to Jones Street beside Mitchell’s Drug Store.⁷⁷ One Edgefieldian remembers being taken often to “Miss Nell’s” Kindergarten in Braidy’s taxicab. He recalls a hole in the floorboard through which one could see the pavement below.⁷⁸ Another Edgefieldian remembers that Braidy could write in shorthand and would demonstrate this to school children.⁷⁹ At some point in his life, Braidy manufactured concrete tombstones and sold them primarily to the black citizens of the county. These tombstones were a less expensive product than granite or marble tombstones.⁸⁰

⁷² *Twilight Reflections*, p. 7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

⁷⁴ Jail records for November and December, 1924, Edgefield County Archives.

⁷⁵ Jail records for July, 1935, Edgefield County Archives.

⁷⁶ Woodson article, paragraph one. See note 1 above.

⁷⁷ This was told to the author on September 14, 2010, by Thurmond Burnett, owner of Edgefield Mercantile Funeral Home who had worked at Mitchell’s Drug Store and at Willis Holmes’s Paint and Electric Store during the 1950’s and afterwards at the Edgefield Mercantile Furniture Store on Main Street.

⁷⁸ This was told to the author on September 8, 2010, by Doug Timmerman.

⁷⁹ This was told to the author on August 12, 2010, by Norman “Joe” Dorn.

⁸⁰ Told years ago to the author by a source long forgotten. This fact is contained in notes made by the author in the late 1980’s. Holmes’s own tombstone in the New Bethel Holiness Church cemetery is of this type. That it was made by him was told to the Reverend William C. Weaver by a member of the church and is contained in a note to Laurel Blossom, editor of *Lovely Village of the Hills: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Edgefield Poetry*. The note is in the files of the Old Edgefield District Genealogical Society.

Some twenty years after the publication of *The Idol Hour*, Braidy had another volume of poems in manuscript form, which he hoped to have published.⁸¹ In 1942, he published *Twilight Reflections*, which was printed by *The Edgefield Advertiser*. That volume notes that he is the “Author of *The Idol Hour* and *Other Poetic Works*.”⁸² This volume contained some of his earlier poems, which he had revised, as well as a number of new poems.

We know that Braidy inherited from his grandmother in 1934 four acres of land on the Modoc Highway, now South Carolina Highway 23.⁸³ This property is about two miles west of town, on the south side of the road on the hill just before the old Mims store at the Cedar Creek bottom.⁸⁴ We do not know whether there was already a house on the property when Braidy inherited it, or whether he had been living there during his grandmother’s lifetime. In 1920 he and Sallie were still living with Maria, but by 1930, they headed another household. Could they have already been living in a house on the four acres? In any event, he did live on this property for many years until his death in 1966.⁸⁵

Braidy was described by Miss Hortense Woodson as “a tall, dark-skinned Negro man, wearing silver-rimmed eye glasses.”⁸⁶ His complexion and the silver-rimmed eye glasses are confirmed by the photograph of Holmes in the frontspiece of *Twilight Reflections*. His height was given in another source as 6 feet, 3 inches.⁸⁷

Although Braidy’s obituary in *The Edgefield Advertiser* says that he was survived by a daughter, it does not give her name.⁸⁸ The 1920 census shows a five year old daughter, Bessie, living with them.⁸⁹ The 1930 census shows Bessie to be twelve years old.⁹⁰ In *Twilight Reflections* there is a poem “Little Bessie Wonders” which appears to have been written when Bessie was very young – probably in the early 1920’s.⁹¹ Bessie

⁸¹ Woodson article, paragraph one.

⁸² *Twilight Reflections*, frontspiece.

⁸³ Last Will and Testament of Maria Holmes in Estate File 171/6729, Office of the Probate Judge for Edgefield County.

⁸⁴ As told to the author by Sue Bell Thomas Ware Simpkins on July 30, 2010. Mrs. Simpkins, with her first husband, Charlie Ware, lived next door to Braidy for a number of years until he died.

⁸⁵ Over the years, he borrowed money from the bank and several individuals, giving a mortgage on the property as security. In 1965 he sold the property to C. E. “Ed” Mims, reserving life estates to himself and his wife. Deed Book 50, p. 389, Office of the Clerk of Court for Edgefield County.

⁸⁶ Woodson article, paragraph one.

⁸⁷ Manney C. Reid, *Watched Over and Blessed, The Memoirs of Manney C. Reid*, p. 92.

⁸⁸ *The Edgefield Advertiser*, March 9, 1966.

⁸⁹ 1920 census, Wise Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina. The census also shows a female of 3½ years old named “Lee,” described as a great-granddaughter of Maria, living in the household. Could this have been another of Braidy’s daughters or was she the child of another grandchild of Maria’s?

⁹⁰ 1930 census, Wise Township, Edgefield County, South Carolina. The other female, Lee, is not living in the household at this time. Could she have died or did she move back to the home of her parents, some other grandchild of Maria’s?

⁹¹ *Twilight Reflections*, pp. 4-5.

apparently married a man by the name of Bettis and thus became Bessie Bettis.⁹² Some believe that Bessie was not actually his daughter, but a girl whom he and Sallie had adopted. Whether this is so and, if so, whether it was a legal adoption has not been determined. Apparently Bessie had two children, a girl and a boy, who were thought by some to be Braidy's grandchildren.⁹³ This is the same Bessie Bettis who induced Braidy to become involved in the 1960 cover-up of a murder (see below).

Another source tells us that Braidy had also adopted a son, whose name was Otis.⁹⁴ The records of Trinity Episcopal Church record that Otis Blalock Holmes, who was born in Edgefield on January 20, 1943, was baptized at Trinity on May 7, 1950. Braidwood Lester Holmes and Sallie Byrd Holmes are listed as "parents by adoption." Sponsors were Braidwood L. Holmes, Luther Drake and Jessie Butler Drake.⁹⁵ To date, neither the daughter nor the son has been located.

One of the interesting sidelights of Braidy Holmes that has been handed down to us is in reference to his role at Trinity Episcopal Church. Like his grandmother Maria Holmes, Braidy was a lifelong member of Trinity. Although we do not find a record of his baptism in the church records, we find that he was confirmed on January 11, 1920.⁹⁶ He was a regular attendant of the church throughout his adult life. In the late 1940's, a new minister came to Trinity, Manney C. Reid. In his 2002 *Memoirs*, Rev. Reid records the following:

[An Ecumenical group of Edgefield Christians which had been formed] got around to talking about "membership" size and makeup, and someone asked, "You all have a black man coming to Trinity, do you not?" Miss Curran [Feltham] replied, "Oh, yes, we have Bra[i]dy Holmes, and he sits on the very last pew!" "But 'can he,' I mean, 'does he' take Communion from your Common Cup?" the lady questioned.

"Why, of course he does. BUT, he waits until everyone else has communed. NO ONE communes after he does!" Miss Curran said, with certainty and some pride. Having overheard the dialogue, I felt constrained to not let Miss Curran's erroneous statement stand. I said, "That's really not RIGHT, Miss Curran. You know the Prayer Book 'rubric' calls for the Rector to consume ALL the 'bread and wine' that is left over. I am the LAST PERSON who communes every Sunday!" "Oh, My GOD, you're RIGHT! How could I be so dumb?" Miss Curran blurted out.

⁹² As told to the author by Sue Bell Thomas Ware Simpkins and Robert Ware on September 18, 2010.

⁹³ As told to the author by Sue Bell Thomas Ware Simpkins on July 30, 2010.

⁹⁴ As told to the author by Ernest "Popcorn" Williams on August 11, 2010.

⁹⁵ Records of Trinity Episcopal Church, Tompkins Memorial Library, May 7, 1950.

⁹⁶ Records of Trinity Episcopal Church, Tompkins Memorial Library, January 11, 1920.

Two Sundays later, at our monthly “Holy Communion” service, Miss Curran did not come forward with her family. Instead, she waited until Bra[il]dy Holmes, all 6’3” of him, made his stately, reverent walk up the aisle. Miss Curran got out of her pew, followed him up the aisle, and knelt at his LEFT. She received BOTH the bread and wine, (the Body and Blood of Our Lord) AFTER Bra[il]dy, and followed him back down to their respective pews. She did that two more times, after which her family and the Mayor and his family did the same thing. The YEAR was 1952! I found myself wondering if GOD or I had the more joyous feeling in our hearts.⁹⁷

A sad chapter in the life of Braidy Holmes occurred on April 20, 1960. In a neighboring house on Highway 23, a man by the name of Johnny Dawson got into a fight with another man, Joe Allen, and shot and killed Allen.⁹⁸ Braidy’s daughter, Bessie Bettis, was a friend of Dawson and apparently prevailed upon the elderly Holmes, then seventy years of age, to assist her in helping Dawson to escape and in hindering his capture and conviction. Possibly Braidy viewed Allen as the aggressor and sympathized with Dawson, or maybe he was just acceding to the wishes of his daughter, Bessie. Regardless of his motive, Holmes reputedly hid the murder weapon in his chicken house. The sheriff and his deputies suspected Bessie Bettis and Holmes of some involvement and ultimately found the gun in its hiding place.⁹⁹ Both Bessie Bettis and Braidy Holmes were arrested, indicted and convicted as “Accessories after the Fact (Manslaughter).” Holmes received a five-year sentence which was suspended upon service of five years probation and Bessie received a three-year sentence which was suspended upon service of five years probation.¹⁰⁰

Braidy Holmes died on February 28, 1966. His obituary in the March 9, 1966, edition of *The Edgefield Advertiser* reads:

Brady Holmes, 76, Died February 28

Brady Holmes, 76, colored, died Feb. 28, 1966, following a period of declining health. For a number of years he operated a taxi service in Edgefield, and was highly respected by members of both the white and negro races. He was a member of the Trinity Episcopal Church. Writing poetry was a hobby of his, and *The Edgefield Advertiser* had printed a small volume of his poems. He is survived by his widow, a daughter, and other relatives. Funeral

⁹⁷ Reid, *Memoirs*, pp. 91-92. The author and many other members of Trinity have vivid recollections of Braidy Holmes’ “stately, reverent walks” up the aisle to take communion.

⁹⁸ Indictment, Edgefield County Clerk of Court, July 2, 1960.

⁹⁹ As told to the author by Sue Bell Thomas Ware Simpkins, July 30, 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Judgment of the Circuit Court, T. B. Greneker, Presiding Judge, July 12, 1960.

services were held Sunday afternoon at 3:30 o'clock at New Bethel Holiness Church, with interment in the church cemetery. The Rev. W. C. Beckham, Archdeacon of the Upper Diocese of South Carolina [of the Episcopal Church], conducted the services.¹⁰¹

Braidy's grave at New Bethel Holiness Church across the road from his home is just to the west of the church building. The tombstone, which he made himself, has "FAITH" on the top left, a cross in the top center, and "PEACE" on the top right. Below that is the name "HOLMES" with "B L - SALLIE" below. Near the bottom is the phrase "BEYOND THE SUN SET." He was a poet to the end.



Conclusion

Braidy Holmes's life and work provide an intriguing glimpse into a part of our past which we would seldom otherwise reflect upon. Who would have suspected that a black man of his quality and education would have played upon the stage of the early twentieth century in a rural county like Edgefield? Our "Edgefield Bard" inspires us with his intellect, his literary sophistication and his sensitivity. His poetry goes far beyond that of a local dilettante and indeed qualifies him for inclusion among the significant poets in American literary history. However, because of the limited exposure which his poetry has had, very few people have had the opportunity to know his work. In many ways Braidy is like Emily Dickinson, who, unbeknownst to most of her contemporaries, wrote many poems throughout her life but kept them hidden away in her bedroom. It was only after her death that her poems were discovered, and she became known as a major American poet. We hope and expect that literary critics, Southern historians and commentators from other disciplines will soon discover Braidy Holmes, our "Edgefield Bard," and raise his stature to that which he deserves.

¹⁰¹ *The Edgefield Advertiser*, March 9, 1966. The Rev. William C. "Bill" Beckham was the priest-in-charge at Trinity Episcopal Church from 1954 to 1957 and later became Bishop of the Upper Diocese of South Carolina. He would have known Braidy well.

Selections from the Poetic Works of Braidy L. Holmes

A PART OF OUR LIVES

Note: One can imagine the frustration and anguish which a well-educated and ambitious young black man faced in early 20th century Edgefield County. There were few opportunities open to him other than farming, except perhaps teaching school. It may have been his ambition to do more that caused him to get into trouble over forging checks in 1921. It was perhaps in the aftermath of this difficult situation that Braidy wrote "A Part of our Lives," as follows:

As onward through life we are treading
The narrow path, day after day,
How often we find our footsteps
Have erred, and we miss our way.

And often our way is so rugged,
We fall in the bosom of fate,
And there are ensnared by the fowler,
Who privily lieth in wait.

We try to arise and be going,
And not be the victim of fate,
For we know that at home there's a dear one
Who's waiting for us at the gate.

We know that a dear one is watching
The path that we treaded, and yearns,
With soft eyes uplifted to heaven,
In prayer, for her loved one's return.

We strive, but in vain, with misfortune,
And life seems a wreck on the foam,
And dim and more dim is the vision
Of her who is waiting at home.

How long, Oh God, must we tarry,
The victim of merciless fate?
How long must we wait and be haunted
By the dear trusting face at the gate?

We know the sweet lips of our dear one
Have borne our name often in prayer,
And oft, as a child that is lonely,
She calls, then listens to hear.

Oh, may we return to her quickly,
And there the sad story relate
To the dear, trusting one who's waited
So patiently there at the gate!

I know that my darling will nestle
Her head on this bosom of mine,
And silently weep as I tell her
The hard, cruel fate that was mine.

Haste the day we may say, "'Tis all over,"
And calm all the sad, anxious fears,
And press the sweet form to our bosom,
And kiss away all of her tears.

And then, when our cares are all over,
And a more perfect day we will know,
When God takes the true and the trusting
To sweeten that beautiful shore,

And when on some beautiful evening,
She waits for her dear one to come,
May we join with the waiting forever,
At the gate of our "Heavenly Home."

And when she comes back in our vision
And whispers, "I'm waiting for thee,"
May we answer, "I'm coming, my dear one,
To where all is happy and free."

THE NEGRO AND THE MULE

Note: There is no icon which more epitomizes the rural South in the early twentieth century than that of a man plowing behind a mule. Cotton was king in the period before the coming of the boll weevil. Production of this white fiber had increased in every decade since 1870 and more and more of the Southern landscape was covered in the fall with a white blanket of mature cotton. The vast majority of the cultivation of these cotton fields was done by a man, a mule and a plow since the tractor had not yet come into general use. Other observers of Southern culture have recognized the immense significance of this iconic unit – the man, the mule and the plow. For example, a song made famous by Walter Brennan, "Old Rivers," celebrates this icon. While certainly a large percentage of the white farmers plowed behind a mule, the more prevalent icon in this area was a black man plowing behind the mule. Here in our own Discovery Center, we have featured in our first gallery, just above the cotton exhibit, a cut-out of such a scene. Braidy Holmes appreciated the cultural importance of this icon in Southern life and thus he gave us "The Negro and the Mule," thought by many to be his finest work.

As I wandered off in fancy,
Down the lane of Long Ago,
I beheld an old-time oak tree,
By a little cabin door.

As I wandered on, that picture
Kept revealing things to me,
But it only was a Negro
And a Mule, beneath a tree.

From its branches swung the mosses
In the breezes soft and cool;
"Neath it I beheld an object –
"Twas a Negro and a Mule.

But somehow it still would haunt me
As along the lane I'd go,
Till my fancy took me way back
To the ages long ago.

Torn and tattered was his garment,
And his shoes were old and worn –
There beneath the oak tree, resting
From the labors they had done.

Far into a state of slumber,
In a vision, or it seemed –
There I found me, and the Negro
And his Mule, all in a dream.

There methought I saw a picture
Hanging 'twixt the earth and sky;
Grave and with such solemn meaning
Did this picture meet my eye.

It attracted my attention
Like a moving picture show,
That displayed an hundred pictures
In my vision o'er and o'er.

They would change from one to others,
As a moving picture's rule,
But in each I saw the vision
Of the Negro and the Mule.

Then an object struck the curtain
With a quiet solemnness:
There was Jesus in the movies –
He in all His righteousness.

As He plodded on His journey,
He could rest His weary feet,
For an humble, trusty Mule then
Bore the Master through the street.

'Twas the only time He ever
Rode, and seemed against His rule;
And somewhere among life's blessings
There is honor for the Mule.

And again appeared the Master
In the movies, in despair,
On the hill of old Golgotha,
When He had His cross to bear.

When He fell beneath His burden,
Only one would count the cost –
'Twas a Negro on the curtain,
And the Negro bore His cross.

On and on they played new pictures
On the curtain, bright and clear,
But when'er a work was needed
I could glimpse the Negro there.

When the play was all completed,
And the last of service done,
I could see the weary Negro
And his Mule, then going home.

And methought upon the curtain
Fell a picture of today:
When'er duty calls, or service,
There's a Negro to obey.

Hence the Master holds a blessing
For the Mule and for "his boss" –
For the Mule has borne His person,
And the Negro bore His cross

And once more upon the curtain,
There appeared the throne of God,
And the pathway that the Negro
And his trusty Mule had trod.

"Neath the Tree of Life, in glory,
By the King of Kings' footstool,
"Mongst the host I caught the glimpses
Of the Negro and the Mule.

SALLIE'S LITTLE CRICKET

Note: The frustrations of life and the cruelty of our fellow men clearly bothered Braidy, but his wife Sallie's philosophy helped him overcome these frustrations, as seen in "Sallie's Little Cricket."

There's a merry little cricket,
In a corner, snug and close,
In the cottage where we lived
 Just o'er the way,
And its chirping often haunts me,
When in solitude I'm lost,
And I hear my darling Sallie
 Softly say:

"Such a merry little cricket,
Braidy, here with you and me,
Does it never, never weary
 Of its song?
For it starts at early twilight,
With its music, full and free,
And is singing gay and sweetly
 All night long.

"Oh, I wish I was as happy
As it is, but now and then,
How my heart is torn and crushed
 Time after time
By the javelin that strikes it
From the words of cruel men,"
And she lifts her brown and tear-filled
 Eyes to mine.

"But 'us is goin' to live,' dear Braidy,
In a good home, and in peace,
Then I'll be as happy as a
 Girl can be.
And I'll sing in sweet contentment
Of a love that shall not cease,
Like our cricket, as it sings to
 You and me."

And today my darling Sallie
Is as happy as can be,
And is singing every joy her
 Heart could give,
As our merry little cricket,
As it sang to her and me,
From its corner in the cottage
 Where we lived.

THE NEGRO'S DREAM

Note: Very few of Braidy's poems had racial overtones. He bore the burden of his race silently for the most part and did not focus on the special challenges which faced him and the other members of his race. One of his poems which seems to question the role of his race is "The Negro's Dream." Here he addresses the issue of the Negro's service in the "great big war." We are not sure whether he is referring to World War I or World War II. The poem did not appear in The Idol Hour which was published shortly after World War I, but

did appear in Twilight Reflections which was published in 1942. In this poem he quotes a verse from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and seems to raise the issue of whether the Negro had the obligation to serve, "to fight – to die – like other men." But in typical fashion his answer was "'Tis not for one to question now, If he be right or wrong, The fight is on and Victory Must be the Nations' song." On three occasions in this poem he refers to one John Thurston who had apparently "quoted God, In his immortal theme." We have not yet been able to find the John Thurston quote and are not even sure who this John Thurston was. Our best guess is that this was John Mellen Thurston (1847-1916) who served as a United States Senator from Nebraska from 1895 to 1901, but we have not identified any speech in which this Thurston put forth an "immortal theme." The poem, though, is very moving, as one can see:

He bowed beside his meager couch
And breathed a word of prayer,
Then laid him down and wondered,
Would God hear him, when and where?

Thus into sleep he drifted off
And wandered through a dream,
To where John Thurston quoted God,
In his immortal theme.

In God's name, to the Negro's prayer
John Thurston made reply,
And pointed him to where he saw
This writing in the sky:

"In the beauty of the lily,
Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom
That transfigures you and me,
As He died to make men holy,
Let us die to make men free,
For God is marching on."

Thus saw the Negro in his dream,
Aflaming in the skies,
He stirred himself upon his couch
And rubbed his dreamy eyes.

And starting up from out his dream,
He heard a voice afar,
Calling for loyal men to march
Into "this great big" war.

They called him, too, the Negro,
And again he's on the spot,
To save Democracy he feels
Has fallen to his lot.

So to the battlefield he goes,
A loyal soldier he,
To fight – to die – like other men,
To make a country free.

"Tis not for one to question now,
If he be right or wrong,
The fight is on and Victory
Must be the Nations' song.

And out upon the battlefield
He lifts an eagle eye,
And sees again John Thurston's theme,
Aflaming in the sky:
"As he died to make men holy,
Let us die to make men free,
For God is marching on."

THE HILLS OF CAROLINA

Note: The vast majority of Braidy's poems celebrate the simple and beautiful things in life, particularly those of our natural world. "The Hills of Carolina" is very typical of those poems where fragrant blooms and singing birds are the principal memories of his happy childhood.

In the hills of Carolina,
 Where the sweet magnolia blooms,
 And the mocking birds make music all the day
Where the jasmine entwining,
 Fills the air with sweet perfume,
 In the old Carolina hills far away.

Where the wild rose on the hillside,
 And the violet in the vale,
 With their fragrance, and the music light and gay,
Of the oriole is blending
 With the whistling of the quail,
 In the old Carolina hills far away.

Where I played in happy childhood,
 When I felt nor knew no care,
 Where in happy youth I toiled from day to day
In the land I loved and cherished,
 All my hopes are planted there,
 In the old Carolina hills far away.

African-American Literary Biographies

Booker T. Washington — Important African-American after the Civil War; Up From Slavery (1871); cited by Theodore Roosevelt in 1890 as a vital African-American autobiography; advocated a network of African-American colleges in the US, including his own Tuskegee Institute and Allen University in South Carolina.

W.E.B. Du Bois — Author of the first work of African-American sociology, *The Souls of Black Folk* which, to its author's dismay, became associated with "soul" music in the 1960s; co-founder of the NAACP; first African-American to receive a doctorate from Harvard; broke with the NAACP; subjected to FBI investigations for Communist sympathies at the height of the Cold War; critic of Booker T. Washington educational philosophy.

James Weldon Johnson — Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1911); urbane, witty, sophisticated narrative; one of the first self-conscious African-American man of letters; co-founder with Du Bois of the NAACP.

Langston Hughes — One of the first African-Americans to make a living as a writer and one of the most anthologized; wrote in a number of "voices" and genres including poetry, plays, essays, and novels. His character Jess B. Semple inspired African-American comedians such as Bill Cosby and Nipsey Russell; the actor, Danny Glover, found his acting "voice", he once noted, by reading Hughes.

Ralph Ellison — Jazz musician and self-proclaimed "Renaissance" man; wrote *Invisible Man* (1952), arguably one of the top three novels written by an African-American; James Brown, the compelling entertainer of Augusta, Georgia cited Ellison in saying he (Brown) was for many years "invisible" leading him to record a hit song, "Try Me"; Ellison inspired President Obama's autobiographical memoir *Dreams of My Father* which has many Ellisonian features.

Phillis Wheatley (1753 – 1784?) — A slave in the family of John Wheatley, a wealthy Boston merchant; widely known as the first African-American woman in U.S. history to have her poetry published. Wheatley by the age of 12 could read Greek and Latin classics and difficult passages from the Bible. Influenced heavily by the works of Alexander Pope, John Milton, Homer, Horace and Virgil; she favored making George Washington "king" to which Thomas Jefferson replied that her poetry was "beneath contempt."

Paul Laurence Dunbar (June 1872 – 1906) — Seminal poet from Dayton, Ohio whose lines found their way to Maya Angelou's popular autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; honored by President Theodore Roosevelt; Dunbar is

known for colorful language, use of dialect, and conversational tone; traveled to England in 1897, like Wheatley (above) to recite his dialect poetry on the London literary circuit; met the brilliant young black composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor who set some of his poems to music.

Claude McKay (1889 – 1948) — Jamaican American writer who became Catholic; influenced by the Catholic Worker movement and its foundress, Dorothy Day (currently in the process of canonization). He attended Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute where he secretly studied W. E. B. Du Bois' "Souls of Black Folk" *Souls of Black Folk*. Sir Winston Churchill publicly cited one of McKay's poems during the bleak days of World War II.

Yusef Komunyakaa (born April 29, 1947) — Komunyakaa is arguably the finest African-American poet who currently teaches at New York University. Witty, learned, and aware of modernist trends, Komunyakaa is a recipient of the 1994 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, and the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. His subject matter ranges from rural Southern life in Louisiana to his experience as a soldier during the Vietnam War.

Braidy Holmes (1890 – 1966) — Appears to be influenced by Phillis Wheatley in the couplet verse forms of his poems. Eschews the "double consciousness" of many African-American writers advocated by Du Bois; poetry seems to be influenced by English romantic verse, specifically elegiac memories of a better time seen in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. His celebration of rural life comport with the similar themes of fellow South Carolina poet, James Dickey, Georgia African-American poet, Jean Toomer, as well as Robert Frost and Robert Penn Warren.

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