

The legend of Priscilla's hollyhocks: Fact or fiction?

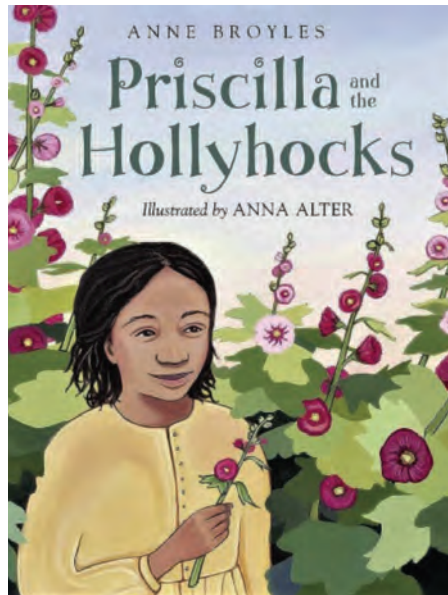
By Mark W. Sorensen

*Way down in Egypt's land,
Let my people go.*

During the Cherokee diaspora in the winter of 1838-1839, in that part of southern Illinois which we call Egypt, it is believed that white farmer and businessman Brazilla "Basil" Silkwood bought a mixed-race enslaved female from one of the passing tribal chiefs. The story of that incident and that girl's life was first documented by Makanda historian J. G. Mulcaster in his October 1935 article "The Quadroon Girl of Southern Illinois" in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* [Vol. XXVIII, No. 3, pp. 214-217].

The basics of the story as first told are – Priscilla grew up enslaved on a plantation of an unnamed master in North Carolina in the 1820s. She was enamored of the dwarf red hollyhocks that grew there. During her childhood, Basil Silkwood of Illinois visited his friend the plantation owner and met the young Priscilla during his stay. When Priscilla's owner died soon thereafter the estate was sold off and she was purchased as a slave by a Cherokee chief who took her to his home in North Carolina. Before she left her early home, she collected seeds from the hollyhocks and secreted them to her new home where she planted them. When the Cherokee were forced to abandon their homes to resettle in Oklahoma, Priscilla again gathered hollyhock seeds and carried them west. While crossing southern Illinois the Cherokee were stopped for several weeks by Mississippi River ice floes and many died while camping near Dutch Creek in Union County. Now a young teen, Priscilla visited the nearby town of Jonesboro at exactly the time that Mr. Silkwood happened to be transacting business there and by chance she recognized him and related

her story of woe. Given a chance to act on his anti-slavery beliefs, Silkwood traveled to find her owner and purchased her freedom. Priscilla then lived in the Silkwood home, an early inn and stage coach stop near Mulkeytown, where she again planted hollyhocks which still grow there today.



In 2008 Anne Broyles wrote the story of Priscilla as an inspirational children's book

Basil Silkwood was a real person who was born in Virginia on September 9, 1800, lived his adult life in southern Illinois, and died on June 28, 1876. He is mentioned only once in the published 1918 Franklin County history, and that just for being a pioneer settler in Tyrone Township. There is no mention of his generosity, or of Priscilla, or of how hollyhocks came to southern Illinois. I could find no mention of Basil or Priscilla in any U.S. newspapers until a small article appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in October 1940 which explained the

once-planted Priscilla hollyhocks "have blazed red and pink and flame, seeded themselves and come up again." This item was reprinted in a number of papers across the country through 1941, and the story was briefly told by Silkwood relatives and members of the Mulkeytown Garden Club when broadcast May 15, 1941 on Herrin's radio station. The first item that I could find about Priscilla Silkwood in the Illinois press appeared on October 2, 1947 in both the *Carbondale Free Press* and the *Murphysboro Daily Independent*. It was written by Mirion Horne, a staff writer for the *Southern Illinoisian*, who stated the story came from SIU museum curator John W. Allen and an interview with Basil Silkwood's grandniece, Flora Silkwood McGlasson, owner of the Silkwood Inn at that time. In her "Hollyhocks Cheered Priscilla Silkwood" article, Horne stated that Priscilla first saw Mr. Silkwood on a North Carolina plantation and that he paid \$1000 for her freedom. Horne also related that Mrs. McGlasson was told that Basil had also freed an enslaved boy and later given him property, as he had done for many white foster children.

Now, how we choose to tell a story and what words we use changes over time, and even historians sometimes make inferences without proof. No one who wrote about Priscilla's life and experiences had ever met or interviewed her, and she left no diary or memoir. In Mulcaster's 1935 non-footnoted ISHS *Journal* essay he stated that "quadroon" Priscilla, one of many "pickaninnies" on the North Carolina plantation, was "herself very light-complexioned" and "could tell nothing of her father and mother." Journalist Horne later gave her interpretation of



Headline from the first Illinois newspaper story about the former slave Priscilla.
Carbondale Daily Free Press, October 2, 1947

The Legend of the Quadroon Girl And the Priscilla Hollyhocks at Mulkeytown

BY JOHN W. ALLEN
Curator of History
S. I. U. Museum

Among the earliest memories of the older persons living about Mulkeytown in Franklin County are those of the Silkwood home.

broken up and the little quadroon girl was bought by a well-to-do Cherokee Indian chief living on their reservation in the Great Smokies.

Priscilla, for that was her name, was taken by her new owner to

Southern Illinoisian, October 17, 1950

stories from the Silkwood family in her 1947 article. SIU museum curator, and 1955-1956 ISHS president John Willis Allen wrote about "quadroon" Priscilla in the October 17, 1950 *Southern Illinoisian*, and again in the December 22, 1952 Mount Vernon *Register-News*, that she lived on a North Carolina plantation where she first met "Marse" Silkwood. He continued, "Before leaving the plantation where she had played with the other slave children and had been happy," she gathered hollyhock seeds. Several years later she encountered Basil Silkwood in front of the "Willard Hotel" in Jonesboro during the Trail of Tears journey before he purchased her freedom for "\$1000 in gold."

In 1963, Allen's newspaper columns were compiled and published by SIU in the book *Legends & Lore of Southern Illinois*, with a special edition published in 1964 by the ISHS for its members. In these, and the many future editions, Priscilla was now first met by Basil on a plantation in Georgia and not North Carolina, and there was no mention of gold to obtain the enslaved girl. In Allen's October 17, 1950 *Southern Illinoisian* column, and subsequent book editions about the legacy of the "quadroon girl" of Mulkeytown, he also stated that 112 years after Priscilla arrived in Illinois a package of hollyhock seeds had been sent to the Cherokee nation in Oklahoma along with her story.

Allen concluded his 1963 book entry about Priscilla stating, "The freedom papers given her by Silkwood are recorded in the county clerk's office at Benton." However, these papers or their recordation in the Franklin

County Recorder's office have never been published. In 2014 Silkwood researcher Sue Glasco reported online that when she visited that courthouse she was told that no such papers could be found. At my request, current county clerk/recorder Kevin Wilson also did a search and reported that he could not find any related documents about Priscilla in his office. Thus exact information about where Priscilla came from and how and when she entered the Silkwood family has never been produced.

What have been documented are the federal census records which confirm over time that Basil Silkwood did indeed shelter up to sixteen white orphans as well as a female named Priscilla. In the 1850 Tyrone Township census the "mulatto Pricilla" was enumerated along with five white persons aged twenty-six or younger. In 1860 a white "Percilla" is listed as a domestic with the last name "Borders" along with two young males. [Sue Glasco was convinced that researcher John Whitfield was likely correct that Priscilla came from the "Borders plantation" in northeast Georgia but did not produce any documentation.] On July 4, 1870, Priscilla was listed in widow "Bazilla" Silkwood's Mulkeytown home [next to the property of Isham Harrison] as a white "domestic servant". In all of the federal census data, which was often inaccurate, Priscilla was listed as being born in Illinois.

According to sisters Chloe Price Davis and Ruby Price Henderson's excellent 1989 booklet *The Silkwood Inn: Illinois Landmark*, Isham Harrison married Laura Annear, "an orphan left

at the Silkwood Inn when she was about two years of age" and most likely raised in that household by Priscilla. When Basil died in 1876, "*Be mindful of the poor*" was carved on his tombstone, and his Will, executed by Isham Harrison, included "*I will and bequeath unto Presilla a colored woman a sufficient amount for her ample support as long as she lives and that my executor is to retain out of my estate a sufficient amount for that purpose.*" Thus the 1880 Tyrone Township federal census for the residence of Isham and Laura [now age 42] Harrison and their children also includes "Persilla," a 60 year-old Black woman servant who was cited as having been born in Illinois with no idea where her parents were born. [Joseph and Lucinda Dewhit, and their four children, were the only other people of color living in that township in July 1880.] Priscilla passed away on March 2, 1894 according to her estate papers filed with the Franklin County Court Clerk a few days later. Nine pages of these legal documents, which identified the decedent only as "Persilla - Colored Lady," are presented in the 1989 Davis/Henderson book revealing her estate valued at \$25.00. She was buried with a simple marker next to Basil Silkwood and his two wives in the Reid-Kirkpatrick Cemetery. Upon learning her story in 1961, two Christopher, Illinois, school teachers and their students bought a new engraved stone listing her simply as "Priscilla" and giving her life dates as 1824-1892.

So, what we do know for certain is that a mixed-race girl called Priscilla came to live at the Silkwood Inn before 1840 and grew to maturity surrounded by a number of "foster" children, and was helped by Basil Silkwood. She is repeatedly referred to as a "quadroon," which meant that she was of twenty-five percent Negro genetics. Early writers referred to her as being light-skinned and she was listed as "white" in several census reports, while more recent works describe her as being mostly Cherokee. No chroniclers have written about the brutality and humiliation that had to occur to create an enslaved person of either heritage. All

The legend of Priscilla lives on in Mulkeytown

Southern Illinoisian, January 18, 1981

have focused on the miracle of her redemption and rebirth in Illinois.

In 1977, former Du Quoin High School English teacher Louise Flynn Underhill wrote a small book of inspirational poetry for her family entitled *Red Hollyhocks*, with the first poem dedicated to Priscilla. In 1989 Davis and Henderson explained - *For many years, newspapers, magazines, poems, books, and persons have paid tribute to the historical significance and the charming legends surrounding the Silkwood Inn and its residents. The facts and folklore are enhanced by the members of the Silkwood family, the sixteen orphan children, Priscilla and her hollyhocks, the slavery issue, and the benevolent innkeeper, Brazilla Silkwood.* In 2008, award-winning children's author Anne Broyles wrote a somewhat fictionalized account of Priscilla and her experiences which opens with *When I was young and still wore slavery's yoke, I was saved by hollyhocks, and a white man's kindness.*

The late Illinois educator Sue Glasco blogged in 2014 - *Because the story is so intriguing, all of us who have heard it have been inclined to dramatize it and add details we imagine happened. I always used to tell the story that the hollyhock seed in Priscilla's pocket came*



Dwarf red Hollyhocks blossom in May and June by the Silkwood Inn Museum sign and at the grave of Priscilla.

from her mother when they were separated in order for Priscilla to remember her mother. It finally dawned on me that I was making that part up, and so I try to refrain from telling it that way now. Priscilla was such a pleasant and inspirational person in real life that she inspired poems, songs, stories, and plays, and we have all taken poetic license with her heroic and compassionate life.

An example of that dramatizing or romanticizing would be journalist Mirion Horne concluding her October 2, 1947 feature in the *Murphysboro Daily Independent* with this graveyard elegy - *It is not hard to think the girl with the green thumb sleeps sweetly here. And who knows, when the moon is full and the evening warm, when the air is bursting with living, growing things, if Priscilla does not visit the hollyhock bed, and smile to see them glowing rosy in the moon light.*

The latest interpretation of the story of Priscilla and the Silkwood family can be gleaned from a visit in person to the West Franklin Historical District and the Silkwood Inn Museum, or on their Facebook pages located at "SilkwoodInnMulkeytown."

And remember that Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley implored you to; ... *dry the orphan's tear, An' he'p the pore an' needy ones 'at clusters all about.*

In December 1887, recent Scandinavian immigrants Enevold and Trine Sorensen found a baby on the doorstep of their west-side Chicago home. They kept and raised the foundling boy and named him Aener. That child later became the paternal grandfather of frequent Illinois Heritage contributor Mark W. Sorensen. At least, that is how family legend tells the story.



When the ISHS held its annual meeting in Benton, IL in September 1967, members toured the historic Silkwood Inn and heard the story of Priscilla's Hollyhocks. Most of that historic site was destroyed in a 1983 fire and the current iteration of the Inn was moved and rebuilt and currently is operated as a museum.

[Photo from the Southern Illinoisian, October 8, 2008.]