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ARTISTS' RENDERINGS

An Interview with Louise Marsh

Suzanne Bolton

The day is soft and surprisingly warm for the middle of February. Red fuzzies on the redbud trees and a tinge of yellow on forsythia bushes hint a promise that spring will soon burst upon the city and this particular older and well-established neighborhood. Small, neatly kept houses line the street as the car winds around one curve and then another before stopping at the home of one of Huntsville's pioneer art educators, Louise Butler Marsh. The door stands open as the visitor ascends the one step. A pleasant face and warm voice bid a welcoming, "Hi, I'm Nancy." Nancy is an invaluable companion to Mrs. Marsh, a friend, a locator of lost pictures and files, and the provider of organization.

Entering the house, a newcomer is introduced to the tiny dynamo seated in a comfortable arm chair in the living room. It is evident immediately that Mrs. Marsh is still very much the teacher she has always been, and a visitor quickly assumes the role of student waiting to be taught. The owner's paintings look down from each wall and give warmth to the room filled with a lifetime collection of cherished pieces.

Louise Butler Marsh is a fifth generation north Alabamian, the oldest of seven children born in New Hope to W. E. and Lillian Mussetter Butler.

"Father was a merchant who ran Butler Bros. General Store, which was founded by my grandfather, and Mother was an excellent watercolorist, although not a professional artist." Mrs. Marsh explains, "Mother was the one who encouraged me to paint and draw, and she took me to art museums in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York."

The Butler family moved to the Governor Bibb house (now known as the Bibb-Hutchens house) at 300 Williams Street when Louise was ten.

“It was exciting, fantastic,” she said with relish. “I had new playmates and went to a schoolhouse for the first time when I was in sixth grade. I took music lessons and Miss Mable Metcalf gave me art lessons.”

There were no museums or art shows at that time, but down the street was Miss Howard Weeden’s home, with every inch of the walls covered with pictures large and small.

“We played with Mary Elizabeth Weeden and had a great time sliding down the winding banisters,” relates Louise as her eyes, still bright and intense, gaze out through the screen door seeing the memories that flood her mind. “I think Miss Howard really inspired me. ‘If she could do it, why can’t I?’ I thought.”

At sixteen, Louise graduated from the Wills Taylor School [located on Eustis Street] where she had been art editor of the school annual. She entered Ward Belmont College in Nashville and selected costume design as her art major. But she was disappointed in the curriculum there and decided instead to attend Sophie Newcomb College of Tulane University in New Orleans. The art department at Newcomb was a dream come true. Louise was able to study watercolor, design, life drawing, and pottery. One of her paintings was acquired by the old Delgado Museum.

“All this wonderful schooling and Mardi Gras too!” Louise exclaimed. “I met my husband at one of the Mardi Gras balls.” Their son, the eldest of five children, was born in New Orleans. Mrs. Marsh also did graduate studies in art education at George Peabody College. She has studied painting, printmaking, and sculpture at UAH and Alabama A&M University.

After returning to Huntsville, the family subsequently moved to New Hope where Louise taught in the high school. The principal there established an art department where Louise taught art classes for elementary as well as the high school students.

In 1952, the family again relocated to Huntsville. There Louise taught at Lincoln Junior High and started an art program at the elementary and junior high levels.

“Our class won five gold medals, six honorable achievements, and seven Hallmark awards in the scholastic competition in Birmingham,” she proudly reports.

Louise wanted to project her philosophy of art to students throughout the community. “Teaching the children to be aware of light and color and composition would make their lives so much more meaningful,” she recalls, but there was no curriculum in the city schools with which to teach them. So, in 1958, Louise, together with Louise Smith, went to Dr. Raymond Christian, then Superintendent of the City Schools. With his help and direction, the two women launched an art program for the city school system. Louise Marsh became supervisor of the entire Huntsville art program when Louise Smith retired. Pride fills her voice as she tells her visitor, “I planted seeds of art in the students.” Later Mrs. Marsh taught at HALMA for fifteen years and was a director of the Huntsville Art Museum Planning Committee.

Awards and achievements have marked Louise’s career. In 1982, she was named art teacher of the year for Alabama, an honor bestowed on her in a ceremony at the National Art Education Association in New York. She was a member of the Alabama Art Education Association for forty years and served the association as secretary, treasurer, vice president, and president. Following her retirement as art supervisor to the Huntsville City School System, she continued to guide children in their artistic endeavors and education. She served as a docent for the Huntsville Museum of Art and as

a volunteer teacher for the Mental Health Center. She also presented frequent slide lectures and demonstrations on art for various Huntsville organizations.

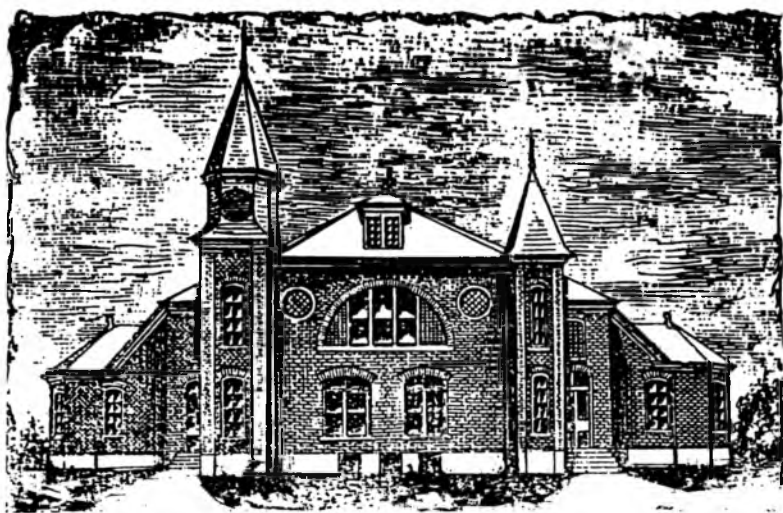
From Louise Marsh's lifelong devotion to art have come some sketches and paintings which captured early Huntsville and its environs for all time. These include a watercolor series on life in Scottsboro and Mooresville, several sketches of historic homes in Huntsville, schools throughout Huntsville and Madison County, and the old Huntsville Courthouse which was torn down in 1964.

The visit finished, Mrs. Marsh sips from the water glass held tightly in her small hands. These hands have captured eras and lifestyles of bygone days in and around Huntsville and have preserved them for us all. These hands have taught children by showing them how to hold a brush, how to mix colors, and how to paint skies, landscapes, and buildings. These hands have carved block prints and worked pottery as well as painted watercolors. These hands have brought pleasure to the viewer and instruction to the student. These hands have shaken fingers at those who disobeyed in class or stood in the way of spreading the love of art. These hands belong to Louise Marsh.

WORKS BY LOUISE MARSH

- A. East Clinton Elementary School
- B. Poplar Ridge School
- C. Madison County High School
- D. West Clinton School, originally a high school
- E. Confederate Monument at Old Courthouse
- F. Old Huntsville
- G. Changing Huntsville









BIOGRAPHY — Suzanne Bolton

Suzanne Bolton is a native Californian who grew up in Santa Barbara and earned her Bachelor's degree in history from U.C.L.A. She worked in the aerospace industry in California prior to moving to Huntsville, Alabama in 1963. For several years, she owned and operated a secretarial and organizational consulting business, which she recently closed to devote full time to freelance writing. Suzanne has spoken at various organizations throughout Madison and surrounding counties on the subject of organization in the home. She has served as a volunteer at Huntsville Hospital, on the Board of Directors of Christian Women's Club, and presently serves on the Board of Directors of the Historic Huntsville Foundation. She and her husband, Bill, enjoy researching genealogy and traveling as often as possible.