



Hostess To The West

By Jan Cleere

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As the train from Illinois rolled into Wickenburg, Arizona on a steamy hot August day in 1897, a young black couple disembarked onto the hard-packed dirt beside the railroad station. Imposingly tall, with an aura of “don’t mess with me” blazing from her charcoal eyes, twenty-eight year old Elizabeth Hudson Smith brushed a strand of kinky black hair from her face, grabbed the liquor bottle her husband Bill had tucked in his pants, and flung it into the dry Hassayampa riverbed. A heat-swirling dustdevil followed them as they headed toward the Baxter Hotel, one of the few places a body could get a bed for the night and a bite to eat.

As the first black citizens of Wickenburg, the Smiths melded effortlessly into an ethnic mix of about 300 Mexicans, Indians, Asians, and a conglomeration of Europeans subsisting on the hope of one more lucrative gold strike from nearby mines. A few saloon and store owners along Center Street (now Wickenburg Way) eked out meager livings supplying bare necessities to this handful of diehard fortune hunters.

No one could have foreseen how Elizabeth Smith's entrance into Wickenburg would affect this grubby macho community, or that she would become one of the first black woman entrepreneurs in Arizona.

How fortunate the Smiths stopped at the Baxter Hotel that first night. Owner Richard Baxter despaired of finding a competent cook for his old boarding house, and his clientele threatened to lynch him for lousy service and indigestible food. He quickly hired Elizabeth to cook and clean. Eyeing the hotel bar, Bill resigned his Pullman porter job with the Santa Fe, Prescott and Phoenix Railroad and convinced Baxter he could manage the place.

Elizabeth's culinary masterpieces attracted a host of hungry miners and townspeople to the Baxter. And no matter what they ate, or when they dined, no one walked away without devouring one of her decadent chocolate chip cookies.

When she had saved enough money, Elizabeth asked Richard Baxter if she and Bill could buy the hotel. Baxter agreed to the deal for the dilapidated adobe building, built in the 1860s, was as reliable as a drunken cowboy on Saturday night. Elizabeth and Bill erected a second level above the hotel's ancient first floor giving Wickenburg its first two-story building.

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Elizabeth's reputation flourished as an excellent hostess and cook. But she soon had to take over managing the accounts of the hotel along with her cooking and cleaning duties as Bill was intent on keeping the bar open and well stocked.

The couple had met in Illinois through Elizabeth's uncle, James Young. Married in Chicago on September 28, 1896, they made plans to head for Arizona Territory and begin their new life. Bill's mother, Vernetta, said her tearful good byes, praying Elizabeth would keep Bill out of the saloons that had sorely tempted him.

Several years after the Smiths completed improvements on the Baxter Hotel, Santa Fe Railroad officials approached them about establishing a second hotel on Railroad Street (now Frontier Street), closer to the railroad station. Since dining cars were not yet a part of train travel, weary passengers could then dine, or stay overnight, before continuing their journeys.

Elizabeth and Bill had exhausted their savings expanding the Baxter. Some claim railroad mogul George Pullman, Bill's old boss, provided the money necessary for the new hotel. Others insist Bill's mother, Vernetta, sold her home to finance the couple's venture. Wherever the money came from, in 1905, construction began on the new Vernetta Hotel.

Elizabeth's early history provides few clues as to how she acquired her depth of business acumen. Born in Alabama in 1869, the daughter of freed slaves, her future appeared as doomed as the crosses burning before her shanty home.

Her father, Sales Hudson, attempted to escape from the Young plantation in Frankfort, Kentucky more than once. His brother James succeeded in unlocking slavery's chains, but Sales was always captured, sold, and resold until the end of the Civil War. James continued to use the last name of Young, his old master, while Sales kept his last master's name of Hudson as his own.

Aware of the trials Elizabeth faced as a black woman living in the South, Sales Hudson encouraged his daughter to acquire as much education as possible for someone of her race and gender. Elizabeth more than happily obliged for she harbored ambitions beyond the meager education available to her at the time. Whether she went to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, as some sources say, or she matriculated at a university in Louisiana, only Elizabeth knows. Somewhere she learned to speak, read, and write fluent French. Elizabeth's business prowess came to fruition as the Vernetta progressed from the planning stages into one of the most modern buildings in Wickenburg.

Elizabeth hired Phoenix-based architect James Creighton to draft plans for the Vernetta Hotel. Both Creighton and Elizabeth, devout Presbyterians, wanted a token of their faith as part of the hotel's decor. A cross embedded in the lobby floor, shining like the North Star, steered weary travelers toward a nourishing meal and a good night's sleep. Elizabeth and Creighton collaborated to help establish the Community Church, forerunner of the first Presbyterian Church in Wickenburg.

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The Vernetta's red brick walls, measuring twelve inches thick, banished the summer heat from the comfortably cool rooms. Yet marching around the perimeter of the hotel, a parade of windows allowed Old Sol's brilliance to shine upon the polished floors and ornate furniture. Six giant smokestacks stood as sentries welcoming weary travelers out of the desert into the temperate climate of the hotel. A host of fireplaces provided heat for wood cook stoves and staved off chills on cold winter nights.

"The finest [hotel] in town," heralded the September 13, 1905 Arizona Journal Miner, crediting Elizabeth with creating a showplace along the sandy shores of the Hassayampa River.

"Lovely rooms, quiet and well-ventilated," Elizabeth told her guests. Providing lodging for up to fifty people, she advertised the Vernetta as "quiet headquarters for mining men," although travelers from around the country luxuriated in the pristine rooms and feasted on fresh salads, locally grown vegetables, and meat butchered right on the premises.

Local children clamored for morsels of broken chocolate chip cookies at the hotel's kitchen door and never left empty handed. Without children of her own, Elizabeth enjoyed the confusion and melee of youngsters underfoot and always found something "useful" for them to do.

Santa Fe Railroad officials were so delighted with the new hotel they erected a wooden walkway from the train depot right to the Vernetta's front door. Passengers could now alight, dine, and be back on board well before departure.

Elizabeth maintained the rooms and the kitchen while Bill ran the Black and Tan Saloon in a corner of the lobby. But he often disappeared for weeks, bottle in hand, returning only when he ran out of money. His thirst for liquor was greater than his love for Elizabeth. Claiming he had "wilfully deserted and abandoned" her, she divorced Bill on November 22, 1912. A drifter the rest of his life, Bill died in 1926 in California.

On her own but undaunted, Elizabeth prospered. The reputation of her refined rooming establishment, and the bountiful food served at the Vernetta, soon wafted down the trail to larger cities. By rail or horse and buggy, Phoenicians traveled over 50 dusty miles to Wickenburg to partake of Elizabeth's delicious meals. When they also discovered she spoke French, they traipsed weekly to Wickenburg for lessons from this black pearl of the desert.

Elizabeth lived on her farm near the Hassayampa River where she raised chickens and hogs and grew the produce served at the Vernetta. When no one would hire Clubfoot (Dan) Davis, a disheveled white cowboy considered more unbalanced in the head than the foot, she taught him to milk cows and feed livestock, and gave him a home on her farm.

Elizabeth also owned a restaurant, barbershop, about a dozen rental homes, and a cattle ranch. Her interest in mining led her to invest in a slew of claims in the area. When touring theatrical companies came to town, they performed in her opera house. She even did a little acting herself on occasion.

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The Vernetta housed several businesses besides the Black and Tan Saloon. In the lobby one could cash a check at the bank, mail a letter at the post office, get a shoeshine, or have a radio repaired. Bridge games, constantly in progress in the hotel lobby, almost always included Elizabeth as one of the most avid players.

While visiting her uncle, James Young, in Illinois in 1908, Elizabeth met Bill Butler, a young black man struggling to break into the music business. Down on his luck, he accepted Elizabeth's invitation to come to Wickenburg and perform at the Vernetta, accompanying himself on the grand piano she placed in the hotel lobby. The town welcomed Butler as they had Elizabeth, hiring him to sing for family parties and social gatherings. Butler worked alongside Clubfoot Davis on the riverbed farm, singing for his supper, to Elizabeth's delight.

From its inauspicious beginnings, Wickenburg developed into an industrious, thriving community. But changes brought new, sometimes pernicious ideas into town.

As the late 1920s threw the nation into the depths of financial depression, people sought work anywhere, and found none. Bias and hatred intensified against black workers who now vied for jobs previously available only to the white workforce.

Wickenburg citizens began to view Elizabeth through prejudicial eyes. Townspeople refused to eat in the Vernetta's dining room. Newcomers assumed she was the hotel maid. Bridge gatherings met behind tightly closed parlor doors, excluding Elizabeth. Racial prejudice ousted her from the Presbyterian Church she helped establish years before. She became a stranger among old friends.

Elizabeth struggled to keep her hotel open, but no one came. Refusing to give up, she finally gave out. Elizabeth Hudson Smith died on March 25, 1935 at the age of 65. The Hassayampa Sun hailed her "many deeds of kindness to the community," but the town refused to bury her in the white-only graveyard. Elizabeth rests in Wickenburg's Garcia cemetery with her Mexican, Indian, and Asian friends.

A ménage of pseudo relatives and friends, claiming an interest in Elizabeth's \$50,000 estate, began popping out of the old smokestack chimneys of the Vernetta. By the time the Young family in Illinois, her rightful heirs, learned of Elizabeth's death, most of her estate was gone.

When Elizabeth died, the dining room of the Vernetta Hotel closed its doors. Today the Vernetta, now called the Hassayampa Building, is a compilation of business offices. The chimneys, leveled years ago, no longer welcome visitors to Wickenburg, but the hotel's thick brick walls have withstood the ravages of time, nature, and mankind. No matter what name attaches itself to this fine old hotel, the Vernetta stands today as a tribute to a woman who brought modernism, efficiency, and graciousness to Arizona Territory, a woman whose color made no difference when she arrived but became her undoing by the time she left.