

Corra Harris: Inspiration and Peace of Mind in the Valley

By Gary Owenby

The following paper was prepared under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Dickey at Kennesaw State University for an Introduction to Public History course.

Corra Harris lived a life that paralleled the world in which she lived, closely knitting political and social upheaval of the times with personal tragedy to create a tapestry of a full life. She was a dichotomy of southern values, at once defending against fictitious romantic depictions of Reconstruction-era southern life while writing in the defense of lynching as a form of punishment in the South. Though she showed strength of character and independence during her life, most of her legacy seems tied to the men around her. Even the plaque devoted to her commemoration has just as many words about an Indian Chief and her husband. From her home and farm she called “In the Valley,” Corra Harris made her living portraying the persona of a southern woman in writing, while defying those traditional mores of southern society by her actions.

Corra May White was born on March 17, 1869. She was raised on her family’s cotton plantation in Elbert County, Georgia, with little formal education. The plantation had been mortgaged to her family through four generations, and Corra would not realize the depths of their impoverishment until much later in life, when she would describe the family’s plight as “genteel poverty.”¹ Corra’s father was a boisterous Confederate veteran known for his wit and love of drinking. Her mother was a devout evangelical Christian with an overabundance of patience for putting up with her husband as well as handling the education of Corra and her sister, Hope.

¹ Catherine O. Badura, *The “Seemingly Contradictory” Life*, 200-244

Corra attended a female academy but never graduated. Corra attributed her creativity and imagination to her “phenominal [sic] ignorance.”²

Corra May White married Lundy Howard Harris on February 8, 1887. Lundy was eleven years her elder and had recently graduated from Emory University with Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees. Lundy was an attractive, well-educated man who embodied all the faults of Corra’s parents. Most of their married life would be spent in poverty, derived from Lundy’s battles with depression and alcoholism. The couple had three children, two sons and a daughter. One of their sons would die in infancy, while the other would die as a toddler. Their daughter, Faith, would live into adulthood and become the rock of sympathy and emotion that Corra would cling to during the tribulations of her married and professional life.

Corra began her career writing in 1899 when the *Independent* published a letter she wrote in response to the paper’s editorial on lynching. The *Independent* was impressed with her writing style that conveyed a degree of masculinity combined with a homespun and relatable ease.³ The *Independent* continued to publish Corra’s articles for the next decade. In 1910 The *Saturday Evening Post* serialized *A Circuit Rider’s Wife*, Corra’s semi-autobiographical story of being married to an itinerant Methodist preacher, leading to publication as a novel later that same year. *A Circuit Rider’s Wife* became Corra Harris’ most popular novel. Hollywood adapted it into a film starring Susan Hayward called *I’d Climb the Highest Mountain*, in 1951.⁴

² Catherine O. Badura, *The “Seemingly Contradictory” Life*, A letter to Paul Elmer More

³ Hamilton Holt’s description of Harris’ writing style, relayed in a letter from Harris to More

⁴ New Georgia Encyclopedia, Corra Harris (1869-1935)

The success of *A Circuit Rider's Wife* brought financial stability and happiness to the Harris household, but the happiness would not last.⁵ During the fall of 1910, after resigning from his job at the Board of Education in Nashville, Tennessee, Lundy died from a self-induced overdose while visiting friends outside of Pine Log, Georgia. The note he left did little to explain his state of mind, but an unknown Methodist minister told one paper, “[Lundy] viewed *A Circuit Rider's Wife* as a story of a vision unrealized, and his life had been a failure.”⁶ Corra remained faithful to Lundy, never remarrying.

Two years after her husband’s death Corra purchased 200 acres of land in Bartow County, Georgia. The property included the place where Lundy died. She claimed to feel his presence in the rolling hills and pine trees. Corra would name her home “In The Valley,” and she spent the last twenty-three years of her life there. A log cabin existed on the property and was rumored to be the home of an Indian Chief named Pine Log. Corra used this cabin as the foundation, which she expanded to include a study and library where she could write, and a barn.⁷

She had intended for Faith to come stay with her at “In The Valley,” allowing them the opportunity to write, while providing each other with emotional support. Faith came and went, but never stayed. That did not mean Corra spent her time alone. She adopted two neighbor girls, and entertained guests so regularly that she started to see visitors as an annoyance that kept her from her writing. The years spent at “In The Valley” were the most productive years of her life. She wrote the autobiographies *My Book and Heart* and *As A Woman Thinks*, columns, short stories, and correspondences.

⁵ Corra Harris, *As A Woman Thinks*, 182

⁶ Catherine Oglesby, *Divided Mind of the New South*, 36

⁷ In The Valley, National Register of Historic Places, 3

Corra made numerous trips to New York City visiting her editor at the *Independent*. She did not believe that a woman should be involved in politics, but these trips influenced her stance on poverty, demonstrating the difference between the urban poor and the rural poor. Being a self-made woman who struggled through poverty imbued her with the belief that anyone could attain financial success through hard work and conviction.⁸ Her articles on poverty became a comparison of the worst of the urban poor compared to the rural poor living in her ideal pastoral valley.

From 1931 until her death in 1935 she wrote “A Candlelit Column” for the *Atlanta Journal*. Her “Candles” ranged from correspondences to family and marriage, but most of them covered religion and politics. Corra would write around five hundred “Candles” leaving enough for weeks’ worth of printing after she died. Corra Harris suffered a major heart attack on January 27, 1935, and died on February 7. She willed that a trust be established to make her Valley home a memorial, but the trust failed to cover all the expenses of maintaining the property. “In The Valley” is now owned by Kennesaw State University and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Corra Harris believed that God communed with humans through nature, and she never felt closer to God than when she was at her home “In The Valley.”

⁸ Catherine Oglesby, *Divided Mind of the New South*, 177





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Corra Harris and the Raines sisters in front of the cabin In the Valley. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Dickey.



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