

MY MOTHER WAS A MAN

Philadelphia steelworker tells intimate story of how he was reared by Georgia Black, the man who lived as a woman for 30 years in Florida

BY WILLIE SABB

MY MOTHER was a man, but I'm not at all ashamed of it. I know of no other person in the world who can say that, but I say it now without remorse, fearing neither ridicule or whispered gossip. Though my mother was actually a man, she looked just like any other woman and acted like one—sweet, feminine and soft.

For 30 years she lived the respectable normal life of a typical Southern, church-going, God-fearing, home-loving housewife and mother. Her name was Georgia Black and until she died on April 26, 1951, she kept up a marvelous masquerade that has become one of the strangest stories of recent years.

To me Georgia Black was my mother, the only mother I ever had or knew. I loved her as mother all my life and when the fact that she was a man was revealed to me it made no difference. My love for her did not change. My memories of her are loving and good and it will always be like that.

Throughout this story I will use the feminine pronoun "she" as it is the only way I can refer to my "mother." She was known as a woman by citizens of the town of Sanford, Fla., where she lived and died and where I was reared. Until shortly before her death no one there knew her strange secret. During the two years that have passed, newspapers, magazines and radio commentators have discussed the unusual story of Georgia Black. There have been many mistakes in these accounts of her life, and I am taking this means to correct them.

I want to set the record straight about Georgia Black, her life and death. My love for her is too strong, even after death, to permit her story to be twisted and distorted. Until now I have never discussed the nature of my relationship with my mother. This then is my story and the truth about Georgia Black, whom some called weird, abnormal and freakish, but whom I know to have been a fine, sensitive, decent human being.

She was known to her neighbors as a generous soul who always helped her fellow man. She was a tower of strength and a tireless worker for her church, St. James A.M.E., which she attended dutifully and was loved by the congregation. She never missed

Sunday services unless she was seriously sick. She was a good, law-respecting citizen.

Sometimes I felt my mother was *too* nice for her own good. She often sacrificed much to help others. I used to get mad at times and criticized her for being over-generous. But she couldn't help being good for she was a true Christian at heart.

My life has been a strange one. I was born in Greeleyville, S. C., in 1912. I don't remember my real mother at all because she died when I was three weeks old. My father was a local farmer. His name was Bennett Ned and I didn't see him until I was 26. Before that I was unaware of what had happened.

All the facts about my birth and early years were never given to me in full, and truthfully, I never questioned Georgia Black, who adopted me, about my childhood. She never offered to tell me.

People have asked me how it was that Georgia Black came to adopt me. This is how it happened: Georgia's first marriage was to a man named Alonzo Sabb. The marriage took place in Winter Garden, Florida. The year I was born Georgia and her husband

were living in Greeleyville and when my real mother, who was Georgia's cousin, died, something had to be done about me.

Thus it was that Mrs. Georgia Sabb decided to take care of me and to raise me as her own child. She took me to Winter Garden, a small sleepy Florida town 28 miles from Orlando, and left me with a Mrs. Coin, a kindly woman who ran a grocery store. My mother and her husband moved to Sanford. She took domestic jobs, washing and cooking for wealthy white people. But she came to see me once a month and always brought me gifts and candy. I remember clearly some of those monthly visits. Georgia would kiss me tenderly and talk to me softly. Those visits were wonderful. I stayed in Winter Garden with Mrs. Coin for nearly six years until World War I ended in 1918.

Alonzo Sabb, my first stepfather whose name I bear, was killed. A tree fell on him while he was working in a woods and he was crushed to death. I remember his funeral. I rode in a buggy and sat there fascinated while the body was lowered into



Gazing fondly at picture of his "mother" Georgia Black, Willie Sabb, steelworker in Philadelphia, recalls "her" as a tender, loving "woman" who made his childhood happy. Georgia Black kept secret being a man until fatal illness unmasked "her."

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MOTHER WAS A MAN *Continued*

the grave. People stood around the open grave praying, their heads bared. I was only four at the time.

After the death of her first husband my mother brought me to Sanford, where she was working. The next few years were happy ones for me. We lived in a white section of town and always had good things to eat. I was always cleanly dressed and given plenty of time to play with other children and enjoy myself.

When I was small I called Georgia Black "Mama" as most little boys do. I remember Mama during the early years in Sanford as a good-looking, firmly-built person who wore pretty clothes and had beautiful long black hair. She worked hard at her housework, and would go to the homes of various white people to do washing and ironing, and occasionally some cooking.

Mama was an exceptional cook. Anything she cooked was outstanding. I particularly loved the way she prepared chicken, pork chops and fish dishes. Her fame as a cook spread throughout the region. She was one of the best, if not the best, cake maker in town. She cooked for every important function given by her church and people always raved about her food. But Mama was a very modest person. "It ain't nothin'," she used to say when folks praised her cooking. "It's just a gift God give me."

I was sent to grade school at the usual age. Mama saw to it that I was well dressed at all times, and sent me off to school on time each morning. During these years I lived in a boarding house with Mama and her second husband, Muster Black. Mama married Black in 1919. I'll never forget my first glimpse of my new stepfather. Mama brought him home on Christmas Day and introduced me to him. "Bill," she said, "this is your new father. Call him Mr. Black. He is a nice man and he'll be good to you."

Muster Black was wearing his World War I uniform that day and I was very impressed. He had just returned from the war. He was a short, stout man in his late 30's who smiled at me, patted me on my head and said, "Hello, son." I knew I was going to like him.

For the next five years we three lived together quietly and in great happiness in a four-room frame house in a nice neighborhood. Mr. Black worked in the roundhouse in the local railroad yard. He worked nights, firing the locomotive engines, a job I greatly admired him for doing. I used to love to take his supper to him in the roundhouse. Mama prepared his supper and gave it to me to carry to him. When I got to where he was working he would hoist me up into the engine driver's seat and talk to me while he ate. Sometimes I'd help him eat it.

Second Stepfather Dies

WHEN Mr. Black died of dropsy in 1925 I really cried. Our house was in gloom and I felt like my daddy had passed. He had fathered me in his own way and I had loved him. I was young and unable to understand the full meaning of death, but I knew that Mr. Black was gone and would never come back, and that I would never sit with him in a railway engine in the roundhouse.

Mama loved him very much as far as I could see. I never heard them quarrel. They were very affectionate towards each other. Our home was a quiet, happy place. Mama took excellent care of Mr. Black, preparing his food just the way he liked it and laundering his clothes with loving care. Outwardly at least they acted like any other married couple. They slept together in a large bed in their bedroom and went to church together on Sundays. Since Mr. Black worked at night they found little time for social life. The few things they did together they enjoyed. Sometimes they took me to carnivals or to the circus whenever it came to town.

After Mr. Black's death Mama converted our home on Pecan Avenue into a rooming house and took in carefully selected boarders. I had a room to myself, and Mama's room was at the front of the house.

Never once did I see my mother undress. She always got dressed in her own room and was very discreet about such things. I accepted her as a woman. It was as simple as that. I thought she was a woman.

As I grew bigger I went to work and helped support my mother

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MOTHER WAS A MAN *Continued*

who had done so much for me. For 12 years I worked in a box factory for \$1.50 a day.

When I reached my teens I started calling Georgia "Mom" just like most boys of that age. Our relationship grew warmer and stronger. We became pals. I could confide in her and ask her help on the difficult problems boys sometimes have to face. Her advice was always sound and sensible.

Being an attractive widow made Mom a desirable target for certain of the town's bachelors. I remember she had several male admirers, well-dressed men who used to visit her at home. They would come and sit respectfully in the living room and talk to Mom. They were always courteous to her and Mom was at all times a perfect lady.

Her womanly charms were admired by many of Sanford's citizens, not one of whom ever suspected that underneath her feminine ways, makeup and stylish dresses was the body of a man. Her voice was light and feminine, but I remember she could mimic men with ease and used to amuse the roomers with her imitations.

Her skin was smooth and soft and she had pretty hair which she kept well groomed. When streaks of gray began appearing in her hair she quickly removed them with hair dye. I never saw her actually use the dye but I used to see bottles of it around the house and figured she was using it. She had tiny hands and feet (she wore a size 6 shoe). She had a very feminine figure, though now that I remember her breasts were rather flat. During her last illness it was discovered that she had been using foam rubber falsies. My wife accidentally found this out while helping Mom dress during her final illness. She found the rubber falsies in the bed but didn't think it important at the time. As far as my wife was concerned Mom was a genuine woman.

Saves House For Mother

I WAS inducted into the Army in 1942 but discharged 90 days later when the doctors discovered that I had an ulcerated stomach. When I returned to Sanford I found Mom sick and worried. She was about to lose the house for non-payment of back

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Willie Sabb and his wife Henrietta thought Georgia Black a woman until her fatal illness. Mrs. Sabb was one of first to learn secret. She was in office of Dr. Orville Barks when medical examination revealed that Georgia was physically a man.

MOTHER WAS A MAN *Continued*
 taxes and was very upset about it. I hated to see her in that condition and assured her that somehow I would get the money to save the house. And I did.

I went back to my old job in the crate factory. But I couldn't save much for the house from my \$25 weekly salary, so I moved north to Philadelphia and got a better-paying job working on munitions in a steel mill. I averaged \$45 a week and managed to send some money back home to Mom every two weeks. It didn't take me long to wipe out the tax arrears on the house. Mom was very happy and grateful for the help I'd given her.

I was laid off from my job at the steel mill in 1945 when the war ended. I soon found another job, though, at a smaller steel plant manufacturing auto parts. I still work there.

Mom's final fatal illness began in November, 1951. I learned about it when her dearest friend, Mrs. Joannah Moore, telephoned me one night and told me Mom was very sick. I left for Sanford the following day. My wife, Henrietta, accompanied me on that tragic trip.

When I saw Mom I was shocked. She had lost a great deal of weight, and was very weak. Though she was suffering terribly she tried to be cheerful. She smiled at me and I hugged her. "Mom," I asked her, "what's the matter?" She wouldn't say a word about her sickness, but made one request. She pleaded with me not to send her to a hospital. "Don't want to go to no hospital," she kept repeating. I couldn't understand it then. Later it became obvious that she feared going to a hospital because an examination would certainly reveal that she was not a woman.

My wife was the second person to know my mother's closely kept secret about her sex. The first was Dr. Orville Barks, prominent Sanford physician, who examined Georgia Black in his private clinic. Henrietta had taken Mom to see Dr. Barks. Mom had protested vigorously but had gone along just the same. My wife stood by while Dr. Barks examined Mom. At the end of the examination the doctor turned to my wife.

"Did you see what I saw?" he asked her. My wife answered that

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MOTHER WAS A MAN *Continued*

she had, although she didn't know exactly what the doctor meant. Then he asked her, "Is your husband the real child of Georgia Black, or was he adopted?" My wife, who did not know at that time that I was an adopted child, answered, "As far as I know, doctor, my husband is her real child." The doctor looked puzzled.

"Your husband can't be her real child," he said thoughtfully, "because Georgia Black is a man!" Henrietta was speechless with shock. After a few seconds she regained control of herself and took Mom back home. Neither said a word on the way back. Both knew that the secret of my mother's sex was now out in the open. For 30 years she had concealed it cleverly and well. Now the whole world would soon know it.

I don't know whether Dr. Barks communicated his discovery to other persons in Sanford, but the truth about mother being a man gradually leaked out. It stirred great curiosity for miles around. Soon the whole town was talking about it. The local radio station broadcast some facts about the strange case of Georgia Black. Mom became the most-discussed citizen of Sanford. Her story traveled right across the country.

Before her death Mom had become a local celebrity and folks came to Fernald-Laughton Memorial Hospital, where she was being treated, just to catch a glimpse of her. They came from cities and towns all over the state. When she left the hospital to spend some time at the home of her brother-in-law, Malakai Black, scores of curious people visited her. Newspapermen interviewed her and photographers took pictures of her while she lay on her sickbed.

I found out that my mother was a man from my wife. Henrietta, who had stayed on to nurse Mom after I went back to Philadelphia, came home a little while before the end. She seemed troubled and nervous. I asked her about her trip and how Mom was feeling.

"What did the doctors say is the matter with Mom?" I asked her.

"They say she has cancer," Henrietta said. I was saddened at this news for I always heard cancer was fatal. Henrietta had something else on her mind and I asked her what it was.



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MOTHER WAS A MAN *Continued*

"Willie," she blurted out, "I'm going to tell you something that's going to knock you off your feet." I told her to go ahead and say it.

She told me in detail what had happened the day Mom was examined by Dr. Barks in his clinic. "Your mother is not a woman," she told me. "She's a man." I was gripped by a feeling of great mental confusion. I couldn't speak. I couldn't think clearly. Then my mind went back many years and I tried to piece together the story of Georgia Black. I remembered she used to sit with her legs open the way men do. But that was the only masculine mannerism she had. And at the time it didn't seem significant to me. "Is what you say the truth?" I asked Henrietta. She nodded. "It's true," she said. I didn't say anything for a long time.

"You know," I told her, "I always felt there was something different about Mom. Now I know what it was."

The last time I saw mother I knew she was sinking. But she put up a brave front for me. "Bill, I'm feeling better now," she said cheerfully. But it was an effort for her to speak and I knew she was lying. She just didn't want me to worry. But I think she didn't want me to be around when she died so that I would discover her secret.

When I left Philadelphia for Sanford to try to reach Mom's bedside before she died, I had decided not to let her know I knew she was a man. I carefully rehearsed a little speech I had prepared and which I intended to make. It went something like this: "Mom, I know there's been an awful lot of talk around here about you, and a lot of people have been spreading some pretty strange stories. I know you think people have talked to me about you. But I want to tell you I don't believe a word of it. You're still my Mom and I love you. You've been a wonderful mother to me."

I was never able to deliver that speech because Mom passed away before I reached her. I don't think she ever knew that I, too, knew her secret.

Mother was a man all right. But to me she was the most wonderful mother a man could want. For 30 of her 56 years she pretended to be a woman and as far as I'm concerned was a complete success. Some say she lived a lie. I don't. Georgia Black raised me to manhood and gave me tenderness and affection. I loved her with all my heart and shall cherish her memory as long as I live. She will always be "Mom" to me.



Reading last letter received from his "mother," Georgia Black, just before her death, Willie Sabb recalls sadly the tenderness and love "she" had shown him throughout the years. At end of letter Mrs. Black wrote: "You've been a wonderful son to me."

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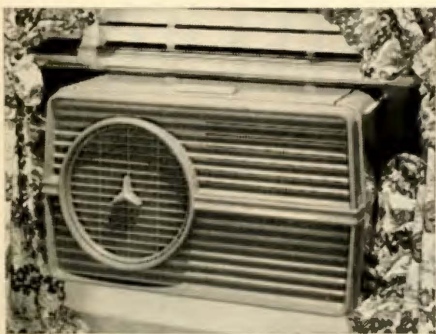


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COVER

Sugar Ray Robinson, retired world's middle-weight boxing champion now turned dancer, recently moved into a newly-remodeled and refurbished Riverdale home. With his beautiful wife, Edna Mae, and his three-year-old son, Ray, Jr., Sugar is now living in the house of his dreams, the first real home he has had since his marriage in 1943. Every item in the luxuriously-appointed home is custom-built to the exact specifications of the famous couple, who collaborated on ideas. Cover by Howard Modavis.



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