

FAMOUS MAYFIELD ARTISTS

Sandra Blythe

My hometown of Mayfield, Kentucky is also that of two world famous artists, Ellis Wilson (1899-1977) and Helen LaFrance Orr (1919 to present). I knew Ellis Wilson and know Miss Helen so I thought it would be of interest to share stories of them with you.

ELLIS WILSON to many Mayfield, Kentucky homefolk was the story of a hometown boy making it big in the big city of New York. But, there was a struggle not known to many except (I'm sure) his close family during the time of strong segregation in which the South there was not a strong outcry for the recognition of a young black artist with such a gift. His gift of painting came natural to him, but the Ellis Wilson I know was more on a personal note for a short time. It was the early 1970s when Ellis Wilson would come back to Mayfield to visit my parents, Reverend Cleo and Mrs. Dorothy Thorpe as well as visiting with his own family members. This visit was around the 4th of July because it was my parents' 25th wedding anniversary. Ellis loved good southern food, and my parents were always overjoyed when Ellis could find the time

and money to come home to visit. We would lay out the red carpet for him.

Also, my father's long-time friend, James Walter Ligon, had also made a big plunge and moved away to the big city of New York. They were like royalty to us. We were all expected to be on our best behavior. I can so vividly remember Ellis's big robust laughter after feasting on southern pit Bar-B-Q with potato salad, all the trimmings and especially, homemade ice cream. He and my father and their friends would tell of their hard times coming up with very little but also of all the fun and family times as well. The struggles they had to face as young black boys running the streets of "The Bottom" on Water Street which was a notable black section of town at that time.

It was amazing and overwhelming for me and many other Mayfieldians to sit at home and look on TV one day and see one of Ellis Wilson's prints on the "Bill Cosby Show" (so many times) featuring the "Haitian Funeral Procession". You never know when you may be in the presence of greatness.

It would have been so wonderful for Ellis to have seen his greatness exposed to the public after all these years.

HELEN LAFRANCE ORR was born November 4, 1919 in Hickory Groves (Graves County), Kentucky. She was the second eldest daughter of John Franklin Orr and Lillie Mae (Ligons) Orr. At an early age, she had a love for reading and painting. She is a self-taught painter, and she paints from previous memories of things in her early life. Her mother inspired her as a child to paint. She showed her how to mix laundry bluing with dandelions and berries to make paints for her paintings. She received no formal art instruction nor did she attend high school. Her mother instructed her to paint what she saw. The first thing she remembered painting was a gray rabbit on an old building of felt fabric. Most of her pictures featured church picnics based on the church in north Graves County, Shelton Chapel A.M.E. Church, where she attended school during the week and church services on Sundays.

Miss Helen not only paints but she carves and builds doll houses. She tells of the story about one of her carvings she did of geese in flight. She mentioned how when one goose is sick or dying that two other geese would hold the sick goose up while in flight until they are sure it is dead before letting it fall to the ground.

Her words are seen in the book titled Art of the South by Kathy Moses. When Miss Helen worked at the Kennedy Tobacco Barn, a buyer from Holland Amsterdam purchased a painting of a worker working in the barn. It was published in a book in Holland titled Tabak in DeKunst. Miss Helen still paints almost daily. Her works are offered in galleries in Kentucky and Indiana and can be located using the Internet.

A birthday party was given in her honor on her 89th birthday (in 2008) by the Matters of the Heart Youth Group of the Smith Temple Presbyterian Church and the Ellis Wilson Society, both of Mayfield, Kentucky.

The Ellis Wilson Society was created in 2008 to promote the art of Ellis Wilson, to promote the art of other Graves County artists such as Miss Helen, and to encourage Graves County citizens to research the country's African-American history and genealogy.

Sandra Blythe currently resides in Mayfield, Kentucky.