

Annette Lane Harrison Richter

Reflections on Black Sisterhood and the United Order of Tents

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Annette Lane Harrison Richter, great-great-granddaughter of Annetta M. Lane, one of the founders of the United Order of Tents, reflects on her accomplished ancestor. As told to Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich (with some edits in italics for clarity).

I grew up in the house that Annetta (*M. Lane*) – my great-great-grandmother – built in Norfolk, Virginia in 1900. My brother, Alvin Richter, Jr., and I were the fifth generation to live in that house. It was a twelve-room house with stained glass windows, marble fireplaces, a butler’s pantry, and it had a steeple, and five porches. Next door to the house was a lawn and on the far side of the lawn was a driveway. Oh, it was just a beautiful home. Very elegant. (*It was often mistaken for*) a church, but I suspect it was Queen Anne architecture; Victorian, Queen Anne period. The United Order of Tents headquarters was located at 622 Church Street, just around the corner.

I understand Annetta had ponies and a man who took care of the ponies, they pulled her carriage. She lived very comfortably. She, as I said, was a religious woman. God was very good to her. He really blessed her. She was seventy when she died. One evening after dinner she was stricken and she was too ill to go upstairs to bed. So they dismantled her bed and brought it down and reassembled it for her in the parlor. She died soon after that. It was probably a heart attack – they didn’t do autopsies back in those days but she died right in the house in 1908 at the age of seventy.

As a young woman (*Annetta M. Lane was enslaved*) she took care of the plantation owner’s children. She had to sit with them when they had their lessons, and she was attentive. She taught herself to read and write, secretly of course, since slaves were not permitted to learn to read and write. But she taught herself. She was also a nurse and, in that capacity, she could move freely about the plantation. Eventually she worked with the Underground Railroad carrying messages for slaves who were planning to escape. She had a younger sister named Mary who worked in the fields. Mary was sold, and Annetta never saw dear little Mary again. But that’s all I know of her family.

When Annetta founded the Southern District of the Tents in Virginia in 1867 (*this is the date of the first official incorporation of the group – the first documentation of the Tents goes back to 1847 in Philadelphia*), she had a vision from God. I understand she was a very religious woman. She had a vision from God to band black

women together to look after one another. So when a Tent Sister died, other Tent Sisters prepared the body for burial. If she left orphaned children, a Tent Sister would take those children into her home and rear them as her own. So it was a means of black women looking after one another. Annetta included the names of two abolitionists in the official name of the Tents, the United Order of Tents of J. R. Giddings and Jollifee Union.

Secrecy was very important. Slavery had officially been abolished, but you never know what's going to happen, so they had all sorts of secret signals and words to protect one another. Meetings are still closed to nonmembers, and there's a lot of ritual to it, which I'm sure was important to these women because they could decide what they wanted to do and how they wanted to do it. And they were all women. Men have never been associated with the Tents and the Tents is not an adjunct to a men's organization. So these are women who have banded together to look after one another and after their children, and the less fortunate in the community. Annetta went on to marry, and she had two girls and a boy. And one of her daughters was Sallie. Sallie Lane was her maiden name and she married Isaac Bonney. And I don't believe they had children. Her other daughter was Adelaide, and Adelaide was my great-grandmother. Robert, I think, was Annetta's husband, and Paul was her bachelor son. Annetta, her husband, her bachelor son, her daughter Sallie Lane Bonney, and Sallie's husband, Isaac Bonney, are buried together in a cemetery in Norfolk, Virginia. Now Adelaide, I understand, her other daughter, divorced, remarried a man named Johnson, and moved to New York and I know nothing further about Adelaide.

I never heard any details (*about Annetta's Underground Railroad work*). The only person who would have known more details of her life would have been her granddaughter, who was my grandmother, Emma Lane Williams Harrison, and she just never talked about it. It was just one of those things. Annetta was the matriarch of the family and we lived in her house. She founded the Tents. And that was about it. There was never a lot of talk about it – not in my presence. My mother, Annette Harrison Richter, was born in 1903 so she was only five years old when Annetta died, so she wouldn't have known much about her. So really the family just never discussed Annetta's early life.

Speaking of my grandmother, she died while she was attending a convention of the Tents in

Hampton, Virginia in 1946. I remember how excited she and Mother would be every June when they went together to the Tent's annual convention. Emma had had a beautiful white eyelet dress made for it, and she was stricken with cerebral apoplexy soon after she arrived at the convention in Hampton and went into a coma from which she never recovered. My brother and I were taken over to see her while she was there in the hospital. And shortly after that she died without regaining consciousness. And she was buried in that beautiful white eyelet dress she had made for it. So the Tents run through my life as a very strong thread in so many ways. The very first telephone number I ever learned was at the Tents Hall so I could call my mother while she was at work.

The Tents provided fraternal insurance. Annetta was concerned about members having a good Christian burial, so they were assured that by having an insurance policy that could pay for that burial. Members attended meetings on a monthly basis in their chapters or Subordinate Tents, and they paid dues and some of that money went toward an insurance policy. And of course each member named someone as the beneficiary of her policy. And so the Tents is monitored, so to speak, by the insurance commission of the states in which it operates. I remember hearing Mother speak about the insurance commissioners. So there was oversight of the organization and its funds. And I remember going in and out of Mother's office from time to time and a funeral director would be there because a Tent Sister had left the funeral home as the beneficiary for her burial.

When they had their annual conventions they would meet in churches. There were no hotels in which the membership could stay so they would stay in private homes of other Tent Sisters in that area. And I recall one convention when they had, I think, three buses from Norfolk to wherever the convention was held that year. And I recall so clearly that my mother was so thrilled and proud to see these three buses, you know, like Greyhounds, massive buses, roll up and these black women getting on to go to the convention. She worked very hard and we knew every June that she was going to be so tied up with the convention because she was the Endowment Secretary and Treasurer of the Tents. So often Tent Sisters would go to headquarters to pay their dues or transact official business and then they would sit by her desk and talk to Sister Richter about personal problems, you know family problems, things of that sort because they were so close in the sisterhood.

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When I was young, Mother was very active in going to rural areas to give degrees – when members move from one level of membership to another. She was also active in establishing chapters or Subordinate Tents in other areas. My father would drive her, and I remember they would go all throughout Virginia and North Carolina on weekends. The ladies considered Daddy kind of an adjunct Tent member because he was so diligent and dedicated to being with my mother, and accompanying her and driving her to various meetings. So they were accustomed to seeing Daddy arrive. But that's about the closest a man has been to the organization, that maybe and financial advisors, but no membership.

I was enrolled in the Tents the day of my birth. And I went to the meetings in the Juvenile Department, and then I transitioned to the adult section in Lydia Tent #1. Each Subordinate Tent or chapter is given a name and a number. So Lydia #1 is the very first Subordinate Tent or chapter that was established (*in the Southern District*) and all of us in my family belonged to Lydia Tent #1. I'm still a member of Lydia Tent #1.

I very recently attended two conventions of the Tents. The first one was in Chesapeake, Virginia, that was Southern District #1 (*there are currently four districts of the Tents*) and then later in August I went to the National Convention, which was in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia. Sitting there in those conventions I started imagining what it must have been like when the Tents first gathered and how excited and joyful and thankful they must've been to sit around at a time they decided on, they weren't told what to do. They could make their own choices. And I'm sure their work was never done. So, I imagined them sitting around maybe making quilts, mending clothing because they had nothing – they had been out of slavery for only two years, they had absolutely nothing. So I could just imagine how the Sisters would sit around and probably make quilts or mend clothing and plan how the organization was going to operate. Would they have officers? And what nomenclature would be given to the officers and their songs or prayers or rituals? And I'm sure it must have been a deeply moving experience for them, because slaves were torn apart so, and treated so brutally and viciously. To be with women who were nurturing and loving and sensitive just means everything in the world.

I have a flashback to slavery almost every day of my life. Some incident, it doesn't have to be anything unpleasant but just something that brings to mind slavery. It must've been in the

early 1970s, I was on liaison with the federal agency where I was working at the time, and that day was a beautiful sunny warm day. I walked from my apartment house in downtown Washington, DC over to the FBI on official business, and when I left the Bureau I was walking past the White House and all of a sudden I felt a presence next to me. I had never experienced anything like that before. I felt this presence and I thought it was Annetta. And I thought about how she would never believe that a descendant of hers worked for a federal agency of the United States, and in a capacity that was tasked with making decisions whether or not applicants could work for that federal agency or employees could continue working for it. At the time I was in security – the Office of Security – which was my career. And I was running background investigations. And it just occurred to me that Annetta wouldn't believe this. Here I am walking past the White House, on my way to the Office of Personnel Management and from there I was going to the Department of State, on the liaison that I ran two or three times a week. And I thought it would just be beyond her comprehension.

The Tents run several homes for the aged now. In fact there's one in Norfolk which is named the Annetta M. Lane Apartments. I was there last summer when I was attending their convention in the area and they have a huge portrait of Annetta in the living room. I was so honored to be photographed standing next to her portrait. And a similar portrait of her always hung in our house in Norfolk. The one at the Apartments, I think, is in pastels and I believe the one that we had at home is in sepia tones, but it's a huge portrait of Annetta holding the charter of the organization, in a wide gilt frame. She was just always there, you know. I always had Annetta and I just think about her almost every day.

I know my ancestors would really be shocked to learn that now I go to the conventions because during my mother's whole lifetime I never went to one, but she was wise enough not to try to force me to participate. So I was always a member and went in the early years to Tent meetings and kept membership. But I never went to a convention. Mother died in 1966. She was still working for the Tents up until the time that she died. But she never forced me into it. During the summer I would go around the corner to the Tents Hall and help her with some paperwork and then all of a sudden I'd discover, "Oh, it's time to go home to start dinner" or to see my TV program or whatever and I'd take off, not to be seen anymore at the Tents Hall that afternoon. But

then in later years I thought, “Gee, wouldn’t it be nice to go to a convention to see exactly what was going on?” And I remembered some of the secrets that one needed to prove one’s membership in a meeting. So I started going to the conventions. And I found it quite interesting. I don’t think they have changed much since the founding. It’s just so deeply rooted in praising God, thanking God for our blessings, and being sisterly.

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