



Sibley Fleming and her grandmother, Celestine, taken by AJC photographer Joey Ivanesco.

## CELESTINE SIBLEY: A Heavenly Journalist

My maternal grandmother, Bonnie Waldrop, loved Gothic paperback novels and dipped snuff. She instilled in me a love for reading in the early 1970s, and we were excited each week when Jasper Drugs got its new shipment of books and magazines.

Eventually I learned to grab my grandfather's copy of the *Atlanta Constitution*, which was never far from reach. I would take the paper onto the steadfast porch of my grandparents' old plank house and, in the cool shade of a towering oak, maul its pages until my hands were soot-colored.

On those pages I discovered Celestine Sibley. Her writing felt as familiar to me as if I were listening to my own grandmother regale me with stories of the 1938 Whitestone flood, which lifted the Connor family house and store from its foundation, killing 11 family members and two visiting children.

Now, 25 years into my teaching career at Pickens County High School, I incor-

porate Sibley's columns and excerpts from her books into my AP literature and composition class when teaching Southern literature. If anyone captured the true flavor of the South, it was Sibley, and her talent is as relevant for readers and students today as it was during her career of more than six decades.

Rising to journalistic prominence in an era when opportunities for women were extremely limited, Sibley dismantled gender barriers while engaging and enthralling readers across the South. *Atlanta Constitution* publisher and civil rights champion Ralph McGill, subbing for Sibley, used her own column to praise her this way: "If there is a queen of [our] news shop, it is sister Sibley."

"She can put words down in a manner to excite envy among the rest of us," McGill wrote.

Sibley was born in Holley, Florida, in 1914 and grew up in Creola and Mobile, Alabama. She began her career as a journalist at age 15, reporting for the *Mobile*

*Press Register*. After high school, Sibley continued in a paid position with that paper until 1936, when she married fellow journalist and *Press Register* colleague Jim Little. The couple moved to Florida and worked on the *Pensacola News-Journal*.

In the summer of 1941, Little accepted a position with the Associated Press in Atlanta, and Sibley began a decades-long tenure with the *Atlanta Constitution* (later the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*), where, thanks to a shortage of manpower after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into World War II, Sibley became the newspaper's first female editor.

Until her death in 1999, Sibley wrote more than 10,000 columns for the Atlanta paper, with topics ranging from state and national politics to cultural commentary and sensational courtroom trials. She also wrote more than thirty books.

Upon his retirement in 1983, Sibley's lifelong New York book editor, Lawrence Peale "Larry" Ashmead, told *Publisher's Weekly*: "A rep would come to an editor about a local writer in the paper, and we'd go there and get the columnist to write a book. Celestine Sibley was my favorite... We could sell 30,000 copies of a book by her just in Atlanta and the Southeast alone."

Atlanta journalist Doug Monroe, who briefly served as part-time editor for Sibley, remembers being amazed not only by the volume of copy she produced, but also its breadth.

"She would go out to Hollywood for these star pieces and then come back and cover a brutal murder trial," Monroe recalls. "And then she'd come back [and] write a column about a cake recipe at Rich's. She'd get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, make a pot of coffee...write books...catch the bus from Roswell into downtown Atlanta, and write a column almost every day, and then she would let anybody who wanted to see her come up and see her. Today they have security guards that won't even let in the employees. She would talk to anybody, from winos to First Ladies. She'd listen, take notes, and write their stories."

Sibley was proud of her profession.

“Being a reporter is one of the noblest things you can do in life,” she said. “Letting the people know. It’s really a holy cause. Time after time after time, in the middle of corruption and disgrace and bad politics, I’ve seen people come through and do for people. I write about someone in trouble and someone else rallies to help them. Through reporting, things can change.”

She became a lifelong student of the human condition, and she could sometimes be heard sighing over her typewriter, “Poor humanity!”

Sibley served as a Pulitzer prize jurist and was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. She won the Ralph McGill Award for Lifetime Achievement in Journalism, the National Society of Newspaper Columnists Lifetime Achievement Award, and a special Christopher Award for a column on how the prayers of her youngest daughter, Mary, changed a charged atmosphere at an Atlanta lunch counter.

Sibley’s eldest granddaughter, Celestine Sibley Fleming (Mary’s daughter), says her grandmother “had compassion for people in humble circumstances and recognized human frailty and the fact that humans are flawed and don’t always do the right thing.”

Fleming, an Atlanta-based writer and editor, carries on her grandmother’s legacy and is author of several books, including *Celestine: A Granddaughter’s Reminiscence* (Hill Street Press, 2002). Fleming also edited *The Celestine Sibley Sampler: Writings and Photographs with Tributes to the Beloved Author and Journalist* (Peachtree Publishing, 1997).

“My grandmother saw and knew people who went hungry in the Great Depression; she talked to me about being grateful for a bowl of cold collard greens as a child because that’s all there was,” Fleming says.

Fleming recalls helping her grandmother answer reader mail. “One reader wrote, ‘Dear Celestine Sibley, Jesus loves you.’ I was very young and asked, ‘Should I write back, Dear Mabel, Jesus loves you, too?’ She was visibly irritated by my question. ‘No!’ she spat. ‘Imagine that ...

someone thinking they can speak for Jesus.’”

Sibley’s daily personal column delighted in everyday simplicity and “turned funny” characters who defined the culture of the South and bonded Sibley with readers. Many of the columns were written at Sweet Apple, her old log cabin home in northern Fulton County where she also gardened and enjoyed solitude with friends and family, away from the bustle of the outside world.

Sweet Apple itself is a testament to the South’s sense of place. Sibley rebuilt the pre-Civil War structure, part of the area’s original Sweet Apple settlement (the cabin was, at one time, used as a schoolhouse), and she grew vegetables and flowers as she befriended and wrote about her neighbors and the surrounding countryside.

Ham and turnip greens cooking on the stove, fruit trees blooming, and a neighbor plowing a field are among the images captured in her prose as deliciously as baked grits and skillet cornbread, Joe-Pye weed, “flower fixing,” and honey bees.

### Hollywood Stars

In the 1950s, Sibley traveled to Los Angeles to interview and write about such Hollywood movie stars as Bob Hope, Clark Gable, and Groucho Marx. She also interviewed Eleanor Roosevelt and personally knew Margaret “Peggy” Mitchell. What made her coverage memorable was that it was never contrived.

After landing an interview with the then-new blond bombshell Marilyn Monroe, Sibley told Fleming that she realized she didn’t have a thing to ask the performer but then conjured a truthful question, telling Monroe that her critics said she couldn’t act and she was getting by on her looks, obviously substantial. Monroe didn’t miss a beat and replied, in her lilting voice, “I do the best I can with what I’ve got!”

### Murder, She Wrote

In 1948, Sibley covered the trial of John Wallace, a wealthy landowner in Meriwether County. After he killed a



Celestine Sibley at Dog Island.

fired tenant farmer who stole two of his cows, Wallace tried to cover up the crime. His trial became a sensation and included the otherworldly visions of fortune teller Mayhaley Lancaster, who helped Sheriff Lamar Potts solve the crime.

Sibley wrote: “I had heard of Miss Mayhayley’s phenomenal fortune-telling talents, and while I was visiting her little house for an interview about her connection with the famous Coweta County murder case, I asked her to tell my fortune.

“She lit a pine torch for light and examined my hand carefully, sighed, leaned back and went to sleep!”

Among the wildest death-penalty trials she covered was that of Anjette Lyles, a Macon diner owner who killed members of her family with arsenic. Sibley visited Lyles on death row before the poisoner’s sentence was commuted. Lyles was then committed to the state asylum in Milledgeville, where, Sibley was happy to report, her work detail was in the kitchen, baking cakes for employees’ and patients’ birthdays.

COURTESY SIBLEY FLEMING

## Georgia Politics

Sibley also began covering Georgia politicians in the 1950s. In 2000, the press gallery in the Georgia House of Representatives was named in her honor. It is the only space in the Capitol so designated. Georgia political writer David Morrison says, “I know the why; I don’t know the how. But it was said that Tom Murphy, who at one time had the record as the longest-serving presiding officer among all the legislatures in the U.S., would not start a session until Celestine was in her seat. The irony, I suppose, was that she was not technically a beat reporter at the Capitol. Oh, she wrote political things throughout the year, to be sure, and stayed in touch with all of her contacts all the time, but technically, she was just there during the 40-day session. She was there when Murphy first took his seat, when Gov. Lester Maddox gave his

first State of the State, and when all the governors I knew, who all came up through the legislature, first took their seats. My guess is they wanted to honor her and could not think of a better way.”

Morrison was among many writers whom Sibley mentored. “The newspapers had no formal mentoring program, but I learned very early in my career that you have to pay attention to, and learn from, those who were there before you,” he said. “I just went to her and asked her if she would show me the ropes when I first got my assignment to go to the Capitol. My first beat was the state Senate during the legislative session.

“The first day she helped me, we sneaked away from the newsroom just as soon as she got her column done (I think she was writing a column every day then) and walked over to the Capitol. The session had not yet begun, and the place was virtually empty except for the people who always work there and who are not always visible. That’s the one thing she wanted to show me—covering a beat like the Capitol isn’t just about sitting on your butt in a press gallery in the Senate chamber, watching the events of history parade before you. You do that, and you probably won’t see anything. You certainly won’t understand it.”

### Dr. King

In 1968, Sibley covered the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the trial of assassin James Earl Ray. She composed a reflection upon the moment she learned of King’s death that was titled “In the Rain by a Mississippi Truck Stop You Remember.” It was published in the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* on the day of King’s funeral, April 9, 1968.

“The lights of a truck stop were just ahead and I pulled off and sat there,” she wrote. “The impulse of all newspaper

reporters is to call the office when news of a great moment happens—to ask, ‘Do you need me? Shall I come in?’ But I was more than 300 miles away with a sleeping child on the back seat and other children ahead, waiting for me. The need for any services of mine would be over by the time I could get back so I sat there by the Mississippi truck stop, watching the rain make mud of the parking area, watching the big trucks pull in to wait out the rain, and thinking about Dr. King.”

She referred to King as “a kind man, an eloquent man,” a demonstration of Sibley’s sophisticated racial views, as compared to those held by many of her contemporaries.

“I think she struggled with the South’s history of enslaving other human beings—she came from a time when racism was not only rampant, it was accepted,” Fleming says. “She raised my mother, Mary Everitt Little Vance, to become a lifelong civil rights activist who marched and ran off to the Freedom Rides and was personally sent home by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Mom was too young), but she was given a job—at least for a short while—helping Mrs. King answer her correspondence.”

### Political Campaign Reporter

In 1976, Sibley furthered her political journalism by reporting on Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign and becoming a part of it. Longtime Sibley friend Reverend Patricia Templeton remembers that time fondly. Templeton, the rector of St. Dunstan’s Episcopal Church in Atlanta, met Sibley in 1974, when Templeton was writing a paper on women in journalism as a student at Atlanta’s Ridgeview High School. Templeton phoned Sibley and asked if she could interview her. Sibley told her, “Come on down this afternoon.” Templeton did.

Sibley took Templeton under her wing as she pursued journalism beyond high school, helped Templeton land a summer internship at the AJC, and included Templeton in her coverage of the Carter campaign when Templeton



Celestine with her grandchildren at Sweet Apple.

BY SIBLEY FLEMING

was a student at the University of Georgia.

“The 1976 presidential election was, of course, a big deal in Georgia, with Carter on the ticket,” Templeton said. *The Red and Black* (UGA’s student newspaper) covered election night. We sent reporters to D.C., to [President Gerald Ford’s] headquarters, to Atlanta to both [the third-party candidate Lester] Maddox and Carter headquarters, and me and a photographer to Plains for a ‘color’ piece. Celestine was also in Plains. She took me under her wing and made me part of all her interviews. Of course, she knew everyone, so I had access to Miss Lillian, Billy, and all the town characters. Forever after she talked about the time we covered the presidential election together, as if I had been on the campaign trail with her.”

According to Monroe, some people thought Sibley was a tiny, demure, wilting flower, though nothing could be further from the truth. Monroe recalls a copy editor who wanted to change an old-fashioned word in one of Sibley’s columns because he couldn’t find it in any current dictionaries.

“I went into her office and told her this guy wanted to change one of her words. She rose up, all six feet of her, and said, with a fierce look on her face, ‘Where is the son of a bitch?’”

“Yonder he is,” I said, pointing, as she stomped out the door. She talked to the guy and came right back in. Needless to say, he didn’t change the word.”

Templeton remembers Sibley in much the same way—as a gracious and loving person with backbone. After spending some time in journalism and then entering ministry, Templeton remained close

with Sibley throughout the years. When Templeton met her husband-to-be, Dr. Joseph Monti, Sibley somewhat playfully insisted he needed to be a solid Democrat. Upon Templeton’s assurance that he was, Sibley remarked, “Good, we’ll keep him!”

The same upfront and honest way that she lived her life and led her career

request for sympathy. After I promised I would do her funeral, she declared that we weren’t going to talk about it anymore. And we never did. If I tried to bring it up, to ask if she had any favorite Scripture readings or hymns, her reply was always, ‘You’ll know what to do.’ The last time I talked to her, three days before she died, she told me, ‘I’m counting on



At Celestine's Sweet Apple, 1990s.

BY SIBLEY FLEMING

was how Sibley met death. Templeton and her husband were visiting Sibley at Sweet Apple in 1998 when Sibley said to her, “I know you can pray. How are you at doing funerals?”

“Good,” Templeton replied, “Why are you asking?”

“I thought I’d commission you to do mine,” Sibley cheerfully replied.

A sick feeling in her stomach, Templeton repeated her question.

“Well, I went to the doctor yesterday, and he said I have a little brain tumor,” Sibley answered in the same dismissive tone she might have used to tell about a trip to the dentist.

Templeton reminisces, “It was pure Celestine: matter of fact, no maudlin tears, no feeling sorry for herself, no

you to take care of things.”

Sibley later wrote, concerning her impending demise, “A friend for whom I did a slight favor said lightly, ‘When you die, you’re going to heaven.’ It gave me a bad couple of minutes. Dying is all right if you must, but Heaven? I’m not sure about that, either getting there or liking it ....Do you work in Heaven? I happen to like it very much, but nothing I read or heard in my childhood mentioned that there’s a daily paper in Heaven.”

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