

Hilda

Carolyn Dungee Nicholas

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The story of one remarkable person is often the story of a family. Carolyn Dungee Nicholas' book, *Hilda*, about her mother, Hilda Howland May Minnis Mason, pays homage to Hilda's rise from humble origins in segregated, rural Virginia to her career as a renowned educator and public official in Washington, DC. It is also a family history.

Born in a log cabin to the grandchildren of emancipated slaves, Hilda benefited from her family's determination to see her well educated at an early age.

After a divorce, Hilda moved to Washington, DC, for greater opportunity. Her career included teaching, working for the Bureau of Engraving, involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, fighting for DC statehood, championing the needs of the poor, political action, and being elected to the DC Board of Education as the representative of Ward IV and later to the DC Council representing the city at large.

In segregated DC, Hilda had a reputation as a "skilled, resourceful teacher, dedicated to improving the academic achievement of the students in her classroom," Nicholas writes.

Hilda was also a mother, and that aspect is shown through the author's many childhood memories of life in Altavista, Virginia, and Washington, DC.

Mother and daughter would hold hands as they walked home from the country school where Hilda taught. "Hilda would tell me a story...If we stopped to pick some greens or strawberries, the story-telling would stop until we finished our picking," she writes. Hilda would use the wild strawberries to make "shortcake with real biscuits and whipped cream for dessert."

Nicholas's vivid memories of her grandparents, her mother's siblings, Southern food, dirt roads, discipline, and ambition reveal a family with values and a will to succeed. Quoted anecdotes gleaned from family members add flavor.

Her research into genealogy shows the difficulty of tracking family members who were born into slavery or shortly after emancipation.

Unfortunately, as the author tries to connect the many disparate elements, her book becomes confusing. Lengthy quotations are not attributed when they appear in the text, but are referenced in the 322 end notes. Family history is repeated in various sections instead of combined into a single, coherent story. At times, the book is more about the daughter than the mother, and a lengthy section involving a nasty fight over the care of elderly Hilda and Charles seems out of place due to the personal details revealed. Nicholas mentions Hilda's "other daughter—her eldest," who is not named or described elsewhere. This is puzzling because the author up to this point appears to be an only child. Hilda also suffers from numerous spelling and punctuation errors, and an index would have been useful.

The book includes well-deserved tributes to Hilda and her husband, Charles Mason, for their Civil Rights and charity work, and lists the legislation and resolutions they sponsored or cosponsored.

Overall, Nicholas's collection of memories provides a delightful view of the incomparable Hilda, whose legacy is inspirational.

LINDA SALISBURY (July 1, 2010)

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