

Voice of the Hill was a local newspaper that covered the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Washington, DC. At the time it was the only newspaper with a web presence. archive.voiceofthehill.com, 16 Sept 2008

MY FRIEND

BY JIM MYERS

There is a world of picket fences and ice cream socials. But our neighborhood has no picket fences. So you must understand, too, that Miss Boone has an adventuring spirit that takes her to unusual haunts. She explains it this way: Her people are Kentucky Boones, and she is the grand niece of Daniel Boone, the noted pioneer. Yet whatever she says, Miss Boone always speaks precisely, with purposeful diction, as a dedicated elementary school teacher should. Among the early surprises I got from Miss Boone is how much this kindly woman knew about the awful warfare that engulfed our community in the 1980s and 90s.

My friend Clara Lyle Boone—Miss Boone to those of us in the Capitol East neighborhood—is a woman of surprises. Not only does she bring a special quality of caring to our neighborhood; Miss Boone also knows the neighborhood in ways that are rare; and she regularly teaches the rest of us about aspects of our community we did not know. She is one fine teacher. From 1967 to 1977—a turbulent decade for eastern Capitol Hill—Miss Boone taught fifth grade at Payne Elementary School on C Street. I think of her thusly—as teacher and community figure. Yet there is much more to our Miss Boone: Back in March 1997, she was profiled in *The Washington Post*—practically a whole page—for another endeavor that many neighbors hardly knew about. She is also the founder and guiding spirit of Arsis Press, an inspired venture dedicated to publishing the works of women composers. Miss Boone, whose first love was music, discovered early on that serious women composers were not getting their due. "I liked to write music from my early years," she explains. "But I soon learned that standard publishers didn't want anything to do with women composers except for children's music. She was also determined to do something about this injustice- which is very much in keeping with her approach to life. "It's not that I can do much," says Miss Boone, never one to boast. "But I do what I can."

* * * * *

Miss Boone founded Arsis Press in 1974; the name derives from the music notation for "upbeat" in Italian. She says it means "upbeat for women" in this context. Arsis Press currently stocks a 10-page catalogue of more than 150 choral, orchestral and chamber music works—all, with one exception, by women. (The lone male composer, John Webber, of Portsmouth, England, is there, among other reasons, to show that Miss Boone has nothing against men).

Still, you also need to see Clara Lyle Boone to understand why her presence delights her neighbors—even those who have no ear for classical music. Miss Boone, who recently turned 74, has striking white hair and regularly walks though the neighborhood in wide-brimmed straw hats or flowing scarves. Or she rides a bicycle with wire basket on the front handlebars. Also, she often wears white gloves. Seeing Miss Boone, you might expect that she had just stepped out of families in our community. Sometimes in discussions about our neighborhood, the name of a young man who had been killed would come up, and Miss Boone would react with great sadness. One time, I remember she responded with these exact words, "Oh, he was such a soulful child." So often did she raise kindly memories about young men who had died that I asked her if she knew how many of her former pupils had been lost. "I never dared count," she replied. "It would be too sad."

* * * * *

Clara Lyle Boone was raised in Stanton, Kentucky in the Cumberland Mountains. She attended Asbury College and graduated from Centre College in Kentucky as a music major. She then received a Master's in education and music from Harvard-Radcliffe. "That was back when women could be nurses, librarians and teachers—and, well, housewives," she says. She taught in schools in Massachusetts, Kentucky, Iowa, Michigan and New York before taking a teaching post at Washington's National Cathedral School in 1957. She remembers looking out and seeing other parts of D.C. far in the in the distance. "I wanted to teach poorer children," she says, "ones that were suffering from educational neglect. She was also a strong believer in civil rights and demonstrated in front of the White House in 1960 in support of the lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. She remembers she carried a sign, "Hot Dogs For All. The same year, she stopped teaching to work on John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign. But I only got to campaign for one week during Spring Break.

* * * * *

In her early years in D.C., Miss Boone shared an apartment on Cathedral Avenue in Northwest. Those were days, she recalls, when proper single woman did not rent apartments alone. But she had tired of the attitudes of her housemate, particularly on racial issues, and wanted to live on her own. Fate, she says, guided her to an apartment on Bay Street, where the entire 1700 block was owned and and rented out by B.F. Saul Co. At the time, the houses were divided into upstairs and downstairs flats and all the renters were white. But the demographics of eastern Capitol Hill were about to change.

Miss Boone moved to Bay Street in February 1961 the same month the nearby Eastern Branch Boys Club on 17th Street SE was integrated (though girls were invited in much later, Miss Boone notes). Suddenly, most of the white youths from Bay and nearby streets refused to go to the club, leaving this potentially volatile group of white youngsters at loose ends on the streets. Soon, one of the youths started showing up in Miss Boone's living room then others began to arrive. There were about 50 boys and girls who floated in and out of the house on a daily basis, Miss Boone recalls. The boys came, and then their girlfriends, and I fed them all. Eventually, the youth authorities assigned a Roving Leader outreach worker to help Miss Boone out. Yet the white families soon began leaving Bay and surrounding streets. Most initially headed for Maryland, and in 1971, B.F. Saul sold its Bay Street holdings under a Federal program designed to relocate large families displaced by urban renewal in Southwest. Miss Boone, however, exercised an option to buy her house, and she still insists the neighborhood got better thereafter. Before 1971, her house was burglarized eight times; after 1971, the burglaries stopped.

* * * * *

Then, in 1962, while again teaching in Washington—at Stanton Elementary at Naylor Road and Alabama Avenue—Miss Boone briefly established legal residence in Kentucky and ran for Congress in the state's 4th District. "I ran on a very specific civil rights platform," she says. Ignoring the obvious, I initially wondered how a woman who favors white gloves could know so much about the young black men who were murdered on our streets. Miss Boone spoke kindly about many of them; indeed, it was haunting to hear her. And then, of course, I eventually realized that she knew so many of these victims because they had been in her fifth grade classes at Payne. It was sweet Miss Boone, for example, who pointed out to me that five young men who grew up in one row house on Bay Street had all been murdered—five! And it was Miss Boone, as much as anyone, who seemed to recognize how totally devastating the violence had been. ("The Life and Times of the Amazing Miss Boone" V O I C E of the Hill /September 28, 2001).

* * * * *

From the beginning, Miss Boone was active in the community. She still faithfully attends PSA meetings, contributing knowledge of the community that no one else seems to have. Yet I was recently surprised to find "Clara Lyle Boone" listed in 1960s documents at the Martin Luther King Library as the corresponding secretary of the Southeast Civic Association, one of the groups that "represented" D.C. residents in the era before D.C. had an elected City Council. What's noteworthy about this was that Miss Boone belonged to the Southeast Civic Association, a key distinction in the semantics of segregated Washington.

Miss Boone says the Southeast Civic Association was a notable group, founded in 1926; as far as she knows, she was its only white member. "They invited me to join," she says, as if there should be nothing surprising about it at all. She recalls that the group opposed the proposed freeway that would have split Capitol Hill down 11th Street and also opposed calls for building basketball courts in Lincoln Park. "We wanted Lincoln Park to be restored and kept as a beautiful park," she says.

* * * * *

In September 1967, Miss Boone began teaching at Payne and was briefly the only white teacher there; another white teacher came a few months later. The following April, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and the city was engulfed in rioting. When King was shot, Miss Boone recalls, the white teachers were sent home. But I didn't stay home very long. I went out to see what was happening. She recalls looting at the small businesses along 15th Street, and unusual scenes outside her house: You could see kids running up and down with items of clothing. On Monday morning, half my class had new outfits. She recalls, too, that some of her fifth graders didn't know who Martin Luther King was. I taught them, she says proudly.

* * * * *

Those with less devotion to our community than Miss Boone might surely have abandoned the area in the years that followed. During what she calls the black power period, she was robbed in the street eight times. I learned to stop buying purses, she says. Yet that was hardly the worst of it. I once took a reporter from America's Most Wanted to interview Miss Boone about the neighbor - hood, and she happened to note that an event occurred about the time I was shot. Both the reporter and I were momentarily stunned. You were shot? the startled reporter asked. Yes, Miss Boone said in her ever precise way, "I took a bullet".

It is not known who shot Miss Boone; to her knowledge, no one was ever arrested in the case. It remains a puzzle, too, what kind of person would do such a thing. Yet it is also possible that the individual who pulled the trigger is still among us—another disturbing thought. The shooting occurred on Palm Sunday in 1976, or as Miss Boone notes, in the year of nation's bicentennial. She was walking to church in the 1600 block of C Street SE, when two assailants emerged with a gun from the alley behind the Boys and Girls Club. When they tried to force Miss Boone into the alley, she took off. "I started running toward the fire house [in the 1500 block], and one shot hit me in the leg...The adrenaline was flowing. I had this bullet in me, but all I felt was a little ping."

Others, it seems, did not take well to the shooting either. "My principal [at Payne] told me it was getting too dangerous in the neighborhood," she recalls. What the principal meant was that Miss Boone should look for a position elsewhere. She applied for a downtown administrative post but did not get the job. In 1977 she retired from teaching to devote herself to women composers. But she stayed in contact with her former students. She merely left Payne, where she had founded the student council and an annual spelling bee and also put on annual operas like Robin Hood or Hansel and Gretel with student performers. Though they're now grown, Miss Boone is still very concerned about what happens to her former fifth graders. Some former pupils have become personal crusades, largely because she often sees the good in people that others seem to have overlooked. She has taught me that there is a sweet fifth grader lurking inside most of us.

On several occasions, she has enlisted me in her causes. The first time I visited the Lorton prison complex was with Miss Boone; she was trying to help a former student she believed was unjustly imprisoned. While we were at Lorton, she took me down a dirt road into the woods to visit Stony Lonesome Cemetery, a sad place where deceased inmates, apparently those whose bodies were never claimed, are buried. It seemed to me that only someone like Miss Boone would know such a place or think of those buried there.

She surprised me again in an interview for this article, telling me that she is a crack shot with a hunting rifle. You're what? I asked. Of course, this practice at shooting was a byproduct of her Kentucky/Cumberland Mountain upbringing. Miss Boone insisted she knows how to shoot a deer or a pheasant. But then she confessed she has never actually shot any real animals just targets. I've never harmed a living thing, she said. Except mice.

*Journalist (and community activist), Jim Myers, is the author of *Afraid of the Dark: What Whites and Blacks Need to Know About Each Other*. He wrote about the Arc de Barney in the July issue of the *Voice of the Hill*.*

* * * * *