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Marie Wilson, daughter of wealthy planter, R.E. Lee Wilson of Arkansas, rejected the rigid world of the plantation at the same time that she relied on the profits derived from it. After an early marriage in 1909, she left her delta origins behind and embraced an unorthodox and worldly lifestyle. She married and divorced three times; she changed addresses frequently; and she crossed the color line in a passionate affair with an African jazzman from Ghana.

Born in 1894 in Mississippi County, Arkansas, she was a precocious and high-spirited child and her father's favorite. Seven years old when the family moved to nearby Memphis, Tennessee, she yearned for excitement and entertainment, but the restlessness that lay below the surface led her into the arms of the young family chauffeur. By the time she was thirteen, she was pregnant. The marriage lasted only a short time and within a few years Marie had abandoned her child to the care of her parents and was keeping company with the man who would become her second husband, Ivan G. Harmon. Twenty years older than Marie and a successful construction engineer, the couple were soon living in Ponca

City, Oklahoma, where they hobnobbed with local dignitaries. Whether the marriage was stressed by the economic turmoil that accompanied the collapse of the Oklahoma oil industry or some other factor, the couple divorced in 1931.

Possibly suffering from stress and anxiety related to her divorce, she travelled to Texas in late 1931 and, thinking she had tuberculosis, checked into the Thompson Sanatorium. Her brother, who was then in charge of the company enterprise corresponded with her doctor: "It is my suggestion that she be put some place and kept there, as she moves around entirely too much," Roy wrote. "She never seems to be satisfied at any one place."<sup>[1]</sup> By May of 1932, Marie had moved to the Breakers Hotel in Corpus Christi, but three months later a chance encounter with a handsome and eligible former acquaintance led to a brief excursion. Henry Coggeshall Howells had recently separated from his wife and was on a business trip that was also intended as a welcome distraction from the realization that his marriage was over. He saw Marie sitting across the room at the hotel and thought she looked familiar. The two lonely people, both recovering from failed marriages, fell into discussion and "before we both knew it, we were pouring out our heartbreak to each other. We talked endlessly . . . hardly feeling the intense heat of the Texas Gulf . . . and then out of impulse and a deep need, I asked her to join me on my journey." Howells, president of a citrus growers' association in Florida, was in the midst of combining a routine business trip with an exploration of the Texas grapefruit crop. Marie accepted his abrupt invitation readily. As Howells put it in his memoir, "the realization of the heavy depression to which we had both been subjected was brought home to us through our meeting, and we were determined to throw off the weight of it, and make the most of this trip."<sup>[2]</sup>

Traveling in Howells' Model A Ford, the couple left Corpus Christi, stopped in Matamoros, Mexico, where they drank Carta Blanca and did a little sightseeing. They drove alongside the Rio Grande River over "primitive, unpaved roads," and eventually reached Laredo where they apparently stayed for a day or two "getting washed up and rested, and eating succulent foods in the Cadillac Bar" in Nuevo Laredo. Although a side trip into Mexico had not been the original plan, it appealed to Howells and "since my charming companion was willing, we set out for Monterrey, a hundred and fifty miles below the border in Nueva Leon." When they reached Monterrey, they dined at a restaurant established on the ruins of the Bishops Palace destroyed by General Zachary Taylor in 1846. "The view [of the city], the starry night, the soft music, all conspired to make us forget our problems and enjoy ourselves." They drove on to Saltillo where they stayed for a weekend, enjoyed a bullfight, and did more sightseeing. Howells is discreet about the exact nature of their accommodations but the romantic portrait he painted was probably intended to convey something considerably more than a platonic interlude. It was not to last, of course. "We both hated to leave Mexico, but knew it was useless to pretend any longer. My article was written, and we had to face the reality of our separate worlds."<sup>[3]</sup>

Marie apparently did not wish to return to Corpus Christi and had Howells leave her in San Antonio. In October her father wrote to her: "pack your duds and come home," stressing "We are waiting with open arms to receive you."<sup>[4]</sup> Both the demand and the affection are discernable in those two phrases. She stayed in Wilson for only a brief visit, however. She soon moved on to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, but by January 24, 1933, had suffered a strained back and withdrew from the medical tests her father believed might establish the nature of her continued illness. She took treatment for the back injury at the Colonial Hospital there in Rochester, but by May she was recovering her health and visiting friends in St. Simon Island, Georgia, possibly, keeping company with the man with whom she had shared her Mexican holiday and who would soon become her third husband.

She settled with Howells in his home in Winter Haven, an agricultural community in the west central area of the state. Unfortunately, Henry and Marie brought very different expectations to the union. Marie wanted someone who would lavish her with attention, provide diversions that would satisfy her search for fulfillment, and meet her emotional needs. Howells had married her because he believed "she would take care of us," meaning himself and his young son, who he had taken custody of.

"Regrettably, she was highly neurotic and not only disturbed us, but the servants as well." He was particularly shocked when he learned that she had sunbathed in the nude in front of the servants and workers and, perhaps even, his seven-year old son. "As much as I hated to, at the end of nine months, I had to give up on this arrangement." The pertinent words here are "regrettably" and "much as I hated to." [5]

Howells' rejection of her was likely both mystifying and devastating to Marie. While Howells was in Europe during the summer of 1935, likely seeking his own distractions from the unfortunate situation, Marie was being treated at the St. Francis Hospital in Miami Beach. Located along the waterfront, it had been constructed in 1927 as a boutique hospital on Allison Island. Marie had apparently recovered by the late summer of 1935 and was negotiating the purchase of a home in North Miami Beach.

The next two decades of Marie's life can only be gleaned from scattered details. Sometime in the 1950s she moved to New York City and took several trips to Europe, traveling first class by ocean liner when that was still fashionable. While living in New York she met perhaps the most interesting man in her life, one she kept secret. Guy Warren (aka Kofi Ghanaba), a former OSS officer and a Ghana-born jazz drummer widely regarded to have brought a new African sound to American jazz in the 1950s, became intimately involved with her in 1958. He was playing in the Africa Room in a popular nightclub that catered to a cross-section of New Yorkers, including Marie and her crowd. Soon Warren dedicated the Lady Marie Suites Parts I and II on *the Themes of African Drums* (1958) album to "his patron and lover Marie Wilson Howells." Twenty-nine years younger than Marie, who was then sixty-four, Warren was smitten from the moment he first met her at the Africa Club where he was playing. "I saw this woman dressed in black. Black hat, black gown, tall, grey, looking very regal. She walked like a queen." The two stared at each other all evening, according to Warren, and she returned "again and again." She was "majestic like a Watusi," but despite his fascination with her, Warren was convinced that he had known her in a past-life and that, in that past life, she had interfered with his music. This perception together with Marie's need for constant reassurance plagued the relationship, but it was also likely that their need to keep their affair secret also took its toll. He would visit her, he said, on the weekends: "I would enter through the front door and the doorman would sign me up. But when I went I would carry a typewriter," claiming he was there to teach her to type. "So this black attendant would escort me upstairs in the elevator and leave me up there. And then the doors would open and she'd be standing there waiting for me and the doors would lock and the elevator would go down and we would embrace." [6]

Two years after they first met, Marie followed him to Ghana when he went home, and they lived together as common-law husband and wife. Ultimately, Marie's demands for attention and Warren's fears of losing focus on his music doomed the relationship. Pressing him to retire to an island near Bermuda with her, Marie promised to provide all the financial support he needed and reminded him that she had already "given you a lot of money." This remark cut him to the quick and exposed the tensions beneath the surface of their relationship. Warren's response was equally devastating to her: "Don't ever forget that my people were the people who harvested the cotton which your father planted. . . and while he was sitting around drinking whiskey, my people made your father what he came out with. So whatever money you are spending on me belongs to me." [Z] Marie's relationship with

Ghanaba was perhaps the most unexpected departure from the norm for someone of her background during the Jim Crow era, but she had never shown a tendency to conform. Characterized by her third husband as neurotic and by her nephews as eccentric, she struggled to find a place for herself in a world not ready for a modern woman who refused to accept the role she was supposedly born to fulfill. After returning from Accra and recovering from the attempted suicide, she settled down in her penthouse apartment on 79<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City. One of her nephews described the apartment as spacious and "as eccentric as she was." Decorated with expensive antiques, art from Asia and Africa, and artifacts from a movie set she secured from a Hollywood producer with whom she was acquainted, it reflected her uncommon life and eclectic tastes.[8]



Marie Wilson Howells's gravestone. There are no known surviving photos of Marie Wilson Howells in life. Photo by Jeannie Whayne.

Marie's Last will and Testament provides a glimpse into her point of view at the end of her life. She left her fortune, amounting to between three and four million dollars, to the University of Arkansas. According to her attorney, "she wanted all of her estate to come back to the people of Arkansas" but she thought long and hard about precisely where to put the funds. As one person close to the negotiations put it, "Miss Marie was a meticulous person and wanted lots of facts . . ." It was the largest single gift ever given to the university up to that point in time. The money was to be invested and "the income . . . used annually for the purposes of financing research, study and other projects within the fields of psychology and psychiatry." Ironically, the woman who spent most of her life trying to escape her place of birth chose to spend eternity under its ground. When she died in November 1978, her body was returned to northeastern Arkansas and interred in a cemetery near Wilson, Arkansas.[9]

[1] RELW Jr to Sam E. Thompson, March 8, 1932; Thompson to RELW Jr, March 12, 1932, Lee Wilson & Company Papers, University of Arkansas Special Collections, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Thompson to RELW Jr., March 25, 1932. In a letter he wrote to his sister, Roy said "I am distressed that you are not getting along better. Just at the present time it is almost impossible for me to get away. Will try to write you in long hand in a few days."

[2] For her move to the Breakers Hotel, see correspondence with company executive responsible for dispatching her monthly allowance: Frank Gillette to State National Bank, Corpus Christi, Texas, May 31, 1932, Lee Wilson & Company Papers.

[3] Henry C. Howells, II, "A Charming Adventure," Privately held by Henry C. Howells IV, Coca Raton, Florida. The manuscript with other personal papers of Henry C. Howells II were supplied to Henry C. Howells IV ca 2000 by Sally Howells Mitchell, daughter of Henry C. Howells II. Email Correspondence, Jeannie Whayne and Henry C. Howells IV, June 17, 18, 2016.

[4] Lee Wilson to Mrs. Marie Wilson Harmon, Oct. 6, 1932, Lee Wilson & Company Papers.

[5] Emails from Henry C. Howells IV, June 17, 18, and 20, 2016.

[6] All quotations from Robin D.G. Kelly, *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times* (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 27-27, 30-31.

[7] Robin D.G. Kelly Interview with Guy Warren, August 12, 2004, p. 11.

[8] Telephone interview with Steve Wilson, July 15, 2016

[9] Marie Wilson Howells, "Last Will and Testament," pp. 4-5; Richard Butler, Jr., interview with Jeannie Whayne, July 8, 2016; and Fred H. Harrison to Charles Hathaway and Harry P. Ward, November 6, 1999. Documents in the hands of author.

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