**A Coming Home in Four-Part Harmony**

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April 15, 2014 was a special day in Arrow Rock. There was an important event sponsored by the Friends of Arrow Rock that invited everyone who lives in and is connected to this small rural community to explore its history from a different set of eyes in order to give themselves a new perspective. The event was the Arrow Rock Black History Month Symposium, featuring speakers from all around the country. It was the First Saturday event, sponsored collaboratively by the Arrow Rock State Historic Site and the Friends of Arrow Rock. And it was my first official event as Poet-In-Residence for Arrow Rock, a program created by the Missouri Parks Association called the Poets-in-the-Parks Project.

I didn’t attend the event with the intent to write about it – I went to support the efforts of our small village, population 56, to have a deep and meaningful conversation about Black History in our community. This was an opportunity to learn about a very important part of the Arrow Rock story. But, the experience was so powerful, especially the way it culminated with our last speaker, I ended up starting a poem on the way home.

Addressing difficult issues in a community setting is never an easy thing to do. It requires an openness and a willingness to face our uncomfortableness about a part our past and be able to talk about it openly and learn from it. Unfortunately, as a nation, we are much more prone to debate and argue with each other rather than listen to what it is people are thinking and feeling.

This didn’t happen at this event. The Lyceum Theatre was full of people wanting to listen, to learn, and to discuss important issues. It was a vibrant, honest, and engaging community conversation – one long overdue. So, before I go any further in this article, I want to give kudos to the Friends of Arrow Rock and to the State Historic Site Park Staff for co-presenting this important event. It was well worth the investment of time, energy, and resources to make this happen. That is just one of the gifts our State Parks and Historic Sites contribute to identifying and celebrating our greater sense of place in Missouri.

When I submitted my application to the Missouri Parks Association for consideration of being the first person selected as a Poet-in-Residence in one of our State Parks, I began my proposal with a quote from one of our nation’s most important authors on the subject of Sense of Place, Wallace Stegner. Quoting from his presentation to his home state of Wisconsin State Historical Society in 1992, Stegner stated:

*Back to Wendell Berry, and his belief that if you don’t know where you are you don’t know*

*who you are. He is not talking about the kind of location that can be determined by looking*

*at a map or a street sign. He is talking about the kind of knowing that involves the senses,*

*the memory, the history of a family or a tribe. He is talking about the knowledge of place*

*that comes from working in it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its*

*catastrophes, loving its mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound*

*investment of labor and feeling that you, your parents and grandparents, your all-but-unknown*

*ancestors have put into it. He is talking about the knowing that poets specialize in. It is only*

*a step from his pronouncement to another: that no place is a place until it has had a poet.*

Wallace Stegner, *The* *Sense of Place*, © 1992

While I am the Poet-in-Residence for Arrow Rock, I am not the only one who is creating ‘poetry’ in that community. That afternoon, in the final presentation of the Symposium, we heard from an African American who grew up in Arrow Rock. This individual, Teresa Van Buren Habernal, didn’t give a speech on her experience. In a powerful presentation, she stood up from her seat in the audience at the front of the stage and began singing, A Capella, the old Gospel hymn *His Eye is on The Sparrow*. Climbing the steps to the stage she walked to the podium, singing the whole way, using what she knew best to tell her story – the Gospel songs she learned from her Mother. And for the next twenty minutes, in between the songs she sang, she talked about her life growing up in this community and the way it impacted and shaped who she is today. It was not a performance – she was singing her story and celebrating the place in which she was raised.

With all that has gone on in our nation since that event in 2014, especially the racial discomfort our Nation and our State has experienced over the last year, I decided it was time for me to return to the poem I started that day about Teresa Habernal’s experiences as an African American growing up in a very rural, geographically isolated community in the middle of Missouri. It was my first poem as Poet-in-Residence for Arrow Rock. It seems appropriate this is the first poem for me to publish as part of my Missouri Parks Association Residence project. It is entitled

*A Coming Home in Four Part Harmony*.

**A Coming Home in Four-Part Harmony**

I heard a song today, it came quite unexpectedly,

a song so sweet and pure it took my breath away.

It was a story told in lyrics sung from deep within,

a coming home in perfect four-part harmony

*I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free,  
 for His Eye is on the Sparrow, and I know He watches me.\**

But it was not the four part harmony that spurred intrigue in me,

it was the fact that these four people were all at different times of life -

a nine year old, a teen, a thirty-something and a woman wisely aged,

all four singing the same song from the same page.

The voices layered softly on each other, making music

no one would expect from such varied voices.

And as the music filled the stage, it soon became a stronger sound,

from which no fuller-bodied, richer tone could possibly be found.

But even that was not the full surprise, for this music,

though sung in four part harmony with four defined and gifted voices,

was actually the voice of just one individual who chose

to sing her story, celebrating all her life-filled choices.

And in-between the songs, she gave us glimpses of a lifetime lived, as she

shared her own experiences growing up in this small village in Missouri:

*Of sitting outside the Lyceum Theater at 9 years old, watching people go inside a place she could not go because she had a different colored skin;*

*to just a few years later being given a ticket, sitting in the balcony of that same place because that was the only place she was allowed to sit;*

*then, as an adult, declaring her intentions – buying her own ticket and striding down the aisle with pride and dignity - sitting in the front row,*

*inviting everyone to see who she really was.*

*And, as if that was not enough, today, walking up the steps,*

*singing A Cappella all the way - sharing the gospel of community in her*

*life by singing the old, rugged hymns her Mother taught her how to sing.*

That is when I realized as she had grown, she had become her own quartet -

her life a song page filled with choices made about the way she chose to live;

now content to be the Spirit’s messenger, reminding all of us that

prejudice is what we use to take away and tolerance is what we choose to give.

It was clear her songs were not about her color or her gender -

nor was she attacking racial hate or some injustice she had felt.

She wasn’t there to scold – or tell us all the ways that she was wronged

but rather share decisions she had made that helped her to belong.

Teresa wasn’t there to read a speech, or tell us truths that we must learn,

but rather celebrate, in song, the love she had for her community.

Singing all those songs and life-lived lyrics she had learned throughout her life -

she gave to all of us her heart felt testimony full of grace and dignity.

So yes, I heard a song today, it came quite unexpectedly,

a song so sweet and pure it took my breath away -

a story told in lyrics sung from deep within,

a coming home in perfect four-part harmony

*I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free,  
for His Eye is on the Sparrow, and I know He watches me.*

Our State Parks and Historic Sites are not just about celebrating the outdoors, although that is certainly a core value and catalyst that brought our parks into existence. Sense of Place is about more than just geography. It is also about the people who live in these places and the stories they create. With the village of Arrow Rock being the first officially designated State Historic Site in Missouri, it plays an important part in the history of our State.

Our State Parks and Historic Sites preserve our past. But they do this by preserving and celebrating not just the physical place, but also the stories of the people who live in these places, stories that help us understand who we were in another time and who we are now.

April 15, 2014 was dedicated to looking at and celebrating our Black History in Arrow Rock. Teresa Van Buren Habernal shared something with all of us that day that invited us to look deeper at who we are and who we can become. But she did it in a way that was positive and healing. I think we were all changed that day because of her decision to sing her story, her gospel of community.

In 2016, the State of Missouri begins a two-year celebration of the Centennial of the Missouri State Park System. As the first designated historic site in Missouri, Arrow Rock has an important part in this celebration. What happened that day in Arrow Rock was just one of the many ways our State Parks System contributes to our lives. Along with celebrating our past and our present, it is clear the Missouri State Parks and Historic Sites will also be ***Celebrating 100 Years of Preserving Missouri's Future***.