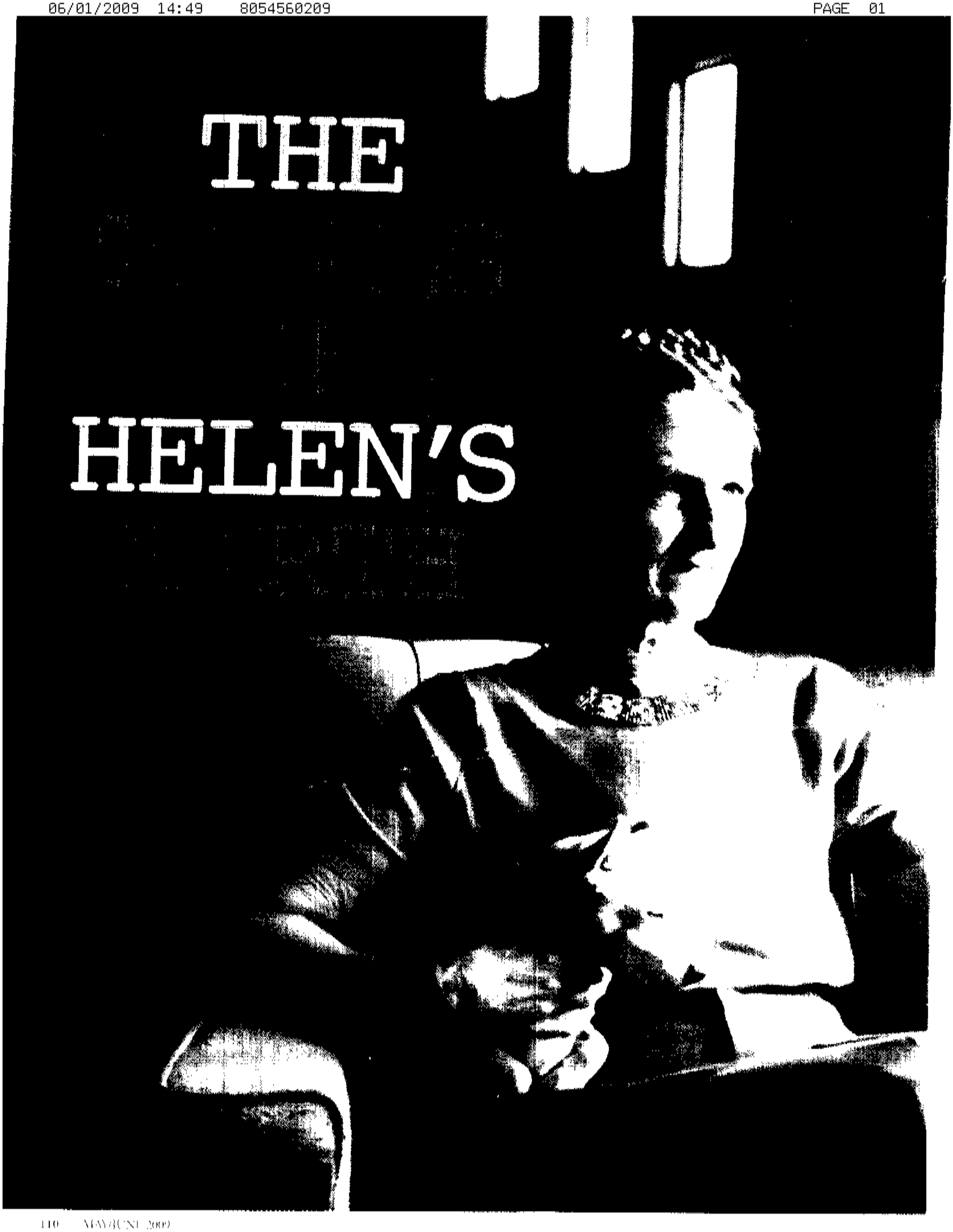
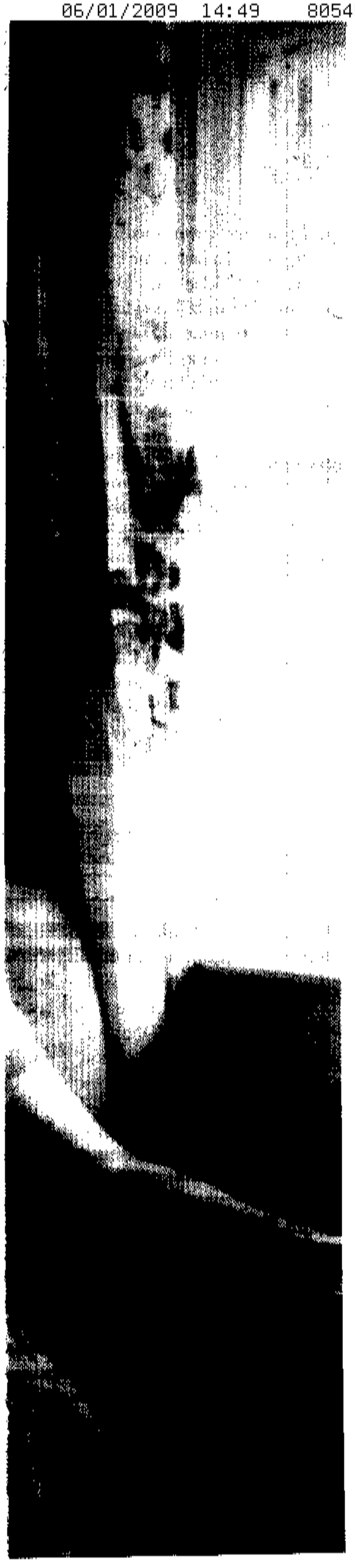
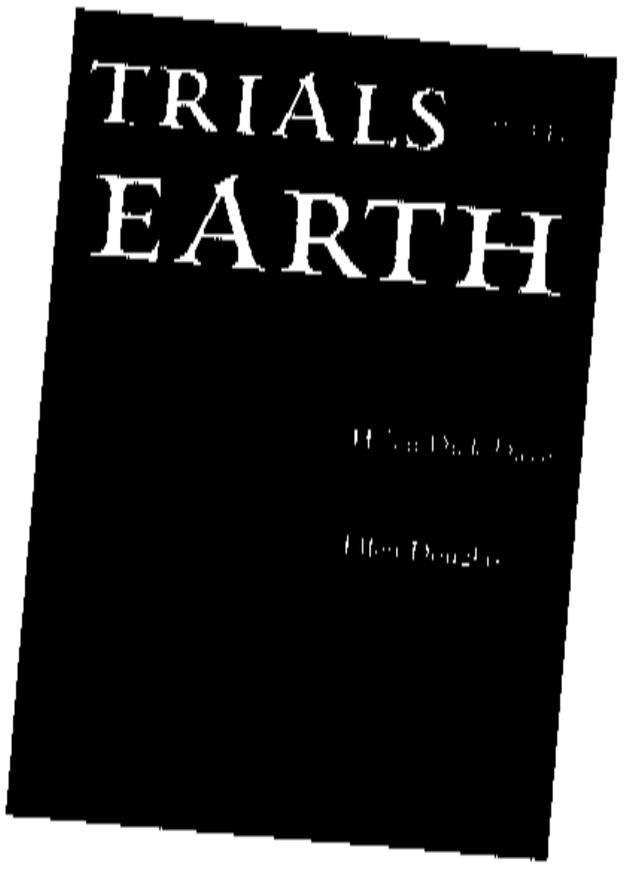
THE HELEN'S





Helen Dick Davis in 1959 or 1960, in her home on Gaywood Avenue in Yazoo City.

There was a remarkable, retiring woman behind three classics of Delta literature, but her work was largely unnoticed until after her death. Teresa Nicholas traces the life of Helen Dick Davis



I first met Mississippi writer Helen Dick Davis in 1970, when I was a sophomore at Yazoo City High School and dreaming of someday becoming a writer myself. Mrs. Davis was one of the freelance "theme graders" that the school employed back then, and after reading my essay about the town's historic Glenwood Cemetery, she invited me to pay her a call.

So began a series of conversations on the sun porch of the old Rand house, across from the First Baptist Church, which were to continue on and off for two years. Mrs. Davis was at the time about seventy, and nothing like the typical Yazoo matron. Tall, rail thin with angular features, she wore her gray hair long and braided like a crown atop her head. She spoke in a direct manner, and with a Northern accent. She baked her own bread—her cinnamon rolls were especially delectable—and even drove a foreign car, an orange Volkswagen Beetle.

Seated bolt upright in her chair opposite mine, Mrs. Davis would read my stories out loud and suggest improvements. She would reminisce about her collaboration with her late husband, Reuben, who had published two novels set in the Delta, *Butcher Bird* in 1935, about black sharecroppers, and *Shim* in 1953, a boy's coming-of-age story. Occasionally she mentioned her disappointment in not being able to secure publishers for their other manuscripts. Very seldom did she speak about her own writing, except to say that she had authored short fiction for ladies' magazines. When I began to report for the school

not of a landowning family." - JoAnne Prichard Morris

newspaper we had a difference of opinion, with Mrs. Davis urging me to quit and concentrate on fiction, to her way of thinking a writer's highest calling.

One stifling summer day before I left for college in the East, Mrs. Davis drove across town in her Beetle to present me with a copy of R.D. Lang's *Knots*. The following year, 1973, she and her daughter Louvica moved to Auburn, Alabama, to live near her son, architect Nicholas Davis, and his wife, Carolyn. After that, we lost contact. But I often thought about Mrs. Davis, because she was the first person who'd taken me seriously as a writer.

Then twenty years later, while living in New York, I opened the Sunday *Times* to come across a review of *Trials of the Earth: The Autobiography of Mary Hamilton*. To my surprise, I saw that the memoir had been edited by Mrs. Davis, whose contribution was praised in the prestigious *Book Review*. "There are two remarkable women speaking in 'Trials of the Earth.' . . . One is Mary Hamilton, a courageous homesteader in the Mississippi Delta at the end of the 19th century; the other is Helen Dick Davis, a modest writer who recognized a story that needed to be recovered 60 years ago and made a handwritten journal into a memoir."

I rushed out to buy the memoir, proud of my erstwhile mentor who'd been instrumental in its publication. Recently, I reread *Trials of the Earth* as part of my research for a writing project. I wondered how Mary Hamilton's account of settling the Delta had come to be written, and I wanted to know more about Helen Dick Davis, who'd been so circumspect about her own work. I decided to visit Nick and Carolyn Davis at their home outside Auburn. On a cloudy December day, in their living room overlooking woods and a muddy lake, we sat in front of an oil painting of Helen made in her later years, and talked about her extraordinary life.

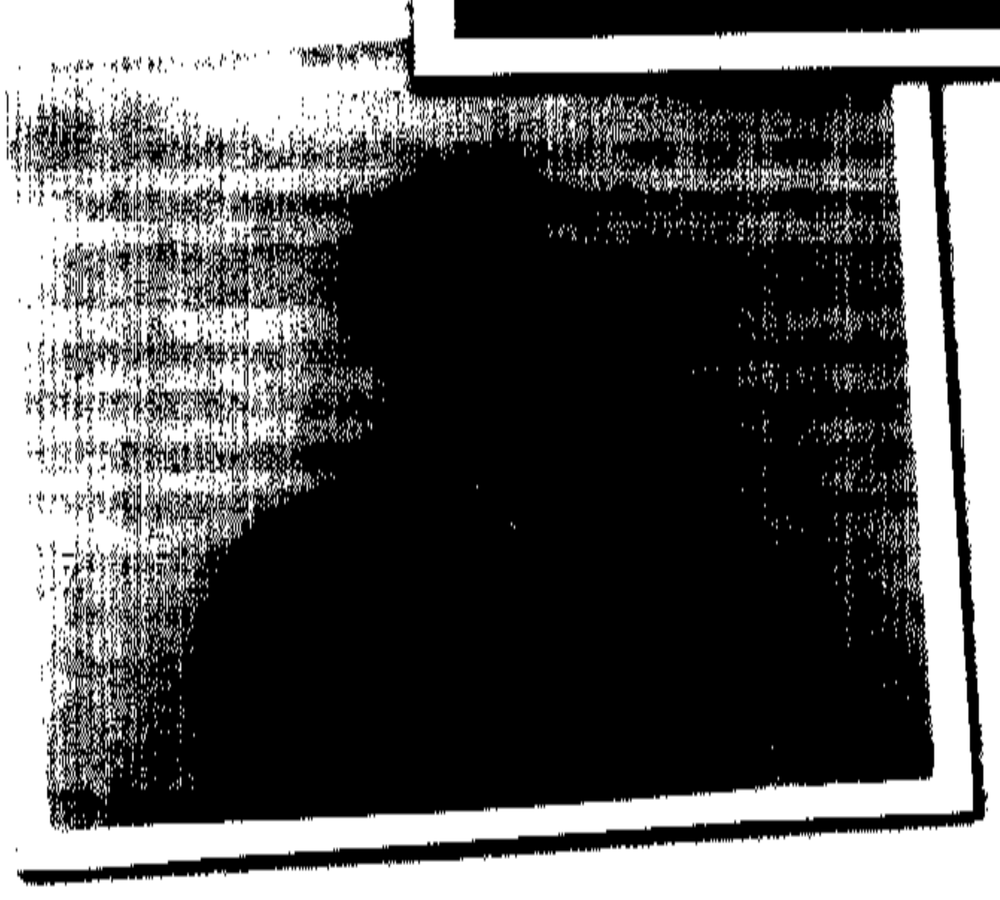
Home of William Henry Dick in Philipp. Visible in the background is his sawmill, which made barrel staves. Reuben and Helen met a block away, when Reuben shot the family cat.

Helen Dick was born in 1899 into a well-to-do family in New London, Wisconsin, the first of three daughters of William Henry Dick and Susan Isabelle Blackwood. In 1907, Mr. Dick moved his family to Greenwood. "Everybody gathered to see these rich Yankees who'd shipped their money down in barrels," Nick Davis laughed. "Well, it was their dishes they'd shipped down in barrels."

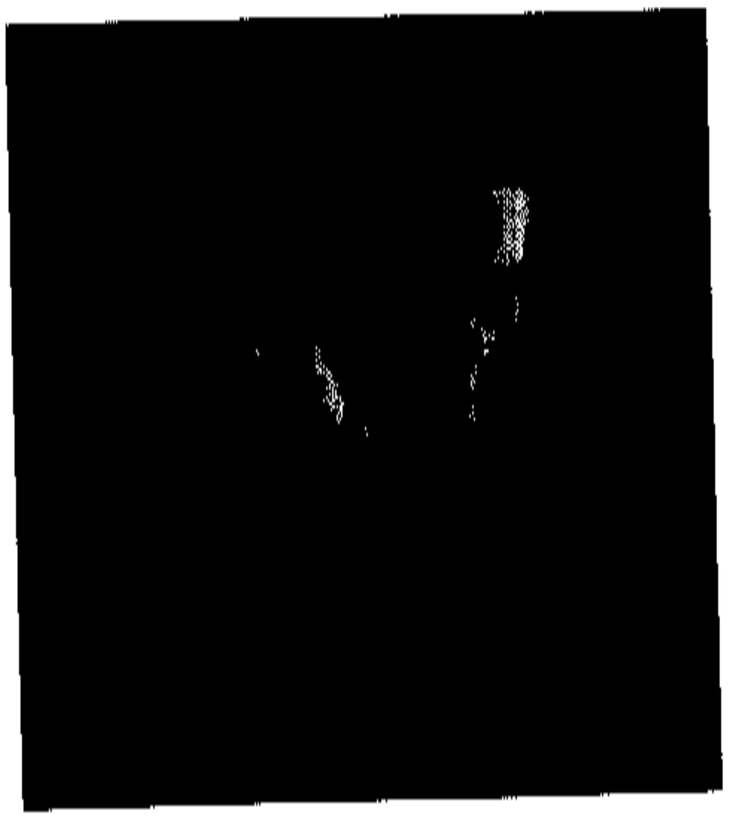
In Greenwood, Helen had trouble fitting in. The *Commonwealth*, in their 1936 review of *Butcher Bird*, recounted the newcomer's first day at school, a story she herself liked to repeat. "The teacher asked that some of the pupils suggest a song to be sung at chapel exercises. All wanting to be nice to the new pupil suggested that young Helen suggest a song. She did. The name of the song was 'Marching through Georgia.' Needless to say, some other song was sung, and the little Northerner wondered why."

Mr. Dick, along with his partner from Wisconsin, William Hatton, founded the Tallahatchie Lumber Company, with offices in Memphis and a mill at Philipp, Mississippi. The partners made money in lumber and by growing cotton on the land they cleared. After a year in Greenwood, the Dick family relocated to Philipp, but they kept a home in Memphis. "You went to Memphis to buy furniture and to be born and to see the dentist," Nick said. Not long after the "Marching Through Georgia" incident, Helen was sent to boarding school at Dana Hall in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

She met Reuben Davis in 1916, in Philipp, when she killed the family cat. "There was a big cat fight and he just shot into the group," Nick said. "It was pretty much a wild west environment on steroids. You just shot anything that annoyed you." Back then, even young boys



Reuben Davis and Helen Dick Davis in the early '50's in Carter. Photo taken by their son, Nicholas Davis.



Portraits of Reuben Grady Davis and Helen Dick Davis.

carried guns; Reuben had begun toting a pepperbox, a kind of small revolver, as early as age nine. After shooting the cat, he went by the family's house to apologize. "He put on such a marvelous act of humility and repentance," Nick continued. "She apparently was attracted to him from that point on."

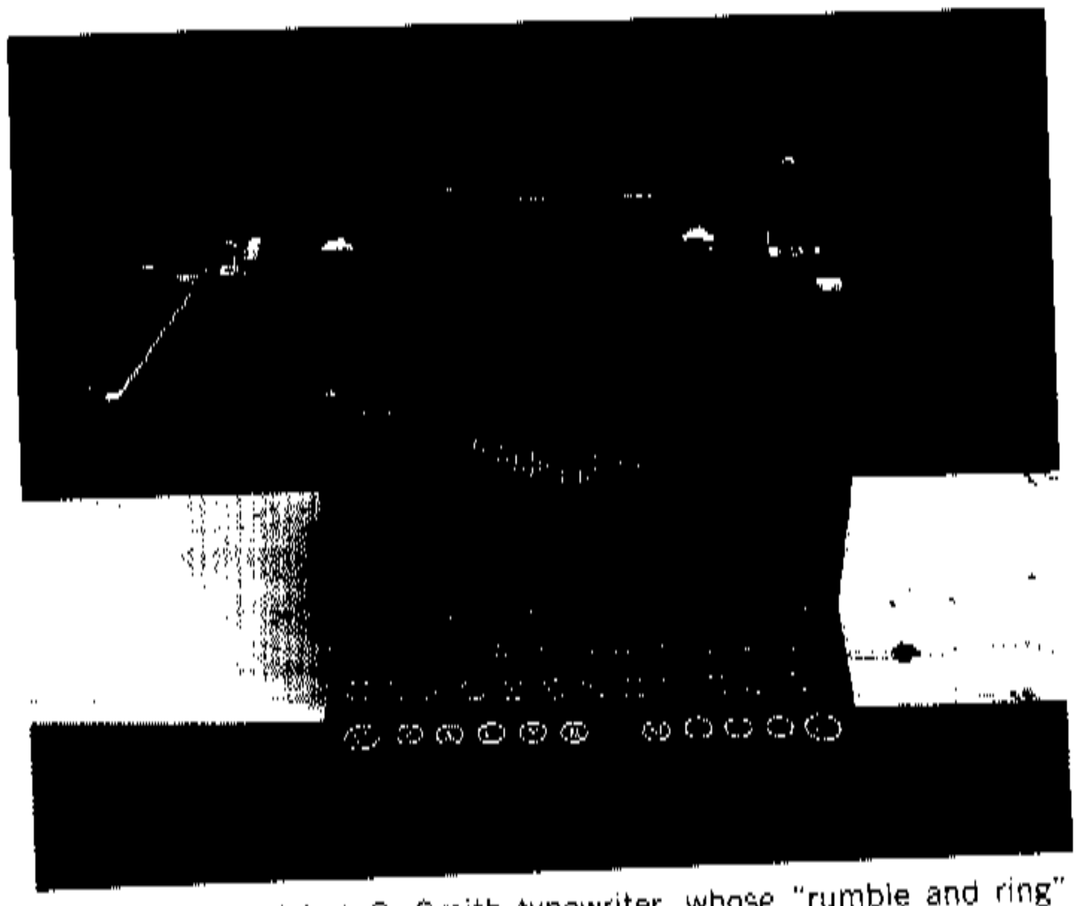
Helen was sixteen and Reuben twenty-seven, with a past colorful enough to hold her attention. His father was Captain Reuben Davis, a great horseman who'd served in the Civil War with General Nathan Bedford Forrest at the Battle of Nashville. After the war, Captain Davis married a widow, Louvica Ann Denman, who'd had six children by her first husband. They lived on a plantation near Charleston in Tallahatchie County; Reuben, born in 1888, was their only child together.

Then when Reuben was nine a dispute broke out over who would inherit the plantation. Captain Davis had a tendency to drink, perhaps owing to his war injury, a bullet in the knee that was never removed. He was overheard in town threatening to go home and kill his wife, who was siding with her three sons from her first marriage. There was a shootout, and young Reuben saw his father killed. "I don't really think he ever got over that," Nick recalled. When Reuben began to write, father-son relations would figure prominently, especially in *Shim*.

After that, he left home. "He started hoboing, catching trains, riding boxcars," Nick Davis said. Later, Reuben would tell Helen fantastic tales about the hoodlums and pickpockets he'd traveled with, and use them as material in his writing as well. He briefly attended Mississippi College, until he was expelled for an unapproved extracurricular activity, boxing. Then in the fall of 1917 Reuben Davis joined the U.S. Army's 20th Engineer Regiment and was sent to France, where Nick said, "he didn't have enough to eat and he didn't have enough to wear. Practically everybody was gassed." Reuben spent several years in army hospitals, but his health never fully recovered.

In 1922 Helen graduated from the University of Wisconsin, where she majored in journalism and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa her junior year. About that time, Reuben went to work for Helen's father as an overseer. By then Mr. Dick needed help running his businesses, because he had begun to get involved in national politics. In 1924 he was campaign manager for Senator Robert M. La Follette, Sr., of Wisconsin, presidential candidate for the Progressive Party. After Reuben and Helen married in Memphis in 1926, Mr. Dick built them a white, two-story house in Philipp. According to Carolyn Davis, the newlyweds didn't go out much: "Helen said once that after they married they would never go to any New Year's Eve party because Reuben said that at midnight some other man might try to kiss her, and then he'd have to kill him."

The writing of *Trials of the Earth* was undertaken in Philipp in 1932. Mary Hamilton's daughter Edris had married Stannie Denman, Reuben Davis' youngest half-brother, and it was through this family connection that Helen met and befriended Mrs. Hamilton. Their initial encounter is described in Helen's charming preface to the book, written in 1933. She was fascinated by Mrs. Hamilton's talk of "her life nearly half a century ago in this same Mississippi Delta where we



Helen Dick Davis's L.C. Smith typewriter, whose "rumble and ring" punctuated the writing of her and Reuben's manuscripts.

live now, and which was then a wilderness of untouched timber and canebrakes, a jungle of briars and vines and undergrowth." She begged her new friend to write down her stories.

At first Mrs. Hamilton wrote to please Helen, and to create a record for her children. But after suffering a severe hemorrhage, she had a strange dream—of a black-watered swamp, and white lilies growing on long, black stems. Helen's young children Nick and Louvica also figured in the dream. Mrs. Hamilton loaded them down with the great, white lilies but told them, "This last is mine," as she reached for the finest one for herself. When this turned into an ugly black snake, little Nick comforted her, using her family nickname. "It's all right, Hampleton. You all right."

What did the dream mean? In a letter to Helen, Mrs. Hamilton concluded that she had been "spared to gather for myself that last and largest white lily, the writing down in a book the memories of a lifetime." She began to write quickly, crediting Nick for giving her the courage. By spring of 1933, she had presented Helen with 150,000 words.

In her preface, Helen also describes her role with the manuscript: "I have edited it, worked over it with her, and guided her in her choice of material, but I have in no case added to nor changed what she wrote. My whole work has been to cut down, for once she started remembering there was nowhere to stop." But from the sample holograph reprinted at the end of the book, one realizes how great in fact was Helen's part. Mary Hamilton's handwritten manuscript reads as a continuous, unpunctuated paragraph. Helen converted it into grammatical English. She also divided the manuscript into chapters, contributed the chapter titles, and typed it on her L.C. Smith typewriter.

In 1933, Helen submitted Mrs. Hamilton's worked-over manuscript to a writer's competition sponsored by the Boston publisher Little, Brown. But it did not win the prize. "We were told by our agent that publishers were at the time primarily interested in literature about southern Negroes," Helen wrote in a 1992 addition to her preface. "Little, Brown in fact confirmed this by publishing our first novel, *Butcher Bird*, in 1935."

During the Depression, Helen and Reuben lost their property in Philipp. The family's finances worsened when Mr. Dick's partner, William Hatton, died in 1937. By then the Davises were living in the mountain town of Hendersonville, North Carolina, where they rented a small house for ten dollars a month. There, Helen received a letter from Mrs. Hamilton requesting that she stop trying to find a publisher for the memoir. Carolyn Davis explained, "She said she'd had a dream and that her dead husband had appeared to her and said, 'Don't publish this, Mary; this is our valentine, this is our private story.' " Helen put the manuscript away in a box. She did submit an article about Mrs. Hamilton to the *Reader's Digest* feature "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met," but it was never published.

While still in Hendersonville, the Davises received word that Mary Hamilton had moved to the tiny Delta town of Carter, with Edris and Stannie Denman. In 1937 Mrs. Hamilton died and was buried nearby in Yazoo's Glenwood Cemetery. Helen and Reuben, realizing how much they missed the Delta, also moved to Carter, in 1939. That year, right after Christmas, Reuben contracted influenza and chicken pox. "He was much less physically active after that," Nick remembered. "He would lie in bed and write, and Mother would type." They lived with Stannie and Edris for a year, then moved into a rundown section foreman's house built by the Illinois Central.

Helen and Reuben had written the novel *First Dark* during their three years in Hendersonville, but it was never published. Other manuscripts would find a similar fate. "So much stuff was sent back," Nick Davis said. "Bad luck seemed to have followed Mother like a hungry hound dog all her life." The Davises did publish short stories in national magazines during these years. Reuben wrote about outdoor life, Helen about relationships and romance, giving her stories titles like "Revenge Is Sweet," and "The Kind of Man Women Love."

Tombstone of Mary Mann Hamilton in Glenwood Cemetery, Yazoo City. Her grave is on the right, near the cemetery's entrance.

With so little of their writing getting published, how did Reuben and Helen support themselves? "My dad got $110 a month as disability from World War I," Nick Davis said. "It was not nearly enough. We lived in a hovel. We were poor as snakes."

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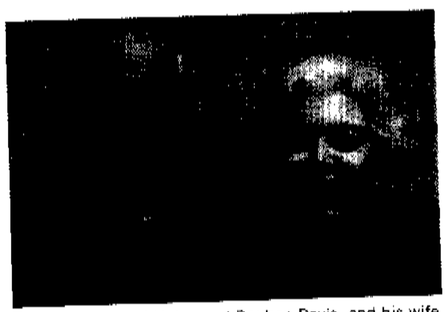
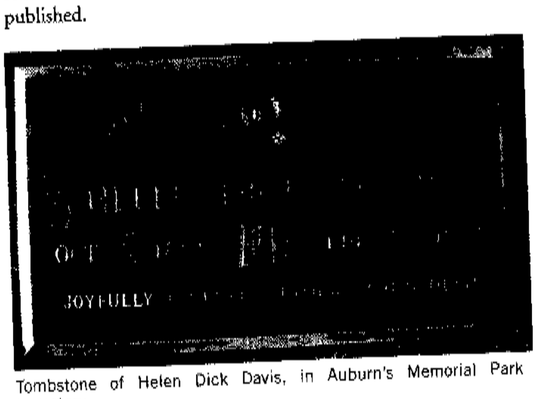
contained rich descriptions of Delta land and water. But *Shim* was autobiographical, based on the life of a young boy, Shim Govan, who like Reuben had a friendship with a hired hand who worked around the family's house. Nick said, "I think he was closer to this black man than to his real father or real mother."

The books were respectfully received by the national media. *The New York Times* called *Butcher Bird* "an unusually likable novel in a minor vein. Its idiom and atmosphere have a rich, authentic flavor; its characters are clear-cut and alive... As an idyll of the Deep South it is wholly disarming in its humor, tenderness and simplicity." About *Shim*, the *Times* wrote, "[It] will be remembered longest for its descriptive passages, its occasional, almost lyrical, reproduction of scene and vista..." Both books were praised for the authentic way they captured black speech. But they were criticized for romanticizing the lives of the black characters they depicted and for minimizing the plight of the sharecroppers. Nick Davis cites this supposed romanticism as the reason more of his parents' novels weren't published.



Nick Davis, son of Helen and Reuben Davis, and his wife, Carolyn, outside their home in Auburn, Alabama.



Tombstone of Helen Dick Davis, in Auburn's Memorial Park Cemetery.

Also in the reviews of the time, Helen was said to be the one who, as the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* wrote, "furnished the technical knowledge of how to put in book shape the rich material Mr. Davis had gathered in his years among the negroes." But according to her son, she did much more than that. "He came up with the story lines for the most part. She was an equal participant in the writing. It was about as much of a joint effort as you can have." Then why didn't she put her name on the novels? "She always deferred to him. That was what women did in those days."

In 1959 the Davis family moved from Carter to Yazoo City, first to Gaywood Avenue, then to the old Rand house where Helen and I would meet. Reuben died in 1966, and like Mary Hamilton, was buried in Glenwood. A low stone that reads simply, "Reuben Grady Davis, Author," marks his grave, high on a hill under a live oak. Afterward, Helen stopped writing as much, though she never lost interest, reading a great deal and grading the themes of Yazoo High students. The English teacher with whom Helen worked was JoAnne Prichard, and later Helen edited the book that JoAnne co-wrote with Harriet DeCell, *Yazoo: Its Legends and Legacies*.

After Helen left Yazoo City for Auburn, she became a great influence on Nick and Carolyn's daughter Jennifer, who wanted to be a writer. It was in Auburn in 1991, the night of Jennifer's wedding, that Carolyn Davis found the blue box with the manuscript of *Trials of the Earth* underneath Jennifer's bed. Years earlier, Helen had lent it to her to read.

Helen describes the scene in her preface. "What [Carolyn] had discovered was a faded carbon copy, the yellowed pages crumbling, the paper clips marking the chapters so rusted they had merged into the paper in brown blotches. We read carefully, like archeologists examining ancient inscriptions. Once again I was thirty-two years old, hearing the rumble and ring of my old L.C. Smith typewriter and remembering how glad we always were to see Mrs. Hamilton, with her wonderful stories and hand-sewn dolls for the children."

Carolyn Davis stayed up all night reading the manuscript. She and Nick sent it to JoAnne Prichard, who by then had married Willie Morris and was senior editor at University Press of Mississippi. "At the time my mother was ninety-two and sinking fast, beset by depressions of having failed as a writer," Nick said. The Press rushed the manuscript into production, but Helen never saw the finished book or the glowing reviews. She died in February 1992, just months before publication.

As JoAnne Morris says of *Trials of the Earth*, "The book is important because it is the only record of clearing the Delta told by a white working-class woman not of a landowning family." A record brought into being with the help of another extraordinary woman. As a participant in an unusual, collaborative writing marriage, Helen Dick Davis also wrote many short stories and helped bring into being the two novels published under her husband's name. Like her friend Mary Hamilton, Helen was an unsung heroine. After reading her journal entries in the postscript to *Trials*—themselves a fascinating account of Delta life during the Depression—one wishes for more of Helen's own writing.

Helen Dick Davis is buried in Auburn's Memorial Park Cemetery. Her tombstone reads: "Joyfully Forever Writing with Reuben." DM