

Carroll Yesteryears
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Sisters intertwined with Famous Writers
By Frank Batavick

There's nothing like the viral nature of gossip in a small town, especially when it involves sexual escapades. Such tales assume a virulent life of their own, as they spread from mouth-to-ear and house-to-house in a flash, not unlike the real-life infections of Measles or Covid. Back in July of 1917, there was a scandalous story in New Windsor that sent many busybodies into hyperdrive.

Two attractive women and former residents of the town became intertwined with two nationally known and debonair writers. One made his journey down from New York City and probably liaised with his Baltimore pal at Union Station (later Penn Station). They then drove out to New Windsor via Reisterstown Road and Old New Windsor Road. They were none other than the novelist Theodore Dreiser and *Baltimore Sun* newspaper columnist H.L. Mencken.

The women were Bertha Estelle Bloom Kubitz, known as Stella, and her younger sister, Marion L. Bloom. At the time, Stella was 31 and Marion was 26 and living together in New York City. Stella was bouncing back from a failed marriage to a German immigrant she met and wed in Baltimore. He had abandoned her in 1913, but annoyingly stayed in touch via a succession of postcards from exotic locales as he traveled the world.

The sisters had once lived with their parents and four siblings in a frame house along the tracks on Front Street, now lower Main Street. Their father, Adam Bloom, had owned and operated a successful creamery, producing butter and ice cream in a factory squeezed between his house and the railroad station. An unfortunate visit to a church revival meeting featuring a fiery, travelling missionary made Adam doubt his salvation, fall into depression, and commit suicide in 1898.

Life soon became difficult for the Bloom family, and the rebellious, young women left town in their teens. Stella was first. Her mother Mary locked her out of the house at age 18 after Stella went to Baltimore against her mother's will and with a soldier twice her age. She returned later that night, but was forced to stay with a neighbor. She then sought employment and adventure in Baltimore where she eventually married. When Marion was 18 or 19, she too left home for a succession of jobs in Washington, DC.

After Stella's husband disappeared, Marion took her to the offices of the *Baltimore Sun* in February 1914, where they hoped to get assistance finding him. While there, they met Mencken, the iconic *Baltimore Sun* columnist. He became enamored of Marion, and they began dating. By October they were lovers. Their affair was "off and on" for the next 15 years which also included Marion's service in World War I as a nurse's aide, her impulsive and disastrous marriage when Mencken failed to propose, and two years living in Paris waiting for a divorce.

Journalist, essayist, and ferocious faultfinder of the social milieu from 1906 to 1948, Mencken came to be known as the "Sage of Baltimore." The one-time literary critic of *The Smart Set* magazine went on to co-found and edit the upscale periodical, *American Mercury*. In 1925, he

most famously reported on the so-called Scopes “Monkey Trial” in Tennessee where the legality of teaching evolution in schools was argued. He covered the event in a syndicated newspaper column, establishing his national reputation. Mencken also authored many influential books on philosophy, religion, culture, and the English language. All this made him a household name in the 1920s and ‘30s.

Mencken introduced Stella to his friend, Theodore Dreiser, in 1916. She became his secretary and editorial advisor, typing manuscripts in his New York City office. Shortly, they too were lovers, and their affair lasted three years.

Dreiser thundered onto the national literary scene with his 1910 best-selling novel, *Sister Carrie*. He topped it with his biggest hit, *An American Tragedy*, in 1925. Broadway rushed to adapt this sad tale of ambition and seduction for a 1926 play, and Hollywood liked the poignant story so much that it produced three movies based on the book. The most famous was *A Place in the Sun*, a 1951 film with Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift, and Shelley Winters. It won six Academy Awards.

The exotic and bohemian Bloom sisters were known for their intelligence, witty repartee, and attractive looks. Estelle was an avid reader and loved the brooding Russian novelists. For this, her sister nicknamed her “Gloom.” Marion was an aspiring writer and contributed epigrams and “essayettes” to *The Smart Set*. Mencken regarded them both as perfect examples of “the new woman,” a genre saluted by him in his 1918 book, *In Defense of Women*. Dreiser thought the sisters the embodiment of his characters in *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*—full of career aspirations and eroticism. When the couples got together, it was the loose equivalent of a literary salon.

From 1916 to 1920, the writers were often summer house guests at the family residence in New Windsor, buying beer at the bar across the street that is still there. In July 1917, Mencken came to town to see Marion and team up with Dreiser. He and Estelle were already there, staying at a farmhouse on Springdale Road by Little Pipe Creek just a few miles from the town limits. The house was owned by Goldie, the oldest Bloom sister, and her husband, Harry Smith.

The couples also held assignations in Washington, Baltimore, and New York City. Unfortunately for the sisters, the foursome frolic ended around 1917 without proposals from either writer. Stella remarried in 1923 to Arthur Phelps Williams, a wealthy importer and purveyor of fine foods and wines. She learned to live extravagantly with expensive clothes and trips to Europe. Her marriage eventually disintegrated under the weight of her husband’s infidelities, and she returned to her childhood home in New Windsor to live alone with her memories. Dreiser is said to have visited her there.

When marriage to Mencken didn’t materialize, Marion became a nurse’s aide for the Army Medical Corps in France. Upon her return, Mencken resumed the relationship, but it ended in 1930 when he wed writer and Goucher College professor Sara Haardt whom he was simultaneously dating. Estelle and Marion had a falling out over Mencken’s playing her along for so many years and never spoke again.

Marion had been traumatized by her World War I experiences nursing soldiers suffering from physical and psychological damages and sought employment as a physiotherapist at Mt. Alto Hospital in Washington, DC. She later worked for the American Red Cross and the State Department and died at age 83.

Old-time town residents remembered Estelle, though she kept her distance. She was often seen at the station traveling to New York to visit friends. She wore long dresses with hats and gloves, ordered fancy candy, expensive canned goods, wines, and liquors from a store in New York, and had the goods shipped to the railroad's freight station. Her younger brother, Preston, picked them up for her. After a bout with cancer, Estelle became a recluse, spotted occasionally on the flat roof over her front porch. She died in 1954 at age 67 and is buried in the family plot in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church cemetery in town.

Frank Batavick is a trustee of the Historical Society of Carroll County and a member of New Windsor Heritage.



Marion Bloom, left, and Estelle Bloom Kubitz in Houston, c.1913. (New Windsor Heritage)



An H. L. Mencken portrait from photo album of Estelle Bloom Kubitz Williams. Estelle and Marion had a falling out in 1930 over Mencken. The "friend" noted in Estelle's inscription was her sister. (New Windsor Heritage)