

the Giggling Granny in Art

By Loyd McIntosh

The word ‘contempt’ elicits strong, negative emotional reactions. That might be why you don’t hear it used during weddings, kindergarten graduations, and baptisms. The word ‘contempt’ posed both an opportunity and a problem for Brooklyn, New York, artist Erin Mathewson a couple of years ago after she was asked to take part in a group art show. The theme, if you haven’t guessed it by now, was contempt. Extremely non-violent by nature - she has no interest in violent movies, for instance - Mathewson took the theme as a creative challenge and let her artistic mind take her to a surprisingly dark place - serial killers.

“I decided to think of the most contemptible act I could think of: murder. What’s worst than murder? Someone willing to murder multiple times,” explains Mathewson.

Each artist was allowed to submit three pieces for the show and, after some investigation into her subject matter, Mathewson settled on three notorious multiple murderers, John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, and Nannie Doss, a notorious serial killer from Anniston known as “The Giggling Granny.”

Rat Poison, True Romance & The Lonely Hearts Club

Nannie Doss was born Nancy Hazle in 1905 in the tiny Blue Mountain community, one of five children in a poor, working-class family. Her father, James, was reportedly one nasty hombre - a violent and controlling man who forced Nannie and her siblings to work on the family farm instead of attending school.

Other reports suggest Nannie was sexually molested by adult males during her childhood. Also, around the age of seven, Nannie took a blow to the head during a train ride to visit relatives in southern Alabama. Nannie suffered headaches and blackouts for many years as a result of the injury. More importantly, however, the injury likely led to greater instability to her already fragile emotional state due in her rotten upbringing.

She was married five times during her life, the first coming in 1921 at the young age of 16 to a man named Charlie Braggs. Together they had four children, however, during their tumultuous marriage - alcoholism, infidelity, abuse, etc. - two of their children died from what was reported as accidental food poisoning, although Braggs suspected his wife had actually killed them. The couple eventually divorced with Braggs moving as far away from Nannie as possible. Despite the failed marriage and the death of two of his children, Braggs considered himself lucky. Really lucky.

To pass the time following the demise of her first marriage, Nannie began obsessively reading the pulp magazine, *True Romance*, a habit she picked up from her mother. Nannie was especially interested in the ‘lonely hearts,’ which she poured through constantly, dreaming and hoping to find that special someone.

‘The Giggling Granny’ went on to marry that ‘special someone’ four more times, with all of her husbands assuming room temperature thanks to Nannie’s fondness for including rat poison in her family recipes. Her fifth and final husband was a solid, church-going man named Samuel Doss. They said their vows in June 1953 and settled in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In October 1954, Doss was hospitalized for flu-like symptoms, and not too long after was given a clean bill of health by his physician.



By Erin Mathewson

Later on the night of Samuel's return home, Doss began his eternal dirt nap; the physician who had just ordered his release smelled a rat and ordered an autopsy. His hunch was close - Doss was poisoned from a ridiculously lethal dose of rat poison. Nannie, with her Aunt-Bea hairstyle, horn-rimmed glasses and copy of *True Romance* in tow, was promptly arrested.

After officers pried the copy of *True Romance* from her grip, the matronly grandmother, confessed to killing Doss and her three prior husbands, her two sisters, two of her children, her mother, a mother-in-law, a nephew and a grandson - 11 people in all - between the years 1920-1954

It was during interrogations with detectives that Nannie Doss earned her nickname 'The Giggling Granny.' Showing no remorse whatsoever, Doss smiled and laughed her way through her confession as though she was exchanging recipes at a church picnic. It was these traits - her nonchalance, her look, and her desperate search for love - that piqued Mathewson's interest, 56 years after Doss' last murder.

Serial Killer In Art

"The name 'the Giggling Granny' was the first thing that interested me. I saw some images and thought that she had a good look with the 40s hair style and glasses. And, she is the "giggling granny" so she'd be mid-laugh," explains Mathewson about why she chose to immortalize east Alabama's most notorious grandmother. "I also thought her image would work well in linoleum block print which is what I generally work in. I thought it would be fun to carve her glasses and hair style."

Working with a piece of black linoleum, Mathewson meticulously carves an image in reverse, applies ink to the print, then, using a heavy roller, applies pressure to the carving which transfers the image to a piece of paper. Mathewson chose this medium for all three of her "contempt" prints, showing all three serial killers in a mug shot.

The print of Doss is humorous and creepy at the same time. The majority of the image is black, including the background and her dress. It appears almost as if 'The Giggling Granny' is some sort of elderly ghost in the night, complete with horn-rimmed glasses, pink fingernails, and heaving bosom. Mathewson, of course, chose to portray Doss in mid-laugh, as though she has no real understanding of her deeds, as though true love and eternal happiness is just around the corner.

"As I read more about her I feel there's a real sadness to her story, always looking



The notorious Nannie Doss

for love, never content," says Mathewson. "Even when she was convicted I read she still looked through the personals convinced she'd still find her true love."

The Giggling Granny's Place In History
Americans are fascinated by serial killers as the names of many brutal killers have become part of pop culture over the years - Gacy, Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, etc. So, it is curious how Nanny Doss' name isn't quite as well-known as her more famous

partners in crime.

A short-lived heavy metal band from Kentucky called itself Nanny Doss for a while, and TruTV has aired a documentary about her life. However, for the most part, "The Giggling Granny" and her 34-year reign of terror remain under the radar. Of the three serial killer portraits Mathewson created, the one of Doss requires the most explanation and is met with the least amount of repulsion.

"When I explain who she was people seem more amused than horrified. The fact that Nannie Doss lived decades ago makes it easier to remove yourself and, unfortunately view it as a story and not history," Mathewson says. "When you read her history and actually think about what she did she was horrible and heartlessly killed numerous family members."

In all, Mathewson created 15 prints, five of each, but is reluctant to sell them - to date she has only sold one print of John Wayne Gacy to a buyer in England. Mathewson says she doesn't want anyone to think she condones the actions of any of the people rendered in her artwork.

There is one particular murder committed by Doss that is simply beyond comprehension. Shortly after the birth of a grandchild, "The Giggling Granny" killed the child by stabbing it in the head with a hatpin. For Mathewson, no amount of time can fade the reality of who Doss was - a ruthless, brutal murderer.

"That image disturbs me personally so much; I think because it is her killing a defenseless innocent child with her bare hands violently," says Mathewson. "That always brought my mind back to the reality that she was a cold blooded killer."

Doss pled guilty only to the murder of her fifth husband, Samuel Doss, and was sentenced to life in prison in May of 1955. She died of leukemia in the Oklahoma State Penitentiary hospital ward in 1965.

A regular Longleaf contributor, Loyd McIntosh's research surprisingly led him to art as well as murder.