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Rhoda Strong Lowry: The Swamp Queen of Scuffletown

ENEIDA SANDERSON PUGH

The implications of the Civil War divided the nation and created loyalties along social, geographic, racial, and gender lines. Endemic to the divisions were barriers superimposed on the society with resulting restrictions, demands, and tensions. Tomes have been written about the battles and of the calculated maneuvers carried out by the generals and their campaigns, successful and unsuccessful. The stresses of the war resonated in each household. Many lives were transformed and heroes stepped out of the chaos and onto the pages of history, altering the lives of millions. Despite the plethora of Civil War literature, one group remains overlooked and omitted in the annals of war: women. Feminine acts of heroism and selfless patriotism have been recorded in various forms; many written by the participants whose firsthand accounts of their experiences relate excitement, danger, and unthinkable heroism. For the vast majority of the women, however, life was a monotonous continuum of deprivation, fear, and loneliness and their daily activities were carried out in the sphere of illiteracy and poverty. Notwithstanding these disadvantages, along with the dangers of war, a relatively small group of semi- and well-educated women recorded their memories. Their writings exist today and comprise a small collection of diaries, letters, memoirs, and a few novels.

Unsung, but not unnamed, the writers shed light on their every day occurrences, fears, and expectations. Katherine M. Jones compiled over one-hundred written accounts by southern women in *The Heroines of Dixie: Confederate Women Tell Their Story of the War*. Each entry offers the reader an intimate glimpse into the life of individual women who lived in a land invaded and occupied by federal troops. The authors did not think of themselves as

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creators of literature intended for later publication. Writing was a form of catharsis: it assisted them in dealing with the turmoil and strife of daily living and was a channel to a metaphysical plane where they could question God. Their safe place, home, had always been first in their life and the supplanting by war of this sacred institution in support of patriotism was mentioned by one South Carolinian who wrote, "What do I care for patriotism? My husband is my country. What is my country to me if he be killed?"[1] This sentiment, even the same words, might have been uttered by thousands of women whose husbands marched off to war. One can envision them standing in the doorway of a cabin holding the hands of several crying children as they watch the figure of their husband fade in the distance. Perhaps one day the lives of these unnamed victims may be discovered by diligent researchers who will bring to light heroic activities heretofore unknown.

Rhoda Strong Lowry is one such woman whose life story has been ignored by most historians. Occasional *New York Herald* articles written in the late nineteenth century mentioned her, but the topic of interest of such articles centered on the exploits of her husband, Henry Berry Lowry. Recently Josephine Humphreys captured much of her history in her romanticized historical novel, *Nowhere Else on Earth*. In the book, as well as in the newspaper accounts, it is apparent that Rhoda does not fit the profile of a woman whose life is suddenly interrupted by the Civil War. The epic unfolding of the war was not her struggle. Her young life had always been one of opposition. She focused her energies on the salvation and preservation of her people, her family, and most specifically, her husband. Rhoda falls into a category that separates her from the documented heroines of her time, one reserved for Native Americans, a people whose struggle for existence began long ago.

Although Rhoda does not engage in activities that brought fame to the noted women of the Civil War, she was by all accounts their equal in intelligence, charm, and personal engagement in daring exploits. Despite her apparent illiterate status and definite rural upbringing, Rhoda's story parallels that of famous historical women whose living fire could not be extinguished.

A cursory glance of the well-documented and famous women of that era discloses a trend. The majority of these women engaged in four basic areas of war activities: medicine, direct battle conflict, espionage, and slavery rescue missions. The talents and energies of these women disclose their importance to the Civil War and the effect of their actions on modern history. Neither race nor geographic location offered an impediment to their strength and tenacity, which helped change not only our society, but also the world.

Numerous women made significant and long-lasting contributions in the field of medicine. Clara Harlowe Barton (1821–1912) began her teaching career as a fifteen-year-old and later became a nurse, offering relief aid for wounded soldiers in Washington, D.C. She received permission from the US Surgeon General William A. Hammond to travel with army ambulances and for three years she was engaged in army operations in the Virginia and South Carolina theaters. Her greatest recognition is as the founder of the American Red Cross in 1881, a prestigious organization recognized today worldwide.

Another figure in the medical arena is best known today for her literary

talents. Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888), the author of the novel *Little Women*, also served as a nurse in a Civil War hospital. Later she depicted her experiences in a book in which she revealed the deplorable conditions of sanitation and sickness in the hospitals, as well as the indifference of surgeons, nurses, and uncaring volunteers.

The third in this list of famous women is Elizabeth Blackwell, recognized as the first graduated female doctor of medicine in the United States. Her vital role in organizing and providing relief to the soldiers early in the Civil War led to the formation of the United States Sanitary Commission. Sharing the limelight with Blackwell was another medical personality, Sally L. Tompkins of Richmond, Virginia, a captain of cavalry in the Confederate Army. Tompkins was the only commissioned woman officer for either side and was commissioned in 1861 by Jefferson Davis for the remarkable recovery rate maintained in a hospital she established after First Bull Run.

Many wives could not tolerate separation from their husbands and joined the fray as soldiers, often at the side of their spouses or fiancés. The exact number of women who donned male attire, enlisted, and fought in the ranks of the Union Army is unknown. Investigation into this area is currently underway and records reveal that the sex of numerous valiant soldiers was discovered only after they were wounded or died on the battlefield. Ellen Goodridge enlisted with her fiancé and fought at his side. Jennie Hodges (alias Albert Cashier) served three years in the Ninety-Fifth Illinois Infantry Regiment and lived her life as a man until a freak accident in 1911 revealed her true identity. [2]

The women of the Confederacy were equally involved in the war action and military records of the period provide information about women who fought in pitched battles. The list includes the names of Mary and Molly Bell (alias Tom Parker and Bob Martin), Amy Clarke (Richard Anderson), and Loreta Janeta Veláquez (Harry T. Buford).[3]

In the dangerous world of espionage women engaged in nefarious affairs on both sides of the line. The southern spy Bell Boyd had an exciting career, providing information to generals Turney Ashby and Stonewall Jackson during the Shenandoah Valley spring 1862 campaign. Jackson made her a captain and an honorary aid-de-camp on his staff. She was imprisoned in Washington, D.C., as a spy and after her release sailed for Europe. The remainder of her life was highlighted by events as dramatic as her stage career in England. Her romantic career was subsequently published under the title *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*.

Sharing the world of intrigue with Boyd was the New Orleans–born Union spy Pauline Cushman (1833–1893). Her good looks provided ample opportunities to garner information for the Union Army, but capture, illness, disregard by the Union, and lack of payment for her service, for which she had been named an honorary major, led to drug addiction and suicide.

Perhaps one of the most effective female Confederate spies was Rose O'Neal Greenhow (1817–1864), a southern belle whose extensive travels and political connections in Washington, D.C., provided her with invaluable information. Like Boyd, she was also imprisoned. Upon her release she traveled to Europe. When the small boat carrying her to the North Carolina shore near

Cape Fear overturned, Rose, weighted down with the gold she had raised to promote the Confederacy, died. Her activities are recounted in her book *My Imprisonment and the First Year of Abolition Rule.*

Harriet Ross Tubman (1820?–1913) is perhaps the name most quickly recognized among women abolitionist. Born on a plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland, to slaves, Tubman fled the conditions that trapped her. She shared with other Civil War women many of their talents and energies as a scout, spy, and nurse for the United States Army. She is universally recognized as the Moses of her people for her involvement in freeing more than three hundred slaves via the Underground Railroad.

Another forceful worker famous for advocating the rights of women and slaves was Susan Brownell Anthony (1820–1906). Abolition and temperance are often the two words associated with this Quaker whose energies and intelligence are credited for obtaining the right to vote for women. Her Civil War efforts were directed toward the establishment of the Women's Loyal League.

It is apparent from this incomplete list of Civil War heroines that daring exploits and intelligence are common themes among all. Each had a high regard for her cause and a sobering realization that life was a precious commodity to be preserved. Home, long considered a place of safe refuge, was under attack as the history of a nation was in progress. Trauma replaced security and each woman willingly risked the safety of her children, family, and person to be effective tools in the struggle. The hardships, hunger, poverty, imprisonment, and self-sacrifice they endured were superseded by an extraordinary zeal to serve. Neither regional, cultural, nor racial divisions prevented them from vital participation in the fight. A fair summation of a woman's situation of the time can be found in the diary entry of Leora Sims of Columbia, South Carolina, who wrote to her friend Mary Elizabeth Bellamy on November 14, 1861: "We have but one motto—Determination. And with God as our guide we will eventually overcome all those heart rending trials."[4]

Rhoda Strong Lowry shares the same strengths, courage, and determination exhibited by the women whose lives and contributions historians have lauded. She deserves inclusion in the list of Civil War heroines, not only for her courage and contributions, but also because she was a unique participant in the fight for the survival and rights of a people. Whereas the women previously mentioned were either white or Black, Rhoda was a Native American and appears to be a lone feminine figure among The People in their episodic involvement in our nation's history. The other heroines were directly associated with the Civil War operations but Rhoda operated on the fringes of the battle, avoided direct involvement in its activities, and directed her energies to the protection of her husband, family, and community.

North Carolina history of that period recounts the electrifying role her husband Henry Berry Lowry played in that state and a considerable body of literature further elaborates his near-mythical presence. Scattered throughout the accounts are sporadic mentions of Rhoda that may appear inconsequential or trivial to one interested in the deeds of her husband. When her actions are examined for cause and effect, a revealing picture emerges of a woman who changed history.

To understand Rhoda's position and importance, one needs a superficial understanding of the conditions of the time. In 1865 the Union Army advanced toward the lower Lumber River (Drowning Creek) in eastern North Carolina and unknowingly contributed to the watery death of numerous Robeson County Indians who were conscripted in fort-building projects to protect Wilmington. The dense swamps along that dark river protected a small group of Indians whose defiance against white injustices sparked a decade of guerrilla warfare. The rebellious men saved their people from extinction and became local Robin Hoods to their community. Led by the daring Henry Berry Lowry, the gang outraged the president of the United States, outwitted the local, state, and federal governments, and incurred the wrath of the Ku Klux Klan. They were interviewed by New York reporters, hounded by the local Home Guard militia, and killed by bounty hunters and white neighbors eager to collect the largest monetary awards known at that time in America's history.

From 1864 to 1874 Henry Berry and his men waged what has come to be known as the Lowry Wars. During that decade they assisted escaped Union prisoners and slaves, protected Indian men from conscription, stole from whites, and killed sixteen white men accused of crimes against the Indians. Their base of operations extended from Union to Moss Neck along the Lumber River, natural boundaries for the Indians whose earlier extensive land holdings had dwindled due to whites' hunger for the rich land of Robeson County. These conditions were exacerbated by the 1835 state law that had "designated the Indians along the Lumber River as 'free persons of color,' and had taken away their right to bear arms, as well as their right to vote."[5] The Indians, who had always owned guns and used them to hunt game, found themselves defenseless, poor, and starving. To redress those grievances they left their swamp hideouts for food, revenge, and justice for their people.

Lowry and his band, mostly teenagers, initiated a program of taking food, clothing, and animals from the whites to sustain the most needy in the Indian community. Stealing from the whites was a fairly simple process, often complimented by Lowry's friendly gestures and conversations with the victims. Likewise, stealing from the Indians was a fairly simple process, and is still referred to by the Lumbees as the "tied mule" incidents. Adolph L. Dial and David K. Eliades carefully explain that the incidents were used by the whites who "sought ways either to use them [Lumbees] as free labor or, worse, to obtain their lands."[6] The existence of the Indians who lived on farms was often due to the possession and health of their mules and the loss of such a valuable animal could result in starvation for many families. White farmers were known to place their own mule and personal items on Indian property and later accuse the Indian of theft. The "thief" was arrested and had to sell a portion of his land to the white "victim" or become an indentured servant to pay the debt.

In 1864 this tactic was used by the Home Guard against the respected large land-owning Indian Allen Lowry. He and a son, William, were accused of theft and illegal possession of firearms. They were promptly executed without a warrant or hearing. Barton states that the youngest son, Henry Berry,

vowed revenge for "the killing of his father and brother, and before the year was out he had killed his first white man."[7] Sixteen-year-old Henry Berry entered America's history and attracted the attention of the president, the Department of War, and, especially, North Carolina.

Rhoda found herself at the epicenter of this social-political-economic upheaval. Eyewitnesses who have assisted in the documentation of her history considered her presence and exploits major contributions to the perseverance of the Lowry gang. While she was known as Rhoda, Rhody, and Rhodie, for simplification purposes the name Rhoda will be used in this article, except in direct quotes.

Rhoda, Henry Berry, and their people have intrigued historians for more than a century. In the mid-nineteenth century their home, Scuffletown, was an Indian township sandwiched between numerous swamps and traversed by a few mud paths branching off the powerful Lumber River. The east-west Wilmington, Charlotte, and Rutherfordton Railroad dissected Scuffletown. All of these factors would eventually facilitate the activities of both Henry Berry Lowry and Rhoda Strong Lowry.

Today their descendants call themselves Lumbee, a mixed-blood group living in the same area. Scuffletown is now Pembroke, located approximately eighty miles west of Wilmington. Now, as then, the Lumbee claim direct descent to the first settlers of Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony. Dial and Eliades use historical records to support this claim. They show that of the original one-hundred-and-seventeen settlers left on Roanoke Island in 1587, forty-one surnames recorded in White's log are found among Lumbees today: Sampson, Brooks, Lowry, and Locklear, to name a few. They include further proof of the use of pure Old English and a peculiar speech intonation that prevailed up to the mid-twentieth century before mass media.[8] In addition, oral and written history place them near the Lumber River as early as 1650 and later by Scottish settlers in 1739 who recorded their encounters with English-speaking Indians.

With western expansion all Native peoples were in danger of extermination. Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830 led to the Trail of Tears and doomed the eastern Indians to extraction from their native lands and near annihilation. The slave issue of 1831 traumatized southern plantation owners and historians Dial and Eliades remind us that at the 1835 North Carolina Constitutional Convention the delegates, governed by fear and the question of how they should deal with free Negroes and mulattos, determined that the Bill of Rights did not apply to the former or the latter. They drafted the amendment stating: " No free negro, free mulattoe, or free person of mixed blood, descended from negro ancestors to the fourth generation inclusive . . . shall vote for members of the Senate or House of Commons."[9] The fate of the Lumbee Indians was sealed and Jackson's enforced democracy placed them center stage in North Carolina history for attacks, assassinations, and theft by the Home Guard and other whites.

Rhoda's history began during those stressful times. It was December 7, 1865, her wedding day. Rhoda was sixteen and Henry Berry, her cousin, was twenty. His outlaw escapades had kept the county in turmoil for two years, and

there was a $10,000 bounty on his head. One assumes that, despite her youth, Rhoda understood the implications involved in marrying a wanted man. A company of the Home Guard interrupted their wedding festivities, arrested the groom and promptly hauled him to the jail in Whiteville, about thirty miles away. Escape from the jail was considered impossible, yet, according to Mary Norment, a local historian of the time who wrote about the Lowry gang, "He filed his way out of the grated iron window bars, escaped to the woods with handcuffs on, and made his way back to his wife in Scuffletown."[10]

Many sources claim that the escape was not only to return to Rhoda but was also accomplished because of her. Dial and Eliades recount the old Indian story that the file was concealed in a cake and carried to the jail by Rhoda.[11] Mary Regan, a reporter for the *News and Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina, wrote a two-page article in the Women Society News Section in 1967 about Rhoda's involvement in another jail escapade. Regan claimed that Rhoda quietly notched "toe-holds" to facilitate her ascent in climbing the Lumberton jail's two-story brick walls to "break Lowery out." In the same article Regan included information from an interview with Clarence Lowery, a great-grandson of Rhoda. Clarence claimed that Rhoda helped her husband escape by smuggling "him a knife instead of a file." In addition, Regan introduced information from another grandson, Danny Leach Lowery, then eighty-six years old, who stated that he was "raised by Rhody for 17 years until her death in 1909 when she was probably 60 years old." He said: "Rhody never took part in any of the gang's activities but 'when they really needed her she came through.'"[12]

Although Danny Leach's words compound Rhoda's real or imagined participation, we know that in 1872 Lowry was jailed for the last time in Wilmington. He and three of his men were tried and sentenced to death. Famous for his jail escapes, Henry Berry and his men were placed in a special cell within the main cellblock of the jail under a twenty-four-hour watch. Regan writes, "Clarence says Rhody walked the eighty miles [from Scuffletown] to Wilmington, set on freeing her husband. Once there she baked a cake with a pistol concealed inside."[13] Rhoda delivered it to the jailer who was later overpowered by the liberated Lowry.

Claude Dunnagan, a freelance writer from Chapel Hill who viewed the episode as more romantic, highlighted, or exaggerated, Rhoda's cunning and daring. Dunnagan's version, also included in the lengthy article by Regan, provides a more detailed image of Rhoda. According to him, a week before the execution of Lowry, the Lumberton train pulled into the Wilmington station and several people got off. One of the passengers was "'a beautiful, Croatian Indian girl. She was dressed shabbily, a shawl pulled around her long black tresses.'"[14] The Indian girl (Rhoda) descended from the train and during a casual conversation with the owner of a local cafe learned that the woman's husband had been arrested for drunkenness and was in the same jail as Henry Berry. The proprietress hired her as a waitress and the next day sent Rhoda to the jail with a tray of food for her husband. Her beauty attracted the eye of the jailer who attempted to seduce her. She refused his initial advances but promised to return later. The next evening Rhoda repeated her visit to the

jail dressed in a voluminous skirt. She entered the jailer's apartment with him and pretended to accept his advances. The man removed his coat, gun-belt and key ring, and as he leaned over to remove his shoes, Rhoda pulled a heavy lead pipe from under her skirt and knocked him unconscious. With keys in hand she unlocked the cellblock door then ran to free her husband. Dunnagan concluded this episode by having the condemned Indians silently make their way in the Wilmington darkness to a boat previously stocked with guns and food. Silently, they pushed off and paddled upstream in the Cape Fear River to arrive later in Scuffletown, their safe place in the dense and forbidding swamps.[15]

These stories obfuscate the true activities in which Rhoda engaged and add to the mystique that surrounds her. On the other hand, definite information is available concerning her appearance. Statements about her beauty abound in all documentation. Evans claims that the "sensation the 'young lady' caused at the jail is similar to the impression Rhoda Lowry made wherever she went."[16] Mary Norment was widowed by the Lowry gang and she vented her anguish and spleen against them in her historical recounting of their atrocities in *The Lowrie History.* Despite her biased narrative Norment wrote that Rhoda was "one of the handsomest and prettiest Indian girls in all Scuffletown, sartirically [*sic*] nick-named by some white young wag 'the Queen of Scuffletown.'"[17] She further claimed that if Rhoda was the queen then Henry Berry was the "Don Juan of Scuffletown."[18] Regan also joins the ranks of those who wish to see Rhoda clearly. She includes the following undocumented physical description of the enigmatically beautiful Rhoda: "Some say her hair was flaxen. Some say it was jet black. Her eyes were either grayish-green or coal black and some say they were of the clearest purest blue."[19]

By 1872 Henry Berry Lowry and his gang had attracted national attention. A. Boyd Henderson, a *New York Herald* correspondent bent on salacious journalism, arrived in Robeson County to write about the Lowry gang. He claimed that he was received by the family, actually became a "captive" gang member, attended church with Rhoda and her three children, and was treated well by the Indians. His declarations are presented in a recent historical novel by David Ball, who offers a unique view of the gang, in addition to making remarkable claims about Rhoda. Ball proposes that the story of the Lumbee is about "two of the most remarkable women in southern history, the chief outlaw's wife (Rhoda) and his mother."[20] His admiration for Rhoda permeates the novel and the reader sees her as a tender, loving, yet stern mother, a faithful companion to her husband, and a young girl who dreamed that the only salvation for the Scuffletown Indians was for Henry Berry to seek Geronimo's help.

As is normal with any scantily documented historical figure, varying images of Rhoda appeared. Henderson, who first saw Rhoda as his train approached Scuffletown, wrote one outstandingly lengthy image. In his article datelined February 27, 1872, and recounted by Regan, Henderon wrote:

> I saw her descend with her baby and walk off down the road in the woods and stop there among the tall pitch pines, as if waiting for somebody. The baby—the last heir of outlawry—began to cry as she left the train, and she said, mother-fashion: 'No, no, no, I wouldn't cry,

> when I had been so good all day!' The woman is the sister of two of the five remaining outlaws and wife of the third. The whites call her satirically, 'the queen of Scuffletown'; but she appeared to be a meek, pretty-eyed rather shrinking girl, of a very light color, poorly dressed. She wore many brass rings, with cheap red stones in them, on her small hands, and a dark green plain dress of muslin delaine, which just revealed her new black morocco 'store' shoes. A yellowish muslin or calico hood, with a long cape, covered her head and there was nothing beside that I remember except a shawl of bright colors, much worn. It was sad enough and prosaic enough to see this small woman with her baby in her arms, carrying it along, while the husband and father, covered with the blood of 15 murders, roamed the woods and swamps like a Seminole.[21]

Reputedly the Lowry gang captured, blindfolded, and held Dunnagan as a "captive" for two weeks in the dark swamp of the Lumber River. He reported that Rhoda was assigned as his official guide in the outside white world. Again, as retold by Regan, he wrote a March 1 article titled "Letter from our Captured Correspondent." His description of Rhoda was more complete and sympathetic. "This young woman is remarkably pretty; her face oval, of a very light color; large dark, mournful looking eyes, with long lashes; well shaped mouth with small even teeth; well-rounded chin, nose slightly retrousee with profusion of straight jet black hair, combined to make her a very pleasant object to gaze at."[22] He continued, "She has small hands and feet, and on the latter wears No. 2, and still cramps her feet less than the majority of white women. She is of medium height, with a very well developed figure, and is between 21 and 22 years old. When I add that she has a low sweet voice, and a great many little graceful motions of her head and body, it will be seen that she is a rare avis in Scuffletown."[23] Lest his editor or readers think him somewhat smitten by the lovely Rhoda, he adds the fact that this queen cannot write and emphasizes in capital letters that "SHE SMOKES A PIPE AND RUBS SNUFF."[24]

Regan includes further information about Rhoda from an undocumented source named as Miss Patton from New Orleans. According to Regan Miss Patton arrived in Scuffletown to avenge the murder of her sweetheart by the Lowry gang. Patton feigned her identity and later claimed that when the Lowrys learned of her educational background they forced her to teach their children to read and write. She claimed that she was their prisoner but eventually gave up any notion of killing Henry Berry due to the kindness shown her by the couple. As a sign of their loyalty to her, she further claimed that the Lowrys brought her the murderer of her fiancé and summarily shot him in her presence. Patton returned to New Orleans and in the article, untitled and unnamed by Regan, she wrote about her life among the Indians. Her analysis reveals a critically feminine eye.

> Rhody Lowery is a peculiar character. In color she is about the shade of an octoroon. She is below the medium height, but possessing such a fine shape and figure as to appear quite queenly—at least when she

> is dressed up for galey days. To look into her face the careless spectator would little dream that she is the bandit's wife, and one also who actually delights in the bloody deeds of her terrible husband. For her large lustrous eyes are exceedingly soft in their expression, while her small, handsome mouth, rounded ruddy cheeks, and wavy, black hair look exactly as tho' they belonged to a young school miss. This is as it seems to the casual observer; but to the skilled delineator of human character the true traits are observable with a moderate degree of scrutiny. The sudden flash and curious leer of her eyes, at the slightest mention of her husband's name, betokens suspicion, curiosity and cunning; the tightening of her lips over the teeth, combined with the deep lines around the corners of the mouth and toward the nostril, show the determination and cruelty of Rhody, and the quick but carefully spoken words indicate her caution. Rhody, it must also be said, smokes, chews and occasionally takes a good drink of whisky from her husband's flask. But all in moderation. She is truly devoted to her robber lord, and loves him better than her own life. She looks on him as a persecuted man and a hero, instead of a felon and a bandit. And it was this romantic notion that caused her originally to marry him. I must add also that her husband is exceedingly fond of Rhody, and idolizes his children.[25]

Perhaps the one episode recorded about Rhoda in which she was not an active or willing participant showed Lowry's love for her. Evans wrote that in 1871 Colonel Frank Wishart, the new leader of the Home Guard, was obsessed with the capture of all the Lowrys. He reasoned that if he captured the gang's wives Lowry would be drawn out of the swamp into direct confrontation with the militia. The militia rounded up Rhoda and other Indians and began the march down the railroad tracks to Scuffletown (now Pembroke) and their militia headquarters. As they approached the outskirts Lowry and his men, who were positioned in an ambush, opened fire, killing three soldiers and wounding three. Rhoda and the prisoners were hastily locked up in the headquarters and put under secure guard. Armed with warrants that charged the captive Indians with "aiding and abetting outlaws,"[26] the militia moved them to the Lumberton jail, again hoping that Lowry would be drawn into the open. Evans reported that the "armed citizens were collecting from all directions to overrun Scuffletown and scour the whole country of the outlaws and all of their aiders and sympathizers."[27] The outlaws vanished but popped up soon after and requested breakfast at John McNair's home, a local white. Evans's quoted the following as Lowry's order to McNair and warning to the armed white community: "'McNair, I want you to gear up and go to Lumberton, where they have put my wife in jail for no crime but because she is my wife; that ain't her fault, and they can't make it so. You people won't let me work to get my living, and I have got to take it from you; but, God knows, she'd like to see me make my own bread. You go to Lumberton and tell the Sheriff and County Commissioners that if they don't let her out of that jail I'll retaliate on the white women of Burnt Swamp Township. Some of them shall

come to the swamp with me if she is kept in jail, because they can't get me.'"[28] Henry Berry then dictated the following note dated July 14, 1871, to be delivered by McNair to Sheriff McMillan and to the Presbyterian minister: "We make a special request, that our wives who were arrested a few days ago and placed in Jail, be released to come home to their families by Monday Morning, and if not, the Bloodiest times will be here that ever was before—the life of every man will be in jeopardy."[29] The message was clear to whites and Indians alike because Lowry was famed in that area as being a man of his word. The sheriff requested help from nearby militia, he wrote to Governor Caldwell for ammunition and appealed to him to present his needs to the federal government, specifically that the US Army Calvary be sent. "Even from the safety of Wilmington the *Morning Star* warned that now especially the whites should be on guard against Henry Berry, that the arrest of Rhoda 'has aroused the lion in his nature.'"[30]

The persistence of the lion and the general knowledge that he was a man of his word caused general panic in the county. The white able-bodied men stampeded out of the county and the gray-haired civil leaders put their heads together to arrive at a plan of action. On July 18, 1871, "the westbound train came to a halt at the Indian village of Red Bank. Among the passengers who got off were the wives of the outlaws. They had left their homes a week ago as prisoners, dragged through the midst of a gun battle."[31] The folks of Scuffletown treated them as returning victors.

The drama and suspense of the decade-long Lowry Wars finally ended with the mysterious disappearance of Henry Berry in 1874. Some say that the expert marksman fell over his rifle that discharged and killed him. Others say that Henry Berry killed a deer then stuffed the brains and blood in the deer bladder. At the moment of his feigned shooting he smeared his face and neck with the bladder contents. He was declared officially dead by his relatives and after the body was placed in a hand hewn coffin "near mid-night, the remaining outlaws took up the body of the robber chief and carried it off and buried it, where, in all human probability, no white man will ever find out."[32] Billy Lowery related the same story to Regan in 1961. However, he claimed that Rhoda and her husband planned this farce to deceive the whites and permit him to escape from Robeson County. According to Billy, Rhoda kissed her husband "goodbye and, with better than $20,000 in his pocket" Lowry "opened the trap door in the hearthstone and crawled through the underground tunnel out into the swamp."[33]

The dangerous episodes that brought Rhoda to the attention of the white world ended with the real or feigned death of her husband. We may assume that she wished to slip into oblivion and move on, like the dark coffee water of the Lumber River that flowed past her cabin. Scant correct information has been recorded or collected about her last years. Most evidence has come from aged Indians who knew Rhoda. Her grandson, Billy Lowery, reported to Regan: "Rhody never married again. She lived well, always had money. Some folks think she had part of the Lumberton safe money. She may have. She died when she was 50, still beautiful. There are men who will tell you Rhody Lowery was the prettiest woman ever walked the streets of Lumberton. She

stayed loyal to Henry Berry too."[34]

Whether Rhoda remained faithful to Henry Berry during their many forced separations is uncertain, but it is known that many men were influenced by her beauty and sought to seduce her. A well-known anecdote is that Henry Berry once warned one white suitor to stay away from his wife; the man promptly left the county. Both Indians and whites alike knew that Lowrie warned only once. According to Dial and Eliades, Rhoda Strong Lowry lived out her life in Robeson County and maintained "a discreet silence about what she knew or believed had happened to her husband, adding yet another dimension to the mystery."[35]

Danny Leach Lowery added the final mesmerizing touch to his intriguing grandmother's history. He related to Regan that Rhoda "was always in conflict. People would come from New York and California just to look at her. . . . No, they didn't know her. . . . Just curious, I reckon. . . . Some of them would tell her they'd seen Henry Berry in New York or in Florida. . . . One man said he was down in Mexico. . . . I reckon she knew better than they did where Henry Berry was."[36]

No one knows the true account of their last days together. No one knows how a man with a $45,000 reward on his head died or escaped so mysteriously. No one knows the last words Rhoda spoke to her husband or how she comforted their children. We can believe the earlier words of Miss Patton, which claimed that Rhoda "loved him better than her own life." And we can trust Rhoda's own words about Henry Berry Lowry that were written in a 1908 edition of the *Robesonian* and preserved in Professor Evan's insightful study of the Lumbee: "Even in her old age, when in the year before her death she talked of Henry Berry, whom she had not seen in more than thirty years, she still remembered him as 'the handsomest man she ever saw.'"[37]

As a postscript to this uncommon history it is important to point out that this remarkably strong woman contributed to the preservation of the Lumbee. Her family's resistance to bigotry and injustice brought them to the attention of the nation, but more specifically, the state. In 1885 the North Carolina General Assembly finally made provisions for a school exclusively for the Scuffletown Indians. *The News and Observer* published statistical data from official records showing that the state provided $500 toward the education of the Indians that year. Twelve years earlier the budget dispersed for whites and colored was practically three times that amount, but for the Indians it was a beginning.[38] The Indians knew that if they were to require more money they would have to raise it themselves, and they did. This intense and involved participation in their education is still prevalent today and was emphasized in an interview with Dorothy Blue, a life-long resident and educator of Pembroke. "Honey, we had to do it ourselves. No one else would help us. All we had was farming, religion and education, and that is what has made us a unique people and community."[39]

The state continued to deny these proud people rightful self-recognition of existence. In 1885 a bill was passed to name them Croatans, a name in long use by whites in a derogatory manner. In 1911 the name was changed to Indians of Robeson County, in 1913 to Cherokee Indians of Robeson County

and, finally, in 1956, a bill approved in the US Congress gave the Robesonian Indians the name they chose. The people are officially known today as the Lumbee.[40]

The Lumbee historian Adolph Dial adds a touching conclusion to this long saga of injustices. He reported that it wasn't until October 28, 1971, that Senator B. Everett Jordan of North Carolina introduced Senate Bill 2763, intended to exclude future discrimination against the Lumbee Indians. Dial records the bill's introduction as follows: "Senator Jordan stated: 'My bill would establish as a matter of law that these people, who possess a heritage as proud and long as any in our country, are entitled to the same rights, privileges and benefits accorded other Indians not living on reservations. The story of the Lumbee Indians is eloquent and moving, tragic and inspiring.'"[41]

Rhoda Strong Lowry's presence and importance in state and national history is romantic, daring, and invigorating. Her beauty has always been a cornerstone of her existence. It is more important today to herald the strength she exhibited in the face of extreme danger, to highlight her intelligence, and to hold up as an example the burning spirit she exhibited in the defense of her family and people. She loved and supported Henry Berry fiercely, and in turn was defended by her hero. She freely roamed the world of the whites and was at home in the depths of the swamps. Her life was central to the preservation and creation of the modern-day Lumbee people. The support she provided to her husband permitted him to become the first civil rights defender in our nation. It might be that Humphreys was correct when she had her heroine Rhoda say quietly to herself as she prepared to step forward in her Lowry quilt-dress to wed Henry Berry, "I knew it was strange, this marriage. I didn't understand it, but I knew it was important, and I knew it would be hard. . . . *I am being married to Scuffletown.*"[42]

NOTES

1. Katherine M. Jones, *The Heroines of Dixie: Confederate Women Tell Their Story of War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1903), vii.
2. Richard Hall, *Patriots in Disguise: Women Warriors of the Civil War* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 18–21.
3. Ibid., 197–200.
4. Jones, *Heroines of Dixie*, 70.
5. William McKee Evans, *To Die Game: The Story of the Lowry Bank, Indian Guerillas of Reconstruction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 5.
6. Adolph L. Dial and David K. Eliades, *The Only Land I Know: A History of the Lumbee Indians* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 45. According to these authors, the Indians of this community still claim that the arrest was based on planted evidence.
7. Lewis Randolph Barton, *The Most Ironic Story in American History: An Authoritative, Documented History of the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina* (Charlotte: Associated Printing Corporation, 1967), 2.
8. Dial and Eliades, *The Only Land I Know*, 11.
9. Ibid., 40–41.

10. Mary Norment, *The Lowrie History* (Lumberton: Lumbee Publishing Co., 1906), 13. Norment's overall attitude toward the Lumbee Indians can be ascertained by the following line from this book: "Quandier, oh! Scuffletown, abutere nostru patientia?" (How long, oh! Scuffletown, will you abuse our patience?) (p. 29).

11. Dial and Eliades, *The Only Land I Know*, 59.

12. Mary Regan, "Dark Fame Surrounded 'Queen,'" *The* (Raleigh, NC) *News and Observer*, 23 April 1967, Women Society News, iv. In this special two-page article, Regan uses a variety of sources, documented and undocumented, about the Lowry gang to present an image of Rhoda. Regan is the best source of information about Rhoda I have found .

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. The term *Croatan* was accepted by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1887 upon the insistence of Hamilton MacMillan, a white friend of the Indians of Robeson County. A detailed account of the discussion of this name, as well as that of the Lost Colony tradition, is found in Dial and Eliades, *The Only Land I Know*, 8–9.

15. Ibid. No specific documentation is available regarding the article written by Dunnagan.

16. Evans, *To Die Game*, 121.

17. Norment, *The Lowrie History*, 13.

18. Ibid., 12.

19. Regan, "Dark Fame Surrounded 'Queen.'"

20. David Ball, *The Swamp Outlaw: The Civil War Story of Henry Berry Lowery and his North Carolina Indian Raiders* (Bloomington: First Books Library, 1999), preface.

21. Regan, "Dark Fame Surrounded 'Queen.'"

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Evans, *To Die Game*, 197.

27. Ibid., 198.

28. Ibid., 198–199.

29. Ibid., 198. Norment's *The Lowrie History* varies somewhat from this account and offers a similar yet loose content. She wrote: "This was on Friday, and they said if their wives were not released by the following Monday afternoon, that Robeson county would be deluged in blood; after that time they [the Lowry gang] would know no man, but would shoot down every one that passed them; that hitherto they had not interfered with the women, that they had scorned it, but after then they might take care, that they were safe no longer" (pp. 52–53).

30. Ibid., 201.

31. Ibid., 202.

32. Norment, *The Lowrie History*, 139.

33. Regan, "Dark Fame Surrounded 'Queen.'

34. Ibid.

35. Dial and Eliades, *The Only Land I Know*, 86

36. Regan, "Dark Fame Surrounded 'Queen.'"

37. Evans, *To Die Game*, 68.

38. "Robeson Citizens Long Have Fought Ignorance: Supported Academies,

Colleges, Public Schools," *The Robesonian,* 26 February 1951, historical edition, 2-H.

39. Dorothy Blue, interview with author, 28 December, 2000, Pembroke, North Carolina.

40. Adolph L. Dial, *The Lumbee Indians: Still a Lost Colony?* (New York: New World Outlook, 1972), 21.

41. Ibid.

42. Josephine Humphreys, *Nowhere Else on Earth* (New York: Viking, 2000), 262.