

TATHEL MILLER

BRWIA'S KEEPER OF STORIES

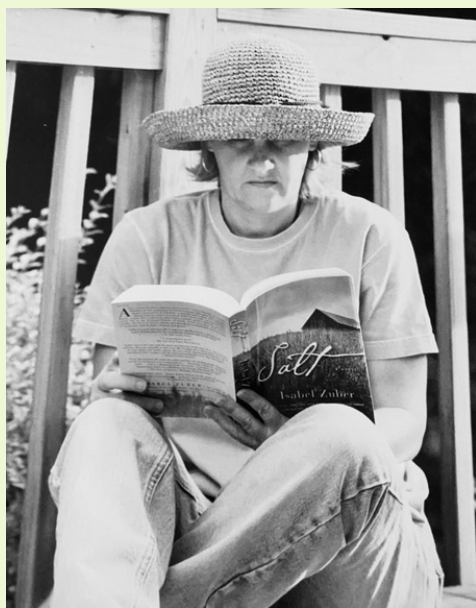


A BRWIA Profile Written by Tathel Miller

It's rare I know to get to visit the past and it seem more alive than it was close to 18 years ago. But it's true. And this part of my story—I find myself even more grateful now for what it was then, what it is now, and the journey to come.

In 2002, my son graduated from high school—and come fall, he would be moving into a dorm five hours away, and my daughter entering her second year of college and my nest—empty. I was working full time, but felt anxious, what was to come, what now?

I had always regretted not finishing my four-year degree right after high school and thought maybe it was time for me to consider going back to college. So, I visited Salem College and inquired about their evening degree program for women over 23. And before I left campus that day at the age of 42, I was holding in my hand a copy of my fall college schedule. Registered and ready. My major—Communications with a concentration in Journalism.



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My senior year came quickly and with that came my senior thesis. I had completed a few oral histories while at Salem and enjoyed meeting and documenting people’s lives. And my work as a freelance feature and sports journalist also fueled my love of inspirational stories. While researching a topic for my senior thesis, I read a quote by author Joan M. Jensen. She wrote, “Every woman has a farmwoman in her family and most of us do not have to go back very far to find that woman.” And I knew right away I wanted to research the history of farm women and include interviews and stories of the present-day farmwoman—in honor and memory of my Granny Rhodes.

One point of my research needed to explain why the subject was important and I wrote, “documenting the lives of rural women in present-day times is very significant in writing women’s history (and) in this research I want to make readers aware of the farmwoman’s place in history and give the present-day new woman in agriculture a voice.”

As I was searching for women to interview, I was looking through the Wilkes Journal Patriot, my local newspaper and saw a small advertisement for Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture (BRWIA) and it included a phone number and website. I then emailed Sue Counts, an advisor for BRWIA and the Cooperative Extension Director for Watauga County. I remember her being very excited and suggested we meet in person. She was a wealth of information. She gave me 12 names of women farmers along with their emails and phone numbers who were involved with BRWIA. Over a 45-day span I traveled over 400 miles visiting four of the women at their farms located in Watauga and Ashe Counties, conducting interviews, and taking photographs. I wanted to include more than four of the women, however my professor warned me that I would not have time to transcribe all the interviews and finish my research before the thesis deadline. And on May 11, 2005, I presented my thesis “With Fullness of Heart and an Aching Back, the Changing Roles of Women in Agriculture”.

Being involved with BRWIA in the early years presented me with many opportunities that continue today. Sue Counts was instrumental in helping me to take my work to a higher level and in 2005 she and I flew to St. Louis where I presented my research at the Small Farms National Conference. I was also a presenter at one of the BRWIA conferences and contributed to one of the first newsletters.

There have been many voices and much hard work instilled in getting to the milestone of celebrating 20 years of BRWIA. And I am humbled and thankful I was blessed to be a small part of the early years and more recently revisit some of the same women living on the same farms I visited some 18 years ago, and to share theirs and many other women’s stories who have contributed to the history and success of the organization.

Nowadays, I try to spend as much time as possible with my four beautiful grandchildren who call me “Granna and Rina” and my family. I serve at my church, volunteer with Hope Ministry, and continue to write as a freelance writer for a few publications. In addition to my freelance writing, I’m working on other writing projects sharing my thoughts and stories on my writer’s website, [Tathel Miller](#) along with sharing farm and artisan related stories at [Farmer Rhodes Granddaughter](#). (See links below)

