

Dorothy Allison writes about a troubled childhood

JENNIFER PULLINGER

jpullinger@msn.com

Dorothy Allison was “literarily hung over” when she appeared last Wednesday at Culbreth Theater for the Virginia Festival of the Book. Allison, author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, had been in New York City the day before for an event at the Lincoln Center, where she was part of a panel discussion with literary giants William Kennedy, Arthur Miller, Studs Turkel, and George Plimpton. The topic was author John Steinbeck.



Dorothy Allison

Allison said she didn't know what she was going to say about Steinbeck for the tribute appearance, so she reread all of his books in preparation. “And you read all of it just in case George Plimpton, over his champagne glass says, ‘And what did you think of the symbolism in *The Red Pony*!’”

Allison was born in Greenville, SC, and even though she now lives in California, her voice still twangs with a deep southern accent. Her early years consisted of poverty and abuse, mostly at the hands of her stepfather. She has been able to draw upon that experience to

milling around



Mill is focus of historic preservation in

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Pieces of machinery, cogs and gears lay exposed in the silt-filled ruins on what was once a thriving mill.

Located along the Rivanna River on state Route 15, all that is left of Palmyra Mill's heyday is a crumbling foundation. The Fluvanna Historical Society is trying to protect this vestige of colonial river life from further deterioration through a preservation effort.

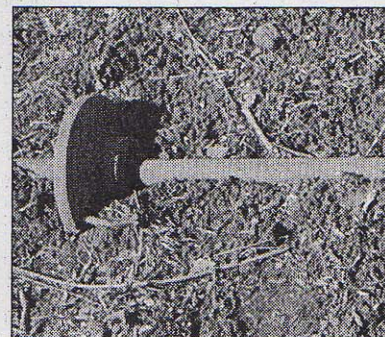
Built in 1813 by the Rev. Walter Timberlake, who was involved in the founding of Palmyra, the once 5-story brick merchant mill was constructed over a rock basement, which is all that stands today. It was burned by Northern troops during the Civil War in 1865, and was rebuilt on the same foundation and remained in use until the 20th century. In the 1930s, the mill was dismantled and many of its bricks were used to construct buildings located in Palmyra village near the current location of the Courthouse and administrative buildings.

Marvin Moss, president of the Fluvanna Historical Society, said the idea to preserve the mill began when they considered extending the Heritage Trail, a nature walking path, across the Rivanna near the steel truss bridge to connect it to the site.

The Historical Society, which owns the four-and-a-half-acre site where the mill is located, also wanted to coordinate its plans for the spot with the future construction of a new Palmyra bridge. “We started working with (the Virginia Department of Transportation) to ensure that the new bridge did not in any way affect the mill site and to maintain the historic character of the mill area” Moss said.

When the bridge is built, Moss added, VDOT has agreed to design the bridge so that “the abutments and things will be covered with stone to match the mill and the locks on the Rivanna.”

The historical society has since created an easement through the Department of Historic Resources so that the mill and the 4 and a half acres can never be developed.



Pieces of machinery cogs and gears from the Palmyra Mill. The Fluvanna Historical Society is working to preserve the mill's ruins.

stabilize the structure, which had been ravaged by floods since its upper stories were taken down. With the help of Fluvanna County, the historical society got a Virginia Department of Transportation TEA-21 grant to achieve this.

Fortification of the mill included placing inserts, some of which weigh over 3 thousand pounds, made of reinforced concrete and steel rods, inside the doors and windows to provide structural support. More steel rods were laid along the top in a trench between the bricks, which were then filled in with concrete, and finished off with a brick capping.

Future plans for the mill site include

tion, the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to approve a request by American Tower to modify its 296-foot tower on Hansen's Mountain to a 260-foot tower with more cellular phone antennae.

The tower — which was constructed in the early 1960s — is considered non-conforming to zoning regulations, but since it was built long before the regulations were put in place, it has been grandfathered. An array of cellu-

“The question should be, will this tower be any more visible than the existing tower is now,” said Valerie Long, an attorney with McQuire Woods, LLP, who represented American Tower. She maintained that the 36-foot reduction in height, coupled with the cables being moved inside the structure, makes it considerably less visible.

Some board members questioned whether the height reduction alone made enough difference

from each side of the tower. Supervisors Dennis Rooker and Sally Thomas supported a staff recommendation that the large antennae bracket be removed and the panels be flush mounted.

“That would have an adverse impact” on Ntelos’ coverage, Long said, adding that the phone company had a 25-year lease for those positions on the large antenna. Rooker responded by suggesting American Tower make a cash offer to Ntelos to

concerned,” argued Richard Cogan. “This is essentially a new facility.”

“This is a radio tower that has been turned into a cellular tower that does not conform with county regulations for cellular towers,” added Shirley Linkous, a neighbor to the tower. “Lowering it from 296 feet to 260 feet doesn’t make that big a difference.”

Jeff Werner of the Piedmont Environmental Council gave an analogy showcasing his organiza-

See TOWER, page B-7 ▶

Allison

continued from page A-3

become a prolific and respected writer.

“I’m poor white trash,” she said, continuing with the John Steinbeck theme at her Virginia Book appearance. “I saw *The Grapes of Wrath* on television. Afternoon matinee. My sister and I sittin’ on the couch, eating leftover cold potatoes, watching *Ma Joad* run the show ... There was stuff in that movie that rocked me to my heart.”

As a youngster, Allison said she was an avid reader. Her sisters would make fun of her for it. But authors like Steinbeck, “made me proud of things I had always been ashamed of,” she said.

Allison’s tormented family life was inspiration for her semi-autobiographical first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which was a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award.

Allison, who has a 10-year-old son named Wolf, talked about one of her sisters, who has daughters but always wanted a son because “boys, she said, you can train. Girls, you can’t.”

“She adores my son. Worships him. The way my momma adored my sister Barbara’s boy. The women in my family love boys ... Now why is that? I told you, I always try to

tell these horribly, tragic, intimate stories. But I always try to thread in a little danger. The women in my family are wild. They can’t be tamed,” Allison said.

Allison, a self-described “radical feminist,” was asked by an audience member what she thought of Andrea Yates, the Texas mother who murdered her five children.

“I think in fact one of the sins to which our culture has got to be held accountable is the fact that we provide so little help and support for mothers and that we have developed a completely false notion of the maternal strength,” she answered. Allison wondered where Yates’ family and friends were and why they didn’t see the signs.

“One of the things that I love about John Steinbeck is that he had a vision of community, that we help each other,” she said.

“But the reality is, a community is a fellowship,” she continued. “You live in a little town. I have driven around here. It’s not that large. You may have pretensions... but you’re still a small town. You know when your neighbors are in trouble. You know when your friends need help.”

On the subject of stories ideas, Allison said, writing is a process that allows you to exercise your demons, but it’s not something you

want to linger on.

“A lot of fiction begins with revenge. Let’s be honest. I joined a writing group when I was 20 and the first assignment was to write about an ex-lover. It was enormously productive,” she joked.

“When people have done you harm, especially hurt your heart or your soul, you really do want to tell a story about it,” Allison said.

Allison said she understands the impulse to write from a vengeful perspective.

“Working it out is a process that will sustain you when you begin many projects. But it is not a place to stay. It is not a place from which one can do really good work. At some moment, the writer has to step above the rage, the revenge, and see deeper or the story will not go deeper. And that is the only thing I know that is a defense against the absolute act of betrayal of telling true stories about people you love,” she said.

While many writers base their stories on real life experiences, Allison said you have to be strong enough to live with the consequences of telling stories based on true events and people, especially if they are your family members.

Which brought her to the topic of her uncles, or “the gift of villains”.

“My God, they liven up fiction. My God, they give you plot,” she said. “My

God, a person with an agenda, a convicted individual that just stomps right through is a gift to a writer. I’ve know quite a few.”

She said she has stolen character detail from her family members.

“You steal everything. You steal your mother’s words, you steal your uncle’s gestures, you steal your little sister’s secrets ... yes, we steal them. And then we remake them.”

All of her uncles went to jail, she said, jokingly calling it a “family tradition.”

“Uncles are terrific. Uncles are a gift. I have a whole hell of a lot of them. I could write for the rest of this decade — no problem. Just based on my uncles,” she said. “You’ve got a really evil uncle. Oh, Lord, cursed his children, strapped his wife and wrecked his truck ... he snatched cigarettes from the convenience store when the little retarded girl worked the cash register. This is an evil man.”

“And then, about three pages in, a piece of another uncle drifts in,” she said. “He drives a truck. Now, the uncle that steals these cigarettes, he drives a Chevy. But foreword trucks are much more fun, especially flatbed trucks, where dogs ride on the back, and maybe they fall off.”

“This is how fiction happens. This is the glory of it,” she added.