

Novel 20 years in the making honors local and family histories

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Lynn Carden, a Ross County native, has published her first book based on her family's history. (Photo: Provided by Lynn Carden)

CHILLICOTHE - For the past 20 years, one local artist has been tracing the past of her family's ancestral home, working to develop the untold stories into a written history for others.

In the summer of 1996, Lynn Carden's youngest daughter, Jenny, told her that she wanted to make a documentary about the family's farmhouse known as Robertson Place. The site had housed several generations of Carden's lineage dating back to at least the mid-1700s. As the family started to film, Carden began to contemplate her personal history and the history of the home.

Now, 23 years later, Carden has published "The Women of Roberston Place: A Family Saga."

"I started to write everything down and was really driven by curiosity," Carden said.

"The catalyst was really when we found the trunk - it was like finding the remains of a past life."

Inside the trunk and around the house, the Cardens found a variety of trinkets like diaries, books, photographs, chamber pots and even a wreath made of human hair. While many of the belongings seemed trivial, to Carden, they showed insight into the women who inhabited the home.

Although Robertson Place had always been in the family, Carden only visited the home during weekends as a child. As she grew older, she set roots in Cincinnati where she worked as an artist. She followed the tradition of bringing her own children to the property for weekend getaways or for family gatherings. Growing up, Carden knew that none of her ancestors ever moved away from the home but her own mother seldom spoke of the olden days.

"I just knew their stories had to be told," Carden said. "And I wanted to bring these women's lives to the historical forefront."



"The Women of Robertson Place: A Family Saga" is a novel written by Ross County native Lynn Carden that focuses on fictionalized history of the author's family. (Photo: Provided by Lynn Carden)

While men's history is traced through tax records and property documents, women of the past are often left out of history. Carden was inspired by the items she found and began to wonder who her ancestors were. She spent the next 10 years tracing the property's lineage to the first owners and researching those who came before her.

Carden says the book was only possible because of the rich collection of primary sources such as letters and writings found in the homestead. She also worked with employees of the Ross County Historical Society to fill in the gaps of information.

When preparing to write the novel, Carden created 22 thick stacks of biographies for each of the individuals she planned to write about. One of the 14 rooms in the house was even dedicated to research and artifacts.

To stay organized, Carden created a 26-foot long timeline that was hung on the walls of the room. It spanned 24 decades and included regional and international events to serve as markers in time.

Carden, who always considered herself an artist, moved towards writing. The novel, which is her first and likely to be her only, took several years to write. The 307-page historical story is divided into five parts, categorized by era. It starts nearly 200 years ago and takes the reader to the present.

The novel starts in 1794 with pioneers who arrived in the Ohio territory with Nathaniel Massie. It tells their story of starting a farm in Twin Township and the struggles they endured. It follows history and takes the reader through time to the Civil War, Underground Railroad and the 1920s. Much of the story is local to Ross County.

"While writing this, I learned the inspiring history of women who helped shape this place," she said.



Beyond writing the novel, Carden also worked to illustrate images and provide historical references to the book. (Photo: Provided by Lynn Carden)

While the book reads like a novel, it also includes photographs of former residents and illustrations of items from the house created by Carden. She used tintypes, maps and etchings to further supplement her written work. The publication also includes citations and an index that Carden hopes will be useful to historians or sociologists.

Carden will be signing books on at 6:30 p.m. on Monday, Dec. 9 at the Northside Library branch on Buckeye Street in Chillicothe and between 1 and 3 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 14 at Wheatberry Books on South Paint Street. Carden's book illustrations will be on view at the library during the entire month of December.

"The Women of Roberston Place: A Family Saga" is available at Wheatberry Books, The History Store, The Ross County Historical Society, Adena Mansion and Gardens and the Chillicothe-Ross County Public Library System. Online ordering is available by visiting www.orange frazer.com/store.

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