

The Silkwood Inn

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The story of Priscilla's hollyhocks and the Silkwood Inn used to be taught in Illinois history as a story from a textbook and even has a poem that was set to music. Today, the Silkwood Inn is a Illinois landmark. It was built by Brazilla Silkwood in 1828 as a log cabin. Eventually it became an inn because it was halfway to St. Louis on the Shawneetown-Kaskaskia trail. Silkwood was known for his love of children, but he had none of his own. Thus, many orphaned children or nieces and nephews grew up in the Silkwood Inn because they had no where else to go. Eventually, Brazilla raised fourteen children. With the addition of the children, the inn was no longer a place of business but their home. The Silkwood Inn was home to Priscilla and the story of her hollyhocks.

One of the children of the Silkwood Inn, and perhaps the most famous was Priscilla. Brazilla Silkwood was able to travel often and he met her in Georgia, where she worked as a slave. She was a quarter black, and was called "the quadroon slave girl." Silkwood and Priscilla became friends, and several years after their introduction, in the winter of 1838, they met again in Jonesboro, Illinois. Priscilla's master had died and she was sold to a Cherokee Indian chief. Priscilla was on the Trail of Tears with her master when Silkwood found her. Brazilla recognized her immediately, and bought Priscilla from the chief for a thousand dollars in gold. Priscilla, at the sight of Silkwood, is said to have gone up to him and said, "I'm sure you don't remember me," and was ecstatic when he did. She was fourteen when she was taken to live at the Silkwood Inn.

The tale of the hollyhocks is told as follows. Just before she was sold, Priscilla took some hollyhock seeds from the bush near her plantation home in Georgia. The seeds remained her only possessions while traveling the Trail of Tears. Those same seeds stayed in her pockets until she got to the Silkwood Inn, where they were planted. The descendants of those seeds still bloom every spring in front of the Silkwood Inn. In their first years they were a reminder to Priscilla of her old home. Today the flowers are a reminder of the past. Later Priscilla was forced to move from the Silkwood Inn to the Bullock house after Brazilla died. Hollyhocks can be seen there today, the descendants of the ones she planted almost a century ago.

Taking in Priscilla was behavior common for Brazilla because, although he was not active in the anti-slavery movement, he disparaged slavery. Priscilla, until the day she died, was a member of the Mulkeytown Christian church, the first Christian church in Illinois, and continued to care for the children that Silkwood had taken in during his lifetime at the Silkwood Inn. During her lifetime, she learned to read, write, and "do sums." If Brazilla had never seen her that day, it is likely she would have become one of those who died on the Trail of Tears.

The Silkwood Inn was called "The Halfway House" because of its location on the Shawneetown-Kaskaskia trail and did serve as an inn until Brazilla began to take in orphans to raise as his own children. Around the area today, many descendants of the children Brazilla Silkwood took in live on the land he gave to them, and the hollyhocks, called "Priscilla's Hollyhocks," still bloom in front of the Silkwood Inn. [From Chloe Davis and Henderson Ruby, *Mulkeyown Memories*; Chloe Davis and Henderson Ruby, *The Silkwood Inn*; Turner Publishing, *Franklin County, Illinois*;

Joseph F. Jurich, "The Silkwood Inn," *This Is Franklin County*, (Aug. 1955); Maurice Metzger, "The Tragic Cherokee Trail of Tears," *Illinois Magazine*, (Nov, 1975); Scerial Thompson, "Land of Egypt," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, (Oct. 1955).]