

Liddy, A Child Found and Lost: A Voice Across Time

By: J. David Smith

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Abstract:

The subject of children whose physical and psychological development takes place in the wild or in isolation has long intrigued philosophers and scientists. The term "feral" has been used to refer to such children. Reports of feral children are rare. The contents of a manuscript written in 188Z therefore, provide an interesting and important insight about feral development. It describes a child who grew up under depriving and isolating circumstances. This story of a "handicapped black child" named Liddy is beautiful and sensitive. It also conveys the hopeful spirit of the woman who tried to help this child.

KEY WORDS: feral children; development; environment.

Article:

INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain once commented on difficulties involved in the socialization of boys. He proposed that they should be raised in barrels until the age of 12 and fed through an uncorked hole. The psychologist D. Hebb cited this comment in a critique of the work of Arthur Jensen on the hereditary nature of intelligence.

Suppose we have 100 boys raised in this way, with a practically identical environment. Jensen agrees that environment has some importance (20% worth?), so we must expect that the boys on emerging from the barrels will have a mean IQ well below 100. However, the variance attributable to the environment is practically zero, so on the 'analysis of variance' argument, the environment is not a factor in the low level of IQ, which is nonsense. (Hebb, 1970, p. 568)

The subject of children whose development takes place outside the usual influence of human culture has long intrigued philosophers and scientists. This is most certainly because such cases promise to shed light on some of the fundamental questions on the nature of humanity. Encountering a child who has grown up in the wild or in isolation may not only stimulate an analysis of the character of the human condition, it may also provide a piece of raw data through which to examine fundamental and profound questions: What is a human being when he/she is not socialized? Is civilization a thin veneer that when removed reveals a human beast?

The term "feral" has been used for centuries to refer both to children raised by animals and those who have grown up in isolation from other people. Actually, it has been applied to four groups of children who have developed under atypical circumstances: children raised by animals, children who have grown up alone in the wilderness, children reared in isolated circumstances with little

or no human contact, and children reared in isolating circumstances with limited and/or extremely aberrant human contact.

According to Freedman and Brown (1968), feral humans were first defined by Linneaus in his classic work in 1758 on plant and animal classification, *Systema Naturae*, Linneaus used the term feral to differentiate between human beings living in society, homo sapiens, and those who develop without contact with other people, homo ferns. He apparently based this classification model on the several accounts of children growing up with animals or in isolation that were available to him during his time. He was so struck by these accounts that he literally placed these people into a different species, they were not to be considered as people but as "wild people."

Reports of feral children are rare. From the accounts that exist, however, some interesting insights can be gleaned concerning the nature of human development. Some years ago, two of my colleagues and I examined all of the accounts of feral children we were able to find. Obviously, neither nature nor nurture is the sole or ultimate determiner of personhood. In the case of feral children, as with all people, these two forces are inseparably intertwined. Children reared by animals are not animals but neither are they fully human in a social or cultural sense. Whether reared by animals or growing up with only limited contact with other people, such children are in critical need of human socialization once they are found and placed in a cultural context. Since they have grown up belonging to no human group their humanity has not been defined. In this state they are neither Rousseau's "noble savage" nor "idiots," the term Pinel used to describe Victor, the Wild Boy of Aveyron. They are not naive or inexperienced, it is simply that their awareness, knowledge, and experiences are not those that are common to the rest of the species. At the time that they are "claimed" or "re-claimed" by society, all that may be termed as their "human potential" is waiting for the human environment to foster its growth (McNeill et al., 1984).

Having been previously interested in this topic, it was with a great deal of excitement that I made a recent discovery. While doing research in the Manuscripts Division at the University of Virginia on another project, I came upon a reference to a manuscript that was indexed as concerning a "handicapped black child." It was dated circa 1887. I asked to see the small collection in which the catalog indicated this manuscript was contained. The contents proved to be intriguing, and I believe the story is worthy of sharing.

The manuscript was written and signed by Mary Willis Minor. It is a 39-page handwritten account of a child named Liddy. The manuscript was received by the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia in May, 1984. It was sent from New Haven, Connecticut, with no return address. It is presumed by University archivists to be a gift. It was included with other materials, primarily genealogical documents assembled by Mary Willis Minor on behalf of Dr. John Staige Davis in order for his daughter, Kathleen Davis, to qualify for admission to the Colonial Dames. Both the Minor and the Davis families have been long established and prominent in Virginia.

I think that the story is beautifully and sensitively written. It speaks of Liddy's tragic childhood and ultimate fate but it also reflects Mary Willis Minor's hopeful spirit. I am honored to convey it to a wider audience.

In June 1887 I was visiting in a town in the mountains of Virginia. My brother who was deeply interested in the welfare of two unfortunate colored men who were convicted murderers, told me that there was a little colored girl in the jail, named Liddy, who had defied the whole civil authority of the county and was put in jail for the protection of the community.

I went at once to see her, and found the wildest little specimen of humanity my eyes ever rested upon. She was small for her age, and very dark, and she backed into the farthest corner of the room with the resolute look of a wild cat at bay, and quite ready to spring and use her claws.

She did not answer when addressed, but when I held out a handful of candy she crept cautiously towards me, snatched the candy, and ran back to her corner to devour it. The jailor told me she destroyed everything she could lay her hands upon, had broken every window pane in reach, and had thrown the water given her for washing upon the bed.

I heard that she had been born at the poor-house and her mother, a poor idiot, had wandered off and disappeared. She had been taken by a man in the mountains nearby, and brought up in the roughest manner. It was said she picked up stones, drove the cattle and slept in the barn.

A little while before I made Liddy's acquaintance the house of the man with whom she lived, burned down, and the owner said afterwards that Liddy set fire to it accidentally. She was sent to make fire in a stove, and finding one log she put in too long, she had pulled it out and thrown it in a closet without noticing that it was on fire. The house took fire and burned down, and some people thought she did it on purpose. I could not get at the merits of the case and would not ask the child, as it was best for her to forget the past.

After this she was sent to the poorhouse, and was made to wait on the washerwoman. She does not seem to have relished being laundrymaid, for one day when the washerwoman sent her to make a fire in the washhouse, Liddy tipped the shovel of live coals into the basket of clothes and clothes and house were consumed.

Then she was sent to jail as the safest place for her. The jailor and his wife were very kind, worthy people, and took much pains with the child. When she was bad she was switched, and when she was good the jailor's wife took her baby into the cell and her other two children, Sammy and Julia, and let them play with Liddy a while. The baby was the first person Liddy condescended to notice and she became fond of it and very proud when allowed to hold it a few minutes.

On my second visit to Liddy I found she had a companion, a pleasant looking colored girl about eighteen years old, named Sarah. I felt interested in the girl, and had some talk with her. She was apparently a gentle, well behaved creature, and I was much troubled to find that she would soon be sent to the Penitentiary for twelve months for theft, this being the 3rd offense.

At my suggestion she took Liddy in hand and by moral persuasion, and sometimes with the aid of a switch, she brought about a great change in our poor little savage. I know she was kind to Liddy for the child soon became devoted to her, and of her own accord dubbed her 'Miss Sally' and me 'Miss Marnie.'

Sarah began her training by getting the jailor to drive a row of nails in the wall, in reach of her hand and out of reach of Liddy's. To these nails she hung Liddy's playthings, such as her doll, doll's clothes, pictures, etc., for though Liddy soon showed great delight at receiving gifts, and would run eagerly forward for them, she soon grew tired of them and broke them all to pieces. A doll which my brother gave her before I made her acquaintance only survived a few minutes and was destroyed before his eyes.

After I saw Sarah's clever contrivance I gave Liddy another doll, and Sarah let Liddy play with it so long as she remained interested in it, and then took it from her and hung it on the wall. Soon Liddy began to take a pride in showing me her playthings and how nicely she had kept them, and the nails were no longer needed.

I found Sarah could read, and write too after a fashion, so I gave her a Bible and some books and papers that seemed to entertain her, and bed quilt scraps and materials to sew. Of some of these she made me a pincushion as a present. She behaved so well that the jailor's wife soon took her into the laundry, and about the building to do odd jobs, which Sarah liked very much. The jailor's wife knew something of her history and said that she was a good tempered, industrious girl, but easily influenced by bad companions.

Liddy's education was carried on by Sarah, with occasional assistance from me. She taught her letters, some hymns and Bible verses, and how to sew, after a fashion. I shall never forget the child's first attempts at holding a needle. Her fingers were all thumbs, she had not had training in the use of them, and they were stiff as so many little pokers, except so far as they had learned to bend enough to pick up the stones on the rocky slopes of the spurs of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The inside of her hands looked like tanned leather, and they were scarred and seamed in a way that made my flesh creep when I first saw them.

When she knew me better and grew fond of me, she would stand close by me and take my hand and smooth it out on my knee and then lay her own little dusky palm by it and touch first one and then the other with an expression of keen enjoyment on her face, and then remark, "Your hand is white," as if it were a brand new idea to her each time. She continued to do this for years, so that I always took off my left glove when I went to see her. I wish I could remember more of her sayings, but I was in such a painful state of anxiety as to her present and future welfare that the amusing side of the matter made little impression then.

One day as I was leaving the jail after a visit to Liddy and stopped to talk a while with the jailor's wife, I heard Liddy bawling to the jailor's children, 'You Sammy, come here and git yo cake, Julie done had hem, and if you don't come long you wont git none.' The jailor's wife told me that the child always divided the goodies I brought her with the children or anyone else who seemed to want them. Her generosity stood her in good stead. She so won the good will of a little colored boy named Willy, who was put in jail while she was there, by dividing with him, and teaching him hymns and verses, that he announced that when he left the jail he would take her home with him.

I can see them now, Willy's face at the grate of his cell, and Liddy at her grating opposite, calling out the words of hymn or text at the top of her voice. I could never feel sure that she took in much of the meaning of what we taught her. The version she gave Willy was sometimes very amusing but little calculated to enlighten him. It was better than the volleys of bad language with which she made the air so thick when first put in jail that she was placed on a floor by herself.

The switch worked wonders in that respect. When the time was out for both the children in the jail, Martha, Willy's mother, took Liddy and kept her five weeks, receiving therefore a moderate board; she was a poor hardworking creature. Liddy behaved very well there, and wept when she parted with them. There was some heart in that poor little body.

Meantime, I had written an account of Sarah's good conduct to Governor Fitzhugh Lee, and asked that her sentence might be commuted in consideration of the pains she had taken with Liddy and the change she had wrought in her, and in consequence her sentence was commuted to six months in the county jail, which term came to an end in February. My three friends, Sarah, Liddy, and Willy all gained the blessing of freedom at the same time, and a doubtful blessing it was to the first two. Willy's history I have never followed further.

In the fall of '87 I went to live at a place about twenty miles from the town where my colored friends were confined, and came up to town every two weeks to see my family, and my friends in the jail. As the time of their release approached I grew more and more anxious for their future, and was at my wits end to know how to provide for them. If Sarah remained in town she would return to her old companions, and poor Liddy to barbarism at the poorhouse where she had literally made the place too hot to hold her. To provide a home for a little person who had in her short space of life accomplished the destruction of two houses was next to an impossibility.

A family in the country near me were good enough to agree to take Sarah when she should leave the jail, and pay her small wages at first and increase them if she gave satisfaction. But, alas! When the day came, some of her bad companions got possession of her, told her I would collect and keep her wages, and persuaded her not to go to the country. Soon after I heard the police were looking for her again for some misconduct, and she disappeared. I have had reason to fear I did her as much harm as good when I prevented her going to the Penitentiary. When left to her own control she seemed utterly unable to lead a decent, respectable life.

When Liddy had been with Martha a month I heard that a colored woman named Lucy wanted to adopt a little girl. I sent for Lucy and laid the matter fully before her, and greatly to my surprise, she asked to have Liddy bound to her. I insisted she should keep the child a month, first, and see how they got on together.

So, after bidding Martha and Willy a tearful adieu, Liddy was taken to Lucy. She was very happy there, and I feel sure was well treated. She went to school and was pronounced a promising singer, but got several whippings for using bad words. Unfortunately she bragged to her schoolmates of her exploits at the poorhouse, and when Lucy questioned her, told her the whole story with great gusto — said she had set fire to the woman's basket of clothes because she was angry with her, and intimated very plainly that it was her way of getting even with people; a boast that made her homeless again.

She gave Lucy an account of her trial, and how the lawyer had told her if she did such a thing again, she would be hanged. Two men had been hanged in jail while she was there, and, though she did not see the execution, she had been inspired with a wholesome fear of hanging. She has never attempted to use fire since.

After that talk with the child Lucy told me she would be afraid to keep her, and I had to take my poor little unlucky penny back to town, to be taken to the poorhouse again. The place was nine miles from town and I could not go with her but I wrote the Superintendent that I thought he would find her improved, and I promised Liddy the reward of a red dress for good behavior.

She was evidently very reluctant to leave Lucy Jones, but she tried bravely not to cry. She thought at first that she would return to the jail, and expressed much pleasure at the prospect of seeing the jailor's wife and children. When she found she was going to the poorhouse her poor little face fell, and she asked if she might just go and see Miss Katie (the jailor's wife) and the children. As the vehicle was waiting to take her out to the poorhouse, that had to be denied, and she showed much grief in her dark little face, though she kept back the tears. As the carriage drove off with her, she forced a smile and waving her hand to me said, 'Good bye, Miss Marnie.'

For the next six months I spent a good deal of my time in writing to first one institution and then another, but to no purpose. In the fall I went to Washington to live, and could hardly believe the evidence of my senses when the Matron of an institution for colored children said she would take her if the receiving committee would agree.

I gave her a full account of poor Liddy's infirmities, and I remember distinctly the Matron's saying, 'She can do no harm here with fire, for the children's part of the home is entirely cut off from the kitchen and furnaces; she could not lay her hand on a match.'

The member of the committee to whom I repeated the tale was propitious, and the matter was settled. I felt as Atlas might have felt when the world was lifted from his shoulders.

The Superintendent of the poorhouse brought Liddy to Washington, and I met her at the B. & O. depot. After she was refreshed with some sandwiches we started off on foot that she might see something of city which was to be her home for the next five years.

She was very glad to see me and trudged by my side quite contently, asking no questions till she saw a large brick building, and then with an exclamation of delight and a beaming face she cried 'Is that the jail? Will I see Miss Katie?' As we approached the handsomer part of the city, her feet, much hampered by the unwanted luxury of being encased in shoes, moved with more and more difficulty. When we came in sight of the Capitol she stood struck still, struck dumb with its magnificence. It was with difficulty that I got her past it, and a little way down Pennsylvania Ave. to a small toy shop, where she chose a dollbaby. Then we got into a streetcar and soon reached our journey's end, where, with a promise to visit her soon, I left my little friend hugging her doll.

A few days later I got a letter from the Matron, saying she had gotten an anonymous letter saying Liddy was a barnburner and a fire fiend, and she insisted that I should remove her at once. At the same time she reproached me with having deceived her. Remembering the Matron's strong expressions as to Liddy's not being able to get at fire in the institution I was utterly bewildered and not a little dejected.

Of course I went next day to the Asylum, taking a lady-friend with me, for I was literally sick with disappointment and despair about caring for poor Liddy. We found the Matron in a very different frame of mind from what I expected. She had seen the member of the committee who had also heard my account of Liddy, and remembered her burning propensities. Between them they determined to keep the child and I had my fright for nothing.

The Matron proved to be a trump, and I can never forget her faithfulness to Liddy. I forgot to say that the day I took her to the Asylum, when the Matron asked her name in order to register her, Liddy spoke up and announced that her name was 'Sarah Elizabeth S_.' She said the man with whom she had lived in the mountains had another Sarah in his family and had called her Liddy. We were much amused, and the Matron put her name down as Sarah S_. I was rather sorry not to put in the Elizabeth, but the Matron thought two names enough, and I was too thankful to have her name entered on the book to make any difficulty. Then her age had to be put down. I thought she must be between nine and ten, but the Matron said if there was any uncertainty she had better be entered as eight, which accorded with her size and advancement, and would give her one more year of training.

I visited Liddy regularly for the next two years, and she seemed to grow and improve, the latter more slowly than the former. The Matron always had a long list of Liddy's misdemeanors to give me, and considering what she had to bear in misery from poor Liddy, I was only too glad for tier to let off steam that way. I listened patiently, with my spirits rising steadily as the end approached and there was nothing worse than 'untidyness,' 'sulks,' 'disobedience' and 'long screaming fits.' She would scream sometime for three hours without a tear in her eye. I really believe she gave the Matron more trouble than all the other children put together, and it was very praiseworthy in her to keep the child, for she could have gotten rid of her at any time, I suppose.

Each time that I saw Liddy I thought there was some improvement, and when she had been in the Asylum three or four years, they said if she continued to improve she could be bound out to some family in two years time, a thing to which she looked forward as a great promotion. She was sent about two years ago to a family in New York State, but remained but a short time. There was a change of Matrons just about that time, and I never could find out the reason of her return or how she had fared. The last time I went to see Liddy I found still another Matron. She told me that Liddy had been put in the infant part of the Asylum to help to care for the little ones sometime before, as she always seemed fond of children, and for a time did well. But one day a baby was missing and after much search they appealed to Liddy. Her reply was 'I tired of hearing him cry and I done buried him in the sand.'

Sure enough the poor little thing was found under a porch, covered up with sand but still alive. After that Liddy was pronounced 'non compos,' and sent to an Asylum for the Feebleminded in Pennsylvania. Last fall she was taken from there and placed in an Asylum near Washington.

Mary Willis Minor

COMMENT

Recently, the authors of *The Bell Curve*, the late Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1995) refocused the attention of the public on the issues of variations in intelligence and other individual differences, and heredity.

The book argues that intelligence and personality are more the result of inherited potentials and limitations than the product of environmental influence and opportunities. These authors advance an argument that essentially lays the responsibility for poverty, school failure, and other social problems at the feet of the victims. It calls for the abandonment of hope, opportunity, and dignity for millions of people.

The story of Liddy that was told by Mary Willis Minor leaves many questions unanswered. What were the origins of Liddy's disabilities? Was she damaged at birth or before? Did her disabilities, on the contrary, emerge from the isolation and desperation of her early life? These are questions that will remain unanswered. It is clear, however, that Mary Willis Minor was hopeful in her persistent attempts to help Liddy. Therein lies the critical importance of this story for those who today seek to understand and assist children and adults with developmental disabilities.

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