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## She Spoke For Those Without A Voice

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# She Spoke For Those Without A Voice

## **Abstract**

Statistically, about 50% of Adams County's history has been women's history since the dawn of time. But it can sometimes be painfully difficult to find out about the women of our county and their experiences. And as with most history, it is the troublemakers who stand out in the records. Luckily one of Adams County's greatest troublemakers, Elsie Singmaster Lewars, is easy to find in the files of the Adams County Historical Society. Mrs. Lewars had the courage to speak for those without a voice. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Gettysburg, Female Writers, Elsie Singmaster, Minority Writers, African American Literature, Adams County Historical Society

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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# She spoke for those without a voice

Statistically, about 50 percent of Adams County's history has been women's history since the dawn of time. But it can sometimes be painfully difficult to find out about the women of our county and their experiences. And as with most history, it is the troublemakers who stand out in the records. Luckily one of Adams County's greatest troublemakers, Elsie Singmaster Lewars, is easy to find in the files of the Adams County Historical Society. Mrs. Lewars had the courage to speak for those without a voice.

She was one of the area's most prolific authors, crafting a robust body of work over her 80 year long life. Her tales of Gettysburg capture some of the most enthralling small details of life in the borough in the early part of the century. She wrote her whole life under her maiden name. Though locals affectionately called her Mrs. Lewars, the world knew her simply as Elsie Singmaster.

Singmaster's vivid works of fiction centered on the maligned minorities of her age, particularly women and African Americans. In these characters, Singmaster imbued agency in fiction in ways the world at large denied it. Her women were strong and independent at a moment when America was arguing against the social and political equality of the sexes. Her African-American characters were driven and socially aware, unafraid of the

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white establishment's threats of violence and unable to fathom the irrational hatred the world expressed toward them.

In her 1926 tale, "The Fiery Cross," published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Singmaster conjured a double threat to the establishment. Her creation, an elderly black woman of Gettysburg, Old Flo, could not fathom why she should fear the Ku Klux Klan as they marched through the borough's streets. Though Flo was fiction, the event was real. The Ku Klux Klan held a massive rally and reunion in Gettysburg atop Oak Hill the previous year with hundreds of hooded minions of hate swarming the streets and marching through the Third Ward, Gettysburg's historically black district.

Into this real life event Singmaster placed her carefully crafted Flo who, over the course of interactions with the members of the hooded order, came to realize

they hate her because they fear her. Then Singmaster made the crucial turn. Old Flo chooses to panhandle in the midst of the Klansmen who, having only ever struck fear into the hearts of men and women of a darker hue, are flabbergasted by her temerity. They empty their pockets and Singmaster's Flo has her most prosperous day ever.

Over the course of her career, Singmaster crafted more than 300 short stories and 42 different novels. They were vehicles not simply for amusement or cheer, but often arguments for real social change. Singmaster loved her Gettysburg and its citizens, both real and imagined. And audiences loved her voice as well.

Today Singmaster's work is unfortunately largely forgotten, but speaks to both a nation and a town still struggling with the legacies of a war fought 150 years ago. Much of her work, many of her personal letters, and her writing notes are housed at the Adams County Historical Society. So this Women's History Month (or any month), come visit the ACHS, read some amazing tales and dig into Elsie Singmaster's legacy. Mrs. Lewars might have much to teach us from way back when.

*John M. Rudy is a volunteer researcher at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg. More information can be found at [achs-pa.org](http://achs-pa.org).*