

Olela Self Barner

As a young girl, Olela Self (nicknamed Lee) was called uppity because she responded “Hell no!” when white folk asked her “Don’t you wish you were white?” She refused to answer “Yes, ma’am” to a store manager in the rural South town where she grew up. Black and white folks alike called her crazy because she stood up for herself, to which Lee politely responded, “I’m just as important as you or anyone else.”

In a lifespan perforated by the realities of intolerance and racism, Lee learned to live in a world of ambiguity and uncertainty, all the while never failing to demonstrate compassion and respect for those under her watchful and benevolent care.

Olela Self Barner died February 26, 2010, in Oakland, California. She was 96.

Born May 23, 1913, on a sharecropper’s farm in Mansfield, Louisiana, Olela Self was one of five children born to Exie and General Self. By the age of 13, with her father ill and unable to work their leased farm, Lee left school and set about working to support her family. Thus began the pattern of labor that would dominate the majority of her life.

Leaving home first to live in Mississippi, Lee was hired to babysit a white couple’s children for five dollars a week, but quickly found herself “doing everything” including cooking, washing and ironing, while sending home her earnings to support her family.

Within a year, she would return to Louisiana, babysitting three children for a bank president, then leaving home once again, this time to Texas, always sending her meager wages back home. She was barely 15 at the time.

Lee lived by her mother’s words: the fruits of her children’s labors were their own, not to be given away for free.

One of the most important figures in Lee’s early life was her paternal great grandmother. A former slave who lived to be 110, Rachel Hardin imparted to Lee what would quickly develop into a love of babies and strong caregiving skills.

Lee also credited another childhood experience as nurturing her love of caring for babies and children. While she loved attending Sunday school as a child, she disliked church services because they seemed to her long-winded and verbose. And the sermons were drowned out, as Lee put it, by “a lot of women shoutin’ and carryin’ on because they forgot to say their night prayers.” Happier to be outside, Lee became the official babysitter for parents attending services.

“Everybody left their babies on quilts outside the church,” she said. “I’d put the babies in the shade by the wagons and mules, and sit there telling the older children stories. All the kids were out there with me.”

In 1932, at the age of nineteen, Lee gave birth in Louisiana to her only child, a daughter, whom she named Vertis Lorraine. Lee openly declined to discuss her child’s father, but she would offer thoughts on marriage. She harkened back to conversations with her father who told Lee that during the slave period, people did not marry. General told her the reasons black folk decided not to marry, post emancipation, could be traced back to when her ancestors were forbidden to choose their cohorts. Lee’s observations

regarding marriage offered an alternative perspective on attitudes toward marital unions in post-Civil War black communities, a custom that continued into the twentieth century.

Spending the early years of the Depression in the South performing domestic and childcare work, Lee chose to migrate to California in 1937 at age 22, sadly leaving her daughter Vertis behind. Exie would not allow her to take Vertis out west until Lee was established and had a place to live.

After four long years living in her aunt's boarding house in Oakland, cooking for boarders and performing "day work" on the outside which paid barely a dollar an hour, Lee eventually found more permanent employment. In 1939, she returned to Louisiana, then brought Vertis back to California.

By 1943, Lee and her daughter were living in a one-bedroom apartment in the San Francisco Bay community of Richmond where Lee worked the graveyard shift at the shipyards during World War II, knocking scale off welds. During this period, her parents moved to California, initially living with Lee and Vertis in their small, cramped apartment. With the war's end, employment at the shipyards terminated and Lee returned to domestic work to support herself and her daughter.

Although she married in 1956, Lee and Mr. Barner--she would only refer to her husband by his surname--eventually separated. She continued to support herself through domestic work well into her sixties. Employment during these years included raising the children of two separate families from infancy to adulthood. Employed in a generational continuum of taking care of white children, Lee eventually ended up working for one of the women she raised from infancy.

In the early 1960s, Lee began performing domestic work for Bertha Toy in Alameda, California. Over the years, their relationship evolved into a deep friendship, with Lee ultimately becoming companion and caregiver to Mrs. Toy until her death in 1974. At this point, Lee retired from domestic-related service.

A faithful and active member of the Amos Temple C.M.E. Church in Oakland, California, Lee continued to care for others through her church duties. It was also not uncommon for her to care for ailing family members or help her nieces and grandchildren with their newborn babies.

Her death leaves behind Edna and David Barner (Mr. Barner's son and daughter-in-law), seven grandchildren, numerous great grandchildren and many nieces, nephews, friends and her church family.