

The Washington Post

A Triumph in a Garage

Mayme Clayton's Trove of Black History Gathers Dust, and Momentum

By William Booth
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, December 13, 2006; C01

LOS ANGELES

Working entirely on her own, spending her librarian's salary and later her Social Security checks, Mayme Clayton amassed one of the finest collections of African American history in the world -- and stored it in her garage.

"I got to warn you, it's scary in here." This is Mayme's son, Avery Clayton, talking. He's jiggling his keys and opening the door. He reaches, finds the light switch, clicks. Inside? It is amazing .

"Originally," Avery apologizes, "there were tables and chairs, like a library, and you could sit down. But as you can see -- "

The roof sags, it may leak. There are books, floor to ceiling on shelves, but the passages between the stacks are blocked, with storage cabinets and film cases and cardboard boxes overflowing with photographs, journals, cartoons, correspondence, playbills, magazines, all dusted with a soft fungal dander. Mold.

The old garage appears held together by its peeling paint, out in an overgrown garden, behind a bungalow in a modest neighborhood. For a moment, before the eye begins to settle on the antique book spines in the gloomy light, the garage looks like a hoarder's hiding place, ready for a bulldozer and a trip to the city dump. "She was a hoarder, she was," Avery says. "But she was a hoarder with a vision."

That is the opinion of the experts, too. "She has everything," says Sue Hodson, curator of literary manuscripts at the prestigious Huntington Library east of Los Angeles. "This is probably the finest collection of African American literature, manuscripts, film and ephemera in private hands. It is just staggering. It is just superior in every way."

Hodson says that when the Mayme Clayton Collection is moved, secured, cleaned and catalogued, it will be among the top such archives in the United States, alongside the Vivian G. Harsh Collection at the Chicago Public Library and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library. (The Schomburg's director, Howard Dotson, described the Clayton holdings as "major and significant" in the Los Angeles Times.)

Avery, a retired art teacher who is now the force behind preserving his mother's legacy, says this is "only a fraction of the collection." The rest of the Claytonia is scattered in storage rooms around Los Angeles and in a climate-controlled vault at a film warehouse, which protects its vast cinema archive of more than 1,700 titles and represents the largest pre-1959 black film collection in the world, including rare silent reels.

Many people may forget that alongside white cinema was its black counterpart, "race movies" seen in some 600 African American theaters and starring the likes of Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Katherine Dunham and Sammy Davis Jr. The most prolific director and producer was Oscar Micheaux, and Clayton found original prints of many of his films, including the silent movie "Body and Soul," which introduced Paul Robeson to the screen, and "The Exile," Micheaux's first talkie, made in 1931.

By the time she died in October, at age 83 of pancreatic cancer ("I've got a so-so body with a go-go mind," she said in her later years), Mayme Clayton amassed almost 30,000 rare, first-edition and out-of-print books. She was especially strong on the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, obtaining first editions and correspondence from Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston.

Her trove includes the first book published in America by an author of African descent, Phillis Wheatley's "Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral," dated 1773, when she was a slave in Boston. Clayton has the only known copy signed by the author; she paid \$600 for it in 1972, far more than she usually spent. Her collecting style was more bargain basement than Sotheby's auction. She'd prowl used bookstores, flea markets, estate sales. When old people died, she'd get into their attics.

In the garage, it still feels like a treasure hunt. There are the first issues of Ebony magazine (She picked up Vol. 1, No. 1, for a dime). A book about Denzel Washington next to "The Negro in Tennessee: 1865 to 1880." There's a "How to Box" manual by Joe Louis lying on a box of Jim Crow cartoons with the label "Negro Jokes" beneath the original movie poster for "Porgy and Bess."

"Oh, that's the one that hung at the premiere at the Orpheum Theatre in New York," says Avery. "Here, look at this."

His mother possessed a complete set of the first abolitionist journal in America, "The African Repository," dated 1830 to 1845. Among the manuscripts, there is an emphasis on paper that predates the Civil War: travel passes and bills of sale for slaves, and plantation inventories.

Avery describes one dated 1790. "They had 408 slaves in the inventory, along with the livestock, the chickens and cows and whatnot. For the slaves, it lists occupation. Field hand. House worker. Blacksmith. Distiller. You know the number one job? Breeding stock. Sixty-two women. You can read all about slavery, but when you hold a document like that in your hand, that is powerful."

In an interview with NPR, Mayme Clayton said, "Unless you know where you've been, you really don't know where you're going." She was born in Van Buren, Ark., and went to New York at age 21 to work as a model and a photographer's assistant, which is where she met her husband, a barber 16 years her senior who brought her back to Los Angeles, and the little house and its garage in the West Adams neighborhood where she lived at the time of her death. Clayton was known as competitive golfer, a quiet force in the community, an obsessive collector/stacker/finder/keeper who enjoyed e-mailing bawdy jokes. She went on to get her master's and doctoral degrees, spending most of her career as a librarian at the University of Southern California and UCLA; she began her

collecting because the universities didn't seem that interested in African American artifacts.

Avery Clayton remembers his mother collecting right until the very end. "She bought a poster for a thousand dollars a few months before her transition and I still don't know where she got the money," he says. It was for a black cowboy movie, a popular subgenre, called "The Bronze Buckaroo."

Clayton has assembled a robust group of volunteers and local politicians for the task at hand. He needs to raise \$7 million, but doesn't seem too worried. Culver City has already leased him a 24,000-square-foot former courthouse (for a dollar a year), and various universities will provide technical help to curate and organize the pieces. The Mayme Clayton Collection, Avery says, will be out of the garage in weeks. "Before the winter rains," he promises.

Julie Page, head of the preservation department at the University of California at San Diego library, is managing the move, under a federally funded program to save endangered collections. The garage makes her nervous. "I just can't wait to get it all out of there. That collection really needs to be in a secure, safe environment." It is time.