

The Many Faces Of Grace Halsell

By William Gildea

Grace Halsell doesn't look tough enough to have done what she has done.

She is 52 years old, single, seemingly demure, almost frail. She speaks softly and responds with a "my goodness" to a question she considers embarrassing. She looks as though she might be content puttering in her Northwest apartment, venturing occasionally to the Safeway or Garfinckel's.

Appearances deceive.

She quit a writing job in 1968 in Lyndon Johnson's White House, took drugs to turn her skin black, then posed as a black in Harlem and Mississippi. Working as a domestic in Mississippi, she says, she was almost raped by the head of the household, but was tough enough to fight him

She went to stay a year with Navajo Indians in the Southwest, living in a dirt-floored, mud hogan without windows or furniture. Changing her hair and dress and posing as Bessie Yellowhair, she did household chores for a California family. Here she says her

mind was assaulted; neighbors were invited in to gawk at her.

Most recently she lived with an isolated, ancient, and remarkably robust people in the Andes of southern Ecuador. Many were centenarians. One man 132 years old, she relates, was interested in her romantically. Other Americans, finding conditions there deplorable, got sick; she says she didn't.

She says she went to Harlem and Mississippi and the Indian reservation so she could tell white Americans what it is like to be black or red, to Ecuador so she could help others lead a more productive and happier life in later years.

She's written a book about each experience: "Soul Sister," which sold more than 1 million copies in paperback; "Bessie Yellowhair," and "Los Viejos, Secrets of Long Life from the Sacred Valley," published last week. She also wrote "Black/White Sex."

Her methods have not set well with everyone, including some reviewers.

"I am instantly repulsed by the au-



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HALSELL, From B1

...dacity of Miss Halsell, after a few months of a half-masquerade, to call herself "soul sister," a black reviewer wrote. "This is not only an affront, it is foolish."

"But she has no qualms about her poses as a black or an Indian. She says she doesn't think she is posing."

"I feel I'm all these things," she says. "There's no one can keep me from saying I feel black, I feel Indian, I feel Jewish, I feel Christian. I'm big enough for all these things. I encompass all these things. This is my whole effort, trying to get away from saying I'm one dogma."

"My search has always been to live in a bigger world—and always a search to know yourself."

The "search" has led her around the world.

It began as she was growing up in Lubbock, Tex. She inherited from her father a desire to write—and to change lifestyles.

The New York Times headlined his obituary this way in 1957: "Harry H. Halsell, 96, Indian Fighter, Texas Rancher Who Once Outfoxed Geronimo Dies—Was Author of 9 Books."

Grace Halsell says her father was once very rich, but when she knew him he was impoverished.

"Daddy had been a rancher, one of the, I guess you would say, cattle kings of

Texas. He acquired a number of ranches and property. He also owned land in Oklahoma. This was in the days when you staked it out and it was yours—thousands and thousands of acres.

"When he was 50, he had a change of lifestyle. He was more interested in people than cows. He sort of turned his back on possessions. He left all his fortune with his family and started new with mother. They had six children. I'm the youngest."

"I grew up poor, we grew up poor during the Depression, dirt poor. Daddy had a garden, he kept a cow. He wrote books when he was 60, 70, 80. He urged me to travel. He always said 'take advantage.'"

She worked as a reporter for two Texas papers and was married for four years. "I wanted to travel overseas and around the world, and it meant giving up marriage," she wrote in "Soul Sister."

"So she traveled and continued her "search," living for long stretches in Peru, Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe; then to Washington, where she has lived 12 years, as a correspondent for another Texas paper, and to the White House as a writer.

She says President Johnson asked: "How old are you? Are you married? Are you in love? Is the reason you are not married that you put your career over marriage? You're a little overweight, aren't you?"

"No," I said, "I think I'm just right."

I had just gotten down to 118. I thought I was just doing great."

The questions didn't offend her. "I enjoyed being a man just like I enjoy very much being a woman. Erazo (the 132-year-old mountain man in her latest book) still enjoyed being a man, flirting with me, as Johnson might have. That adds zest, sparkle, color, texture. I hope we don't lose that."

She gave up "a big salary, a nice prestigious job" at the White House after three years and managed to get her skin black in the manner of her inspiration, John Howard Griffin, who wrote "Black Like Me."

She agrees with those who've told her she might have gotten herself killed in her roles of black or Indian. "It just makes me treasure each day as a bonus, an extra gift. But I think I'm ready to die, you see."

In her "bonus" existence, she is spending time at a "health center" in Southern California, from which will come still another book, this one about "bringing personal concern back into medicine."

She says she wants "to live naturally, as naturally as I can, joyously. I want to be loving and lovable."

She eats no meat, walks a lot, has bought a bicycle and rides it, and meditates. She's trying to live like the old mountain people of Ecuador—as much as one can do that in Washington.