NOTABLE AMERICAN WOMEN

A Biographical Dictionary

Completing the Twentieth Century

Susan Ware, *Editor*

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The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press
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McLean

McLEAN, Barbara. November 16, 1903–March 28, 1996. Film editor.

Barbara McLean, one of only two people ever to be nominated seven times for an Academy Award for film editing, started learning her trade in grade school. She was born in Palisades Park, New Jersey, the daughter of Charles Pollut (some sources list his name as Anton Pollu), the owner of a film laboratory. Nothing is known about her mother or any siblings. During her breaks from school, young Barbara would work in the lab, patching together release prints of the films of the adjacent E. K. Lincoln studio.

In 1924 she married J. Gordon McLean, a projectionist and later a cameraman, and they moved to Los Angeles. The couple had no children and divorced in the late forties. Based on her lab experience, McLean got a job at Fox studios, then moved to First National and became an assistant editor. She worked on films during the transition from silent to sound films both at First National and later at United Artists, where she helped cut MARY PICKFORD's first talkies.

As an assistant to Alan McNeil, she worked on the first films of a new company called Twentieth Century, which was releasing its films through United Artists. Her first solo credit was *Gallant Lady* (1933), and soon she was cutting several pictures a year for Twentieth Century. McLean received her first Academy Award nomination for *Les Miserables* (1935). A 1945 article in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that she was one of only eight women film editors in the industry in her time.

In 1935, Twentieth Century merged with the older Fox company to become Twentieth Century Fox. By then, her work had impressed Darryl F. Zanuck, the head of the studio, and she became his chief cutter. Zanuck's focus was on telling stories on film, and McLean's editing kept the stories flowing. In the script for *Jesse James* (1939), the train robbery scene has several amusing diversions that McLean cut out of the film to keep the scene moving. The humor of the scene is still there, but there is not one shot in the sequence that is not needed to tell the story.

Her skill as a film editor can be seen in the variety of films she cut in the 1940s. Her credits include the musical *Down Argentine Way* (1940), the war film *A Yank in the RAF* (1941), the pirate movie *The Black Swan* (1942), and the religious picture *The Song of Bernadette* (1943). For all her focus on keeping the narrative moving, McLean's editing could dazzle if called for. In *A Bell for Adano* (1945), she took material director Henry King shot on the return of the Italian POWs to their village and put it together with such a sure sense of emotion that when she cut at exactly the right moment to King's overhead shot of the prisoners and villagers coming together in the square, the cut was more heart-stopping than conventional close-ups would have been. Part of her success in this scene, and she felt as a film editor in general, came from having studied music as a child. Due to her sense of rhythm, she could cut the numbers in a musical just by the visuals alone, without having to listen to the music and vocal sound tracks.

Because of Zanuck's faith in her, McLean's suggestions and requests were followed. She frequently asked directors to shoot material, especially close-ups, to help her improve the rhythm of the scene. Directors too often wanted to leave the scene in just the master shot, but she wanted shots to cut in if necessary. Not that she did not hold on a long take if it worked. In *12 O'Clock High* (1949), she lets a one-take scene King had shot run nearly five and a half minutes without a cut. She also discussed with Fred Sersen, the studio special effects man, what shots were needed for special effects sequences. Sersen said, "If we put Bobbie [her nickname] on this picture, we'll save a lot of money." McLean helped Sersen prepare the material for his special effects shots for such films as *The Rains Came* (1939) and *Wilson* (1944). On the latter, she also had to cut down the enormous amount of footage shot of the 1912 Democratic convention into a workable sequence, and she condensed several bill-signing scenes into montage sequences. She won her only Oscar for her work on *Wilson*.

She also made suggestions on casting, helping King convince Zanuck that young Tyrone Power could become a star. She was also not afraid to voice her opinion about the costumes. She was the only woman in the projection room, but neither she nor Zanuck saw her simply as representative of the female audience, although she believed she brought her "woman's" point of view as part of their everyday discussions. Frequently Zanuck and others would disagree with her, and she would say, "I don't care. Don't ask me. If you're going to ask me, then listen to me." They did.

McLean worked closely with other directors on the lot. King not only wanted her to cut all his pictures (she cut twenty-nine of his), but had her come down to the set to discuss which shots were needed and which were not, as did Edmund Goulding. Elia Kazan was dazzled when McLean took several shots of the peasants beating rocks to warn of the danger to Zapata in *Viva Zapata!* (1952), duplicated them, reversed them, and built a scene into a sequence. Kazan said, "Where in the hell did you get all that film?"

In 1951 McLean married Henry King's longtime assistant director and later a director himself, Robert D. Webb. She was the co-producer on his 1955 film *Seven Cities of Gold* and associate pro-

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ducer on his 1956 film *On the Threshold of Space.* The marriage lasted until Webb's death in 1990.

McLean was made the chief of Fox's editing division in 1949, a job title that simply confirmed her status as the top editor on the lot. Her editing credits after 1949 include the classic western *The Gunfighter* (1950); *All About Eve* (1950, her last Academy Award nomination); *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952); the first CinemaScope movie, *The Robe* (1953); and *Niagara* (1953), in which she was forced by the censors to use the less provocative long take of MARILYN MONROE walking away from the camera. In 1960 McLean was made head of the feature editorial department, a job that involved her in more administrative details. She retired from the studio in 1969 and died in 1996 in Newport Beach, California, at the age of ninety-two.

Bibliography: There is not yet a biography of Barbara McLean. Ally Acker's *Reel Women* (1991) contains a brief biographical sketch of her. Sam Staggs's *All About "All About Eve"* (2000) is one of the few "making of" books that actually has a section on the editing of a film, and it presents a nice portrait of McLean at work, giving a flavor of her personality. Mel Gussow's biography of Darryl Zanuck, *Don't Say Yes until I Finish Talking* (1971), has only a few references to McLean, as does George F. Custen's *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood* (1997). In David Shepard and Ted Perry's collected oral history interviews with Henry King, *Henry King Director: From Silents to 'Scope* (1995), King does discuss his working relationship with McLean. *Elia Kazan: A Life* (1988) mentions the "rock sequence" in *Viva Zapata!* but Kazan only says that Anthony Quinn suggested the action; there is no mention of what McLean did in the editing room. An extensive oral history interview with McLean was done by the author at the American Film Institute in 1970; this was the source of information in Acker's, Staggs's, and Custen's books, as well as for the quotes in this essay. Obituaries appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 2, 1996, and the *New York Times* on April 7, 1996.

TOM STEMPEL

McNEILL, Bertha Clay. November 12, 1887–September 21, 1979. Peace activist, educator.

Bertha McNeill dedicated her life to improving race relations, furthering blacks' education, and working for peace and international understanding. Like the African American club women and internationalists who came before her, including MARY CHURCH TERRELL and Addie Hunton, McNeill worked on all of these concerns simultaneously because she believed that improving race relations at home created the climate for world peace.

Bertha McNeill was born in Southport, North Carolina, the eighth child of Lucy A. Reaves and Henry C. McNeill. Little is known about her family or upbringing. For her early education she attended Gregory Normal Institute in Wilmington, North Carolina, which had been founded by the American Missionary Association. As a young woman she moved to Washington, D.C., and attended Howard University, graduating in 1908. McNeill undertook graduate work at Columbia University and the University of Chicago, and later earned a master's degree in English from Catholic University in 1945.

Reflecting the strong tradition of middle-class black women's dedication to personal and community development through maintaining and improving educational institutions, McNeill worked as a teacher in traditional black institutions and helped create new black educational resources. In Washington she taught English and journalism at the famous M Street School, which later became Dunbar High School, named after black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. After retiring from Dunbar in 1957, McNeill taught as a visiting professor of English at Howard University.

Bertha McNeill played a strong role in maintaining educational associations for African American women. In April 1910 she joined other African American women leaders in education from the Washington, D.C., area, among them Mary Church Terrell, Dr. Sara Brown, Mary Cromwell, and Dr. Georgianna Simpson, in founding the College Alumnae Club. In 1923 the group expanded the organization and by 1924 incorporated it as a national organization, renaming it the National Association of College Women (NACW) (it later became the National Association of University Women). LUCY DIGGS SLOWE, dean of Howard University, became the NACW's first national president. McNeill also served as a charter member of the Howard University Women's Club and was a fifty-year member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Next to education, working for peace played the most important role in McNeill's life. A longstanding member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), she joined the organization in the 1930s. McNeill served the organization in various executive capacities and represented WILPF at four international congresses. She continued the work of linking African American causes to the work for world peace and bringing the talents and insights of African American women to the cause of peace.

In WILPF her worked spanned the local, national, and international scenes. In 1935 Bertha McNeill became the chair of WILPF's Interracial Committee, which had been directed by prominent black club woman and peace activist Addie Hunton since 1928. In December 1937 the committee's name changed to the Committee on Minorities and Race Relations and its purpose ex-