

In search of Lucile

By Erika Usui



LARRY HARWOOD

Maybe it was her strong determination that led her to become the first African American woman to graduate from CU-Boulder during a time of intense racism and discrimination against women.

Maybe it was her unwavering willpower to pursue German as a major in the aftermath of World War I, when things German weren't popular in the United States.

Maybe it was her I-know-what-I-want attitude that made her buck every tradition that stood in her way.

Whatever it was, there's just something about Lucile Berkeley Buchanan (A&S'18) that made Polly McLean, associate professor of journalism and director of women and gender studies, embark on a five-year search to uncover Buchanan's life. There's something about Buchanan that intrigues people, makes them immediately drop whatever they're doing to listen to McLean whenever she starts talking about her quest.

It's June 13, 1884. On the second floor of an old mule barn in the town of Barnum southwest

of Denver, emancipated slaves James Fenton Buchanan and Sarah Lavinia Buchanan have their sixth child, the first child to be born since the couple left the Virginia plantations where they worked before being freed. The girl is named Lucy Berkeley Buchanan, oddly taking on as her middle name the surname of Sarah's biological father, her former owner.

The little girl grows up to be an educationally ambitious woman who enrolls at CU in her early 30s. Her interests are in cultures and languages of the world, and she studies German, Greek

and Italian. She earns high grades in Platonian *apology* and *critico*, Von Scheffel's *Ekkehard*, Schiller's *Wallenstein* and Cicerian essays, with mostly As and Bs marking her transcript.

It's 1918 and Buchanan, according to her niece, is in her cap and gown ready to march with her graduating class to pick up her CU diploma. Before her turn to cross the Macky stage, a white woman hands Lucy her diploma and tells her to sit still. The woman crosses the stage when Lucy's name is announced as a graduate. Such was life for an African American in those days.

Lucy spent the rest of her working life teaching in five states — Colorado, Arkansas, Illinois, North Carolina and Missouri — making frequent trips back to Colorado to further her education at universities around the state. She also attended classes at the University of Chicago.

On Nov. 10, 1989, Buchanan passed away at the age of 105. She is buried in an unmarked grave at Denver's Fairmont Cemetery, with a benefactor, Fred Walsen (Jour'39), later placing her name on a tombstone. Instead of "Lucy Berkeley Buchanan," though, the nameplate reads "Lucile Berkeley Buchanan." Sometime during the 105 years, Buchanan had changed her name from Lucy to Lucile.

g In her office inside the Hazel Gates Woodruff Cottage, McLean, winner of the 2007 Robert Stearns Award, peers at black-and-white photos and tries to read faded letters addressed to "Miss Buchanan" she found after talking to a multitude of people and walking past many a "beware of dog" sign. Since coming across Buchanan's name in her "Historical and Contemporary Issues of Black Women" course in fall 2001, McLean has been researching tirelessly to piece together the puzzles of her unusual life.

"People don't want Lucile to be forgotten," says Michelle Miles, a journalism doctoral student who has been helping McLean track Buchanan's life. "She



was swept under the rug for a long time but once people start learning about her, they don't want her to stay a footnote. The project for me — and everyone else — is to bring history alive and be a part of making the record clear and correct."

McLean's quest took off at the CU Heritage Center, where she found out that Buchanan was the first African American female to graduate from CU. Documents led McLean to the former Buchanan home in Denver where the current resident, as McLean recalls, greeted her wearing only grey sweatpants with the price tag still on. He opened the door to the century-old home and, after hearing McLean's story, generously donated a framed photo of Buchanan that had long remained in the home.

McLean's next step was to hire a genealogy detective to track down the two people who had originally bought the Denver home from Buchanan.

Once in contact with the two former homeowners, McLean and Miles discovered both had kept some of Buchanan's former possessions, which were in an old steamer trunk collecting dust. After much discussion with the two, Buchanan's personal possessions became McLean's to keep. Included were love letters, family portraits, funeral record books and copies of first-edition texts of American classics such as W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folks* from 1903.

Meanwhile, McLean secured an Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program grant from CU to take two undergraduate students on the road with her to research more of Buchanan's history. She used the first grant to go with Emma Goodman (WomSt, PolSci'07) to Chicago to learn about Buchanan's life after CU, where she had been a public school teacher for over 10 years. McLean also went with Shea Hasan (Jour'06) to Virginia, where they visited the two

Buchanan's parents, freed slaves, purchased five lots of land in Denver from legendary showman P.T. Barnum. Her father James built their home with his own hands. He also defeated a white man in an election for street commissioner. Lucile, left, inherited her parent's drive as she rose above the discrimination of the time.



LARRY HARWOOD

Though Polly McLean has already spent more than five years figuring out Buchanan's life, portraits, school transcripts and countless records still perplex the researcher as she keeps piecing together clues to complete Buchanan's extraordinary story. Note the upside down motorboard, which has Buchanan's initials, LBB.


plantations where Buchanan's parents had been slaves.

The quest also led to Los Angeles, where McLean and Miles searched for Buchanan's living relatives. McLean eventually located one elderly niece.


*T*he culmination of the research will be a book. Another ongoing project is an endowed scholarship, which sociology professor Joanne Belknap kick-started with a \$5,000 donation. Four students intrigued by Buchanan's extraordinary story — Miriam Barrere (WomSt'07), Keira Stearns (WomSt'07), Kara Stewart (Anth, WomSt'07) and Eliza Williamson (WomSt, Span'07) — are fundraising to collect \$20,000 more which will enable the women and gender studies program to create an endowed scholarship.

Gazing at Buchanan's graduation gown from 1918, McLean says Buchanan's story is inspiring to her because of the legacy Buchanan left as a strong, ambitious African American woman who set high standards for women of color.

But Buchanan's story touches different people for different reasons, McLean says.

"Everywhere I go, people drop whatever they're doing to help out with this research," she says. "At first I thought, 'How do I start to put together the life of someone who has already passed and try to find out what she did in a lifespan of 105 years?' But there's just something about Lucile. For me, it's her human spirit. She simply must live on." 

Erika Usui is a student assistant with the Coloradan and a junior majoring in journalism. A native of Okinawa, Japan, she has a strong interest in the world's varied cultures.

 *To contribute to the Lucile Berkeley Buchanan Endowed Scholarship, give online at www.cufund.org/giveonline or mail your donation to the CU Foundation, Gift Processing, P.O. Box 17126, Denver, CO 80217-0126. Make checks payable to the CU Foundation for the Lucile Berkeley Buchanan Scholarship, Women & Gender Studies Program.*