

Letters from Miriam ~ this article started out as "Mush-roaming with Miriam" , but to get a different perspective on our long journey together, I began to reread some of the many letters that she had written to me over the years..... The earliest "correspondence" that I could find from her was a hastily scribbled phone message in pencil on the back of an envelope dated 3/17/74....

"Miriam Rice ~
Mushroom
Leaving
At noon
Drop at post office
~ Shaggy mane"

What this little "haiku" really meant was that Miriam had persuaded the Postman from Mendocino to hand carry a shoebox with a carefully wrapped mushroom (the "shaggy mane"), in his mail truck, 30 miles down the road, with who knows how many mailbox stops along the way, to be delivered to the Post Mistress in Philo. The Post Mistress was then to call me up at El Ranch Navarro, (up above and across the raging winter floodwaters of the Navarro River) and tell me to come get some smelly mushroom that just arrived in a shoebox! That meant hiking down a rainy mile to the "swinging bridge" (a 75' swinging suspension bridge on cables with wooden planks, a few of which were missing), and then once on the other side, high-tailing it down another $\frac{1}{2}$ mile to the Post Office for the precious cargo, and then returning home again across the bridge, etc. to sit down and draw this lovely 8" tall mushroom the "Shaggy Mane" (*Coprinus comatus*) - which deliquesces to become **black ink** as it matures ... So, you can imagine my haste! I managed to get one drawing done, and then 2 others, each of the various stages of its self-destruction, and then I think I did a disappointing dye with the remains - which may have made a nice ink in colonial times, but produced only a warm beige hue as a dye on wool... However it is supposed to be a great edible mushroom in its pristine early form, though not to be eaten with alcohol... [\(insert drawing of Shaggy Mane mushroom?\)](#)

I think I first met Miriam C. Rice in 1973. I don't remember what day or even in which month it was when Robert and Christine Thresh of Thresh Publications, drove me up the long winding road from Santa Rosa to Mendocino, CA to finally meet Miriam C. Rice and her husband Ray, in their little dark red house with white trim overlooking the Mendocino Headlands. We were to discuss illustrations for her new little groundbreaking book about mushroom dyes to be called: "**Let's Try Mushrooms for Color**"..... and it was the beginning of what would be a warm and lively friendship which would span almost 37 years.

As I look back at those illustrations now, it seems as if every mushroom drawing for her first book (and some of those in the succeeding ones) had some

sort of escapade attached to it ~ so many adventures with Miriam, anecdotal, memorable... She used to drive along the back roads in Mendocino with her eyes searching the side of the road for mushrooms, able to spot a *Dermocybe phoenicea* at 20 yards and be out of the car and have it picked while barely slowing down - I swear - or at least so it seemed to me at the time! Many others were chronicled in our letters back and forth, and especially her magical discoveries of those mushrooms that produced the rose-reds, (in which miniscule dried pieces of cooked mushroom were scraped off of the side of a dyepot and mailed to a mycology professor (Susan Libonati-Barnes) for identification under the microscope. The mushrooms were keyed out to the genus of "Cortinarius" by the size and shape of the infinitesimally small spores!) - That set off a wild search for all of those little brown mushrooms with red anthraquinone pigments both here in the US and by mycologist friends Carla and Erik Sundström in Sweden.

To reread many of the letters between all of us during those days of discovery is to relive the excitement of the Quest, the pursuit of the Holy Grails of Color. Miriam loved to share - her door was always open to any and all. Both she and Ray were generous and hospitable with their time and boundless energy. And of course there were letters from all over the world to Miriam that she patiently answered, - questions about mushrooms, fibers, exciting discoveries shared, that eventually came to a wonderful fruition in the formation of the "International Fungi & Fibre Symposia & Exhibitions" to be held every two years by fiber artists in different countries worldwide, and then in the formation of the "International Mushroom Dye Institute", which Miriam began with the hope of promoting the use of mushrooms as safe, natural dyes as an alternative to potentially harmful chemical dyes.

Born in 1918, in Massachusetts, Miriam pursued the study of sculpture at a young age, as an artist-in-residence at Yaddo, in Sarasota Springs, NY, and studying later at the Art Students League. She continued her primary work as a sculptor throughout her life, though Miriam's creative endeavors later expanded her passion for color through batik and woodblock printing, and it was in her quest for some more "natural" sources of inks that led her into the fascinating world of natural dyes, and to teach what she called "garbage dyeing" (onion skins, carrot tops and beet skins) in a children's art class at the Mendocino Art Center. And one day she threw a handful of little yellow mushrooms into a dyepot and, as we say, "the rest is History...." (See Turkey Red Journal, Volume 14, Issue 1, Fall 2008 for a detailed history of Miriam's mushroom dyes/papermaking/pigments and Myco-Stix projects over 40 years!)

Miriam spoke and hand-wrote her letters with an elegance and grace that is almost non-existent in this today's texting-emailing-facebooking world ... to read her words again is to hear her Voice, to share her exuberance, and to delight in her constant

daily discoveries over the dyepot... whether it came from her genteel upbringing, her family background, her love of literature - or all of those factors, I have yet to discover, but there it was.... So that when a few well-intentioned editors suggested "rewriting and updating" her latest manuscript, I insisted "Absolutely Not" - it is HER Voice that speaks through those pages, every word, and no one else...

In rereading her letters I can hear her merry laughter again, often at herself, and in the delights and mysteries of the fungal color feast. If the phone rang after 10pm I know it could only be Miriam with some new tidbit to share that could not, would not wait for morning's light - How I miss those late night phone calls... Only now am I able to fully grieve over the loss of her almost daily presence in my life.

But it wasn't until her memorial gathering on October 17th, 2010, that I fully began to realize that with all of the richness I had in her friendship over the years I only knew a very tiny part of her - only one small but bright aspect of this glimmering many faceted woman.... Everyone else had similar engaging reminiscences and stories without mushrooms! To hear other folks of all ages speak, who as children had been her students in many of the children's art classes she taught, whose mothers had been her bosom friends and confidantes, poets she inspired to publish, to name just a few, was to see and embrace the universal woman, feminist, and mother to us all that she was.

Thank you, Miriam!