Book Review

Remembering Lucile:
A Virginia Family’s Rise from Slavery
and a Legacy Forged a Mile High
By Polly E. Bugros McLean
University Press of Colorado (2018)
309 pages, notes, index, and photographs.
ISBN: 978-1-60732-824-7 (cloth),
ISBN: 978-1-60732-825-4 (ebook)

Reviewed by Virginia McConnell Simmons

WHEN LUCILE GRADUATED in 1918 from the University of Colorado, her picture was not in the yearbook and she did not attend the commencement ceremonies, but she does appear in photographs with groups of black friends who shared extracurricular interests at the university and in the town of Boulder. Clearly, she was sociable and engaged, as photographs in McLean’s book attest. When she died in 1989, the Rocky Mountain News stated that Lucile Berkeley Buchanan was CU’s first black female graduate, although the University itself had never felt obliged to mention the fact previously.

For Lucile’s family the journey begins on two plantations in Virginia, where the interactions of owners and slaves, including sexual abuse, are supported by the author’s verified facts. The indefatigable research of Polly McLean, head of media studies at CU in Boulder, also provides in detail the life of the Buchanans in Denver, describing activities of middle class black families with information that too often is ignored in the city’s social histories.

Remembering Lucile is primarily the biography of one gifted African American woman. She was born in 1884 in Denver and lived in the same red brick home on Raleigh Street in Denver for the majority of her life. As a girl, she was the star of the family – tall, attractive, ambitious. The only African American in her class at Colorado State Normal School, she earned her teaching certificate and went on to Boulder, majoring in German, a language that was familiar in Denver life at that time.

But even with her certificate and degree in hand, she was unable to obtain a job in Denver, where white males were normally the high school teacher. She replied to an ad about Maitland near Walsenburg in the coal-mining area. After Maitland, she opted for city life in Chicago, where she took classes at the University of Chicago. This was followed by teaching in Arkansas where a lynching took place; next Kansas City, and then back to Chicago, teaching as always. There, she was married for 15 years to “Mr. Jones,” a hand-

some, Black, Phi Beta Kappa member who abused and deserted her. Divorced, Lucille continued teaching until her retirement in 1949, when she returned to her home on Raleigh Street for nearly 40 more years.

Reading Remembering Lucile, we mountain dwellers will appreciate learning about this remarkable woman from Denver, so near and yet so far from the experiences many of us have known.

As a grad student in the 1960s, this reviewer took an English lit course taught by the first Black professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, the only African American professor in its entire 80 years until then, Charles H. Nilon.