

Local history comes alive

By SCOTT CISSEL
Times-Mirror Staff Writer

The view through the sun-drenched windows of Meredith McMath's writing studio in her historic Hillsboro home gives a glimpse of the setting of her most recent novel, "Pella's Angel."

To the west are the rolling mountain ridges that Union and Confederate soldiers crossed in the Civil War on their way to Harpers Ferry and the battlefields of Antietam. Just a step from McMath's front door is Route 9, which brought traders to Hillsboro, once the second largest town in Loudoun County. In the 1800s it was an industrial town and had its own textile mill, blacksmith, tannery, four working mills and five taverns.

In this town 15 years ago McMath restored a 180-year-old Federal style home with her husband. Here she began researching the histories of men and women who wrote about life during the Civil War in letters and diaries that have been preserved.

"For a good story you need conflict," said McMath in a recent interview, "and that is why there are so many amazing stories to be found in Loudoun during the Civil War — because the conflict was tremendous, you could cut it with a knife."

"People have said it's like time traveling to read ["Pella's Angel"], and I know what they mean. Living in this area and seeing 19th-century things about you all day fills your mind with images of that time."

The main character of "Pella's Angel" is Annabelle MacBain, a young woman and Confederate sympathizer from Hillsboro. As the novel opens, Annabelle appears as an innocent, young woman on the porch, saddened that heavy rains have damaged an old oak tree in her front yard. By the end of the novel, her world has been shattered by the death and destruction of war, and she questions her own loyalty to the South and her concept of right and wrong. Her moral dilemmas are sharpened by the discovery that her own father, a surgeon for the Confederacy,

has stronger ties to the Union than she had imagined.

Annabelle's character is based in part on the diaries of Cornelia Peake McDonald, a woman who was opposed to slavery and the Confederacy and documented her experiences.

"I was interested in writing a story about a southern girl who would change her mind during the Civil War. What would it take for her to become pro-Union? What would it take for her to take the oath of allegiance to the United States?" McMath said she asked herself.

"With a lot of girls who were raised with the tradition [of slavery], they were taught not to question it," said McMath, "I knew I had a basis to create an Annabelle who had a conscience. Cornelia had out-of-the-box thinking for a southern woman."

Other characters in her book, McMath said, are based loosely on accounts of the war by people who lived in other towns of Loudoun County.

"I would rather hear the stories of what people did on that day than any fictional account of what occurred," said McMath, giving examples of powerful testimonies by people who witnessed and survived the events of Sept. 11.

"When we see what another human being is capable of... it makes us able to think maybe I would have done that. You can create strong fictional stories, but the fact remains, they have to inspire the human soul. You have to think it's possible."

Before she writes, McMath tries to read as much as possible and immerses herself in all of the historical material she can find.

"You make yourself a sponge so that you're absolutely soaked in your research — it's dripping from the fingers — then you go to write your stories," said McMath.

"You want to fill yourself with as much real, raw, true information as will enable you to create characters in your head that are going to live in real space and time in your imagination."

Throughout history, people

have sought to explore history so they can make sense of the present, particularly in times when the familiar encounters the forces of change. The experience of Loudoun is no different, said McMath.

"I think counties go through periods when historical preservation is suddenly important to them, when you feel overwhelmed or attacked like Loudoun has with development," said McMath.

While 50 years from now the urgency of historical preservation may not be as strong as it is at the moment, the pull of Loudoun history is strong, she said. McMath thinks even people who are new to Loudoun can and should want to shape their sense of place and sense of home by learning Loudoun's history.

"When a person goes to settle into a place, it's our natural bent to want to dig our toes in," said McMath. "History is a way to root yourself in the place that you are in."

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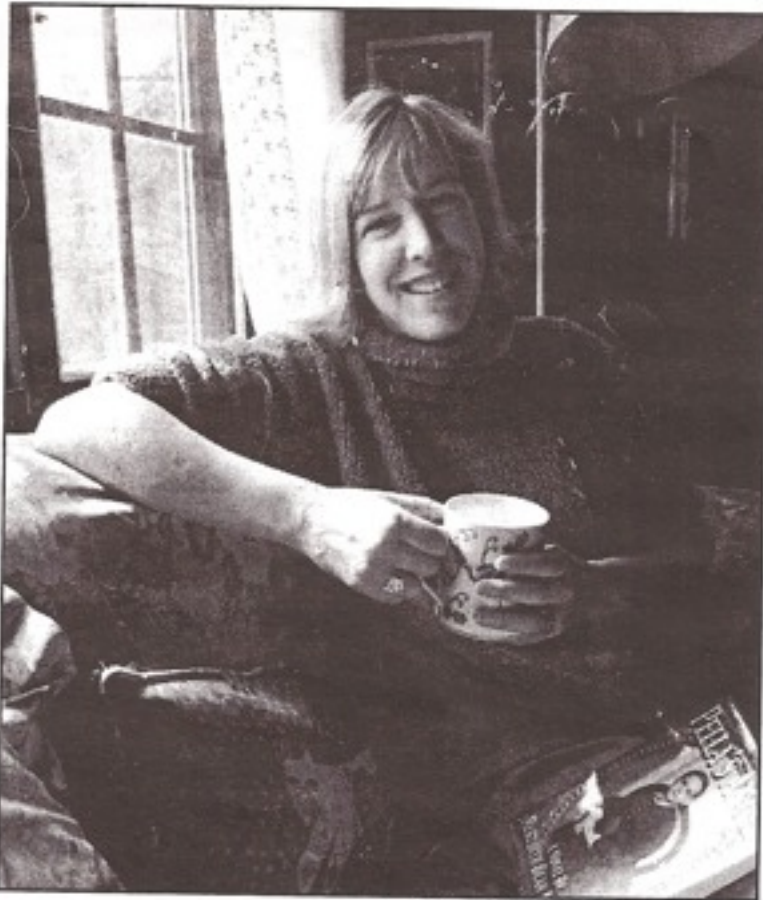
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Times-Mirror Staff Photo/Michael J. Kacmarcik

STORIES WITH ROOTS: Meredith Bean McMath, author of "Pella's Angel," sits in her historic home in Hillsboro.

McMATH'S FAVORITES

- **Authors:** Mark Twain, Jane Austin, Madeleine L'Engle
- **Civil War novel for adults:** "Kindred" by Octavia E. Butler
- **For children:** "Mine Eyes Have Seen" by Ann Rinaldi and "A Girl Named Boy" by Belinda Hurmence
- **Nonfiction on Civil War in Loudoun:** "County and the Civil War" and "Legends of Loudoun" by John Devine, and "To Talk is Treason" by John Devine, Bronwen Souders and John Souders.
- **Civil War Movie:** "Pharaoh's Army," an HBO special