
Sub-Saharan African Affairs

Rwanda Remembers Rosamond Halsey Carr, Five Years after her Death



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Young people gathered at Imbabazi Orphanage the day after Thanksgiving, to give their thanks for the woman who was mother to them all.

Ms. Rosamond Halsey Carr, who died in 2006 at the age of 94, started to take care of Rwanda's orphaned children when she was in her 80s. Nothing in her early years (she was born in New Jersey in 1912) gave any inkling of what her future



would be.

Land of a Thousand Hills

This remarkable woman was the author of **Land of a Thousand Hills**, in which she recounted her early life in USA, then in Congo and in Rwanda. Only the fifth and final part of this book deals with the genocide and civil war that brought Rwanda to world headlines in 1994. Her life until then had been an active and interesting one: she first went to Africa with her husband, Kenneth. After the marriage broke down she lived there independently, running her own pyrethrum plantation. She befriended Dian Fossey of *Gorillas in the Mist* fame, she witnessed the eruption of **Nyiragongo in 1977**. She lived a full life, but never had children.

Her book was published in 1999. Ms. Carr describes her unwilling return to the US in April 1994 when Rwanda lapsed into turmoil after the death of President Juvenal Habyarima. A few months later, in the year of her 82nd birthday, friends and relatives were shocked at her decision to return to her home. Rwanda was her home, and having seen the horrors of

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the genocide on television, this most determined lady packed and returned to Rwanda, with the idea of adapting some of the premises used for pyrethrum drying, into a shelter for orphans. This was the beginning of an orphanage which has cared for about 400 children since its inception until the present day. Ms Carr was actively engaged with **Imbabazi Orphanage** until her death.

On her tombstone is written:

Humanitarian and friend

Rwanda was her home for 57 years

It's beauty was her inspiration

It's struggles were her struggles

It's people were her strength

It's children were her greatest joy.

Imbabazi Orphanage

Children were brought to her by the Red Cross and other international organizations, some physically traumatized, all deeply hurt in spirit, having lost their parents during flight to the Congo, or seen their parents and siblings murdered, or simply wandered dazed and hungry for days, perhaps too young to speak, until someone collected them and took them into care.

Many children were reunited with family members after the hostilities ceased and people returned to their homes, or to where their homes had been. Even finding family members was not an ideal situation, for houses and huts had been

burned or destroyed, women were left widows with children to feed and no income. Some children left Imbabazi Orphanage only to return after insertion in a family of relatives (not parents) proved unsuitable.

Many children remained alone or with a sibling in the orphanage, uncertain even as to their own identity, due to the early age at which they found themselves alone. These children have grown up with a family round them: they are the Imbabazi kids.

This enthralling story does not end with Madame Carr's death. Her last years were dedicated to assuring a future for the growing children in her care, and all the employees.

The Imbabazi orphans come of age

Coming of age is a special moment for all youths. But for an orphanage such as Imbabazi, this is a most delicate time. Suddenly a large mixed group of sweet little ones turns into a large mixed group of teenagers!

In their early years these children needed love, affection, food, clothing and primary education. As they grow, they need secondary school education and jobs (as well as more food and more affection). They need computer skills, career advice, the older ones start to think about forming families of their own. This is a particularly strong desire for all these young people who have lost their parents, grandparents, siblings. As one boy has written "It all starts with me now."

All children have had the opportunity of going to school, to the highest level they have been able to obtain under their own efforts, with the help of the orphanage which also provided them with English and French language education.

In recent years, the official foreign language of Rwanda changed from French to English. Many of Imbabazi's children are quite fluent in English, thanks to Roz Carr who provided teachers and attracted many young Americans to spend shorter or longer periods at the orphanage. These youngsters are therefore rather fluent in two European languages besides the Rwandese language which is called Kinyarwanda.

Secondary school for the Imbabazi kids means boarding school - they are glad for the opportunity, but boarding school life is hardly cushy. It means:

- Early rising to queue and fill their water-bucket at a single tap, for washing
- Meals mainly composed of *fufu* and bean, potato and/or carrot stew
- Intense discipline and the knowledge that if they fall behind in their studies, they will lose their chance to pursue their education.

Secondary education is still considered something special in this country, so the youngsters accept the tough life with good grace. A few of them are now studying in university. These Imbabazi kids all seem happy to return to the orphanage, up in the hills only 100 miles from the equator, but with night temperatures around 10°C.

Rosamond Halsey Carr

Rosamond Carr loved all these children. She managed to make each one feel he or she was her favourite child. And she loved Rwanda. I feel that love and serenity emerge from a line written in the last letter I received from her, when she was 94 years old. Between giving news about the orphanage, the herd of cows, the football teams, the cold nights, and wishing us happiness and joy, she simply wrote:

"There was a touch of snow on Karisimbi's peak yesterday."

Sources:

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- Luna Park RWANDA (Italian Text) by Roberto "Ciko" Mauri, Edizioni dell'Arco - Gruppo Solidarietà Come, Milano 2000
- **Imbabazi Insider Newsletter and blog.**
- Personal contributions from Gadi Habumugisha
- Through the Eyes of Children's **Rwanda Project** started by the late David Jiranek (another wonderful person)

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