



Living Large: Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason

Joseph P. Eckhardt

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Living Large: Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason, by noted silent film historian Joseph P. Eckhardt, is by turns a rollicking dual biography and a sweet love story. Wilna Hervey a six-foot-three-inch, three-hundred-pound heiress won the role of "The Powerful Katrinka" in the Toonerville Trolley comedies of the early nineteen-twenties through her impressive size. Her evocation of Katrinka was so successful that it became a permanent part of her identity.

Wilna's movie work brought her something else that would long endure--a partner for life. While filming on location in the Philadelphia suburbs, Wilna Hervey met Nan Mason, the surprisingly tall daughter of her Toonerville co-star, Dan Mason. Wilna and Nan became close friends and ultimately life partners.

They discovered that they had a mutual passion for art. So when Wilna's cinema work began to wane, she and Nan decided to pursue careers as artists in the famed artists' colony at Woodstock, New York. As artists, Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason evolved into accomplished and imaginative talents, exploring a wide variety of genres over the course of their long careers. As a same-sex couple, living in one of the few American communities where they could comfortably be themselves, the "Big Girls," as they were known locally, carved out extraordinarily creative lives for themselves. Uninterested in defining themselves except as artists, they lived a free and joyous existence, fully participating in the life of their community. They hosted some of the wildest parties ever seen in the Catskills, and frequently used their legendary "full moon" soirées to raise money for local causes such as the Woodstock Library and the children's health center.

An irrepressible enthusiasm permeated everything that Wilna and Nan did, whether it was building a real estate empire, trying their luck as farmers, painting houses or entertaining bar patrons with medleys of quaint old songs. Their many friends included a number of noteworthy figures in twentieth-century American arts and letters: film director Frank Capra; photographer Edward Weston; portrait artist Eugene Speicher; the Whitney Museum's Juliana Force; painters Henry Lee McFee, William Pachner and Charles Rosen; and legendary children's book illustrators Maud and Miska Petersham.

Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason were inseparable for the better part of six decades. Their unfailing devotion to each other was respected, even admired, by their friends. Their enduring partnership, the art it inspired and their go-for-broke lifestyle form the major narrative arc of *Living Large*.

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