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Times-Picayune

LOUISIANA WOMEN: THEIR LIVES AND TIMES

Wednesday July 29, 2009

by Susan Larson, Book editor

"Louisiana Women: Their Life and Times," edited by Janet Allured of McNeese State University and Judith Gentry of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, was inspired by a colleague's question of her students.

When Louisiana State University professor Emily Toth would ask her students to name three famous Louisiana women, the top responses were Anne Rice, Britney Spears and either Kathleen Blanco or Mary Landrieu. Hence this journey into Louisiana's past.

And what a trip it is. These historians bring readers the lives of an amazing variety of women, from writers to visual artists and musicians to newspaper publishers to builders and conservationists.

Elizabeth Shown Mills brings that fascinating Cane River character, Marie Therese Coincoin, to life. Biographer Christina Vella distills the essence of the complicated affairs of the Baroness Pontalba, who created one of New Orleans' most famous landmarks, while Carolyn Long examines the truths and legends surrounding voodoo priestess Marie Laveau. Mary Farmer-Kaiser introduces readers to Civil War supporter, diarist Sarah Katherine (Kate) Stone, and Linda Langley traces three generations of Coushatta women, Louisa Williams Robinson and her descendants.

Two New Orleans newspaperwomen are represented in Patricia Brady's essay about publisher Eliza Jane Nicholson and Christina Vella's vivid depiction of beloved columnist Dorothy Dix. There are other writers as well: Mary Ann Wilson writes of Grace King, Karen Trahan Leathem explores the unconventional path of cookbook author Mary Land, and Kate Chopin scholar Emily Toth writes about the New Orleans ties of the author of "The Awakening."

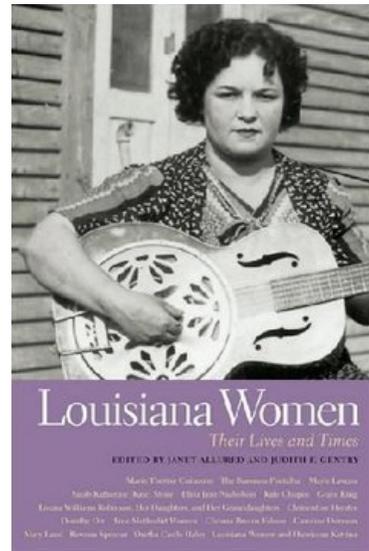
Dayna Bowker-Lee honors the commitment of conservationist Caroline Dormon, while Shannon Frystak celebrates the achievements of civil rights activist Oretha Castle Haley. Bambi L. Ray Cochran, in her essay on Rowena Spencer, admires the first woman surgeon in the state. Kevin Fontenot and Ryan Brasseaux pay tribute to Cajun musician Cleoma Breaux Falcon.

A beautiful array of color reproductions accompanies Lee Kogan's essay on self-taught artist Clementine Hunter. Ellen Blue, in "True Methodist Women," celebrates the founders of St. Mark's Community Center.

This book charms with colorful stories of women who broke the rules and lived by their own lights. Pamela Tyler brings the story right up to the present in "Louisiana Women and Hurricane Katrina," which begins with the roles of former Gov. Kathleen Blanco and U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu.

Tyler then moves on to a study of activism in the wake of the 2005 flood, and the role of women in such organizations as Becky Zaheri's Katrina Krewe, Anne Milling's Women of the Storm, Ruthie Frierson's Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, and LaToya Cantrell's Broadmoor neighborhood association.

"It is beyond question that women's unpaid labor, given so willingly, has helped to speed the recovery of New Orleans," Tyler writes. "This grievously wounded city, while still far from mended, is already more vibrant and hopeful because of their efforts."



LOUISIANA WOMEN: THEIR LIVES AND TIMES

This immensely readable collection of essays shows the great scope of Louisiana women's achievements. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich once said, "Well behaved women rarely make history." In Louisiana well-behaved women do make history, along with their misbehaving, fascinating sisters.

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