

Previous Work and the Community

The Cane River Creoles received historical literary attention early in the nineteenth century when the Freeman-Custis expedition described their community on Cane River (Flores 1984). Both that expedition and another traveler, named Malley, described their ethnicity and mentioned their community (Flores 1984).

Debates about Creole identity seem to have developed in south Louisiana, particularly about New Orleans. The classic acrimonious debates between George Washington Cable, Alcee Fortier, and Father Adrien Rouquette about Creoles of color have been detailed several places (Jordon and DeCaro 1996:31-59, Dominguez 1979, 1986). The term Creole is still emotionally loaded and has long been considered the label of preference by Creoles. So, while whites argued about it, mixed racial and cultural Creoles tried to explain their position (Desdunes 1914). They continue that struggle today.

By the nineteenth century, literary figures began to focus on Cane River, particularly Kate Chopin, whose short stories often seem to have Cane River settings, and since she lived in Cloutierville, she likely was the first local colorist to fictionalize the region (Jordon and DeCaro 1996). The works of George Washington Cable (1883, 1884) brought Creole culture to the attention of the world, too. Eventually recoiling from fierce opposition, Cable slowed down.

The first three decades of the twentieth century saw the literary and artistic crowd move to Melrose Plantation. Mrs.

Cammie Henry, *doyenne* of Melrose, brought writers and artists there to work. The folklorist Dorothy Scarborough (1925:19) visited and gave us descriptions from Melrose of race relations, material culture and music. Most notable of these was Lyle Saxon; his novel *Children of Strangers* focused on Creole and African-American relations on Cane River. Rose Ann Jordon and Frank DeCaro (1996:31-59) have discussed this period of Melrose history as part of their discussion of Louisiana folklore. Fran90is Mignon, Lyle Saxon's friend, came to Melrose to visit and remained. He left his impressions, very romanticized, of Cane River and its people: *Cane River Memoires*. This little work is an example of the rich mix of folklore, fact and fantasy that developed in the 1930s.

It would be the 1950s before writers discovered the Cane River Creoles again. Sister Jerome Woods, a nun in the Order of Sisters of Divine Providence, began sociological research at Isle Brevelle. In an era when sociology and anthropology shifted their interests to community studies, Sister Jerome Woods uniquely recognized the power of ethnicity in community development. Moreover, she caught the dynamics of urban migration (Woods 1972) by Creoles.

Recently Lucy Cohen (1984) has noted the inter-marriage of antebellum Chinese with Cane River and Campti Creole families. Particularly, she met the Creole families who accepted these non-white, usually Cuban, additions to the Creole community.

Another clergyman, Father II Callahan (1956) began writing a history of St. Augustine Church and parish which

really is the history of the community at Isle Brevelle. Resident priest at the church, Father Callahan was in a unique position - an inside outsider - to understand local historical developments. His history would stand alone until the 1960s.

In that period, the historians Gary Mills and his wife, Elizabeth S. Mills, came to Natchitoches to do historical and genealogical research. Primarily focused on Melrose Plantation, their interests extended to the Creoles.

The Mills' work, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*, has become a standard reference on the region. In that it emphasized the role of Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin in the formation of the community, it broke new ground. The Creole community found its description and genealogy of great interest, and the Mills stimulated a wave of local history - from the Creole point of view - which continues. As one Creole author, Kathleen Balthazar-Heitzman (personal communication 1996), has put it, "The Mills made me aware of my history. That I had history."

The Mills' work seems to have been stimulated by the contradictions that surrounded Melrose Plantation. Sold by the Henry family to a corporate farm and then donated to the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches, Melrose was opened to the public year round, and local legends began to become part of the tours. A local historian, Louis Nardini, pointed out that Marie *Thérèse Coin-Coin* did not build at Melrose, but it was the plantation of her son, Louis. In fact, he pointed out that her grant and house were upstream, nearer Bermuda, Louisiana. The local

preservationists, seeking to rationalize the controversy, engaged Gary Mills, and serious research on Melrose began. His initial work resulted in a small work entitled *Melrose* (Mills 1973). Mills continued his work, extending his interest to the whole Creole community on Cane River. Elizabeth S. Mills began translating the records of St. Francis Church, contributing a valuable tool to local genealogists of whatever group.

By the 1980s, only Father Callahan's work seems to have emanated in the Creole community. Still, younger Creoles were beginning to be interested in their genealogy and history. That interest began developing in several directions: history, genealogy and the arts.

In 1986, Virginia R. Dominguez published a classic work, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*. The Creole controversy had been re-opened, and while not denying African roots, the Creoles maintained their distinct ethnicity as well. It was their traditional position, and the Civil Rights movement in the South had seen their legal status shift, but their identity had not. Younger Creoles read Dominguez's study and found themselves there. Coupled to earlier work, it reified traditional Creole identity. Creoles retain fiercely the right to be who they think they are.

The obscure work of the Creole Rudolphe Desdunes (1911), *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, had early argued the traditional Creole definition of Creole, and while non-Creoles had argued about it, he held his ground. Contemporary Creoles have now begun a national, if not international, movement to identify

themselves as a distinct ethnic group (Bayou Talk 1996).

Genealogical studies attracted Creoles early on. A major overview of Creole history and genealogy was begun by Theresa Demery, a graduate student at Northwestern State University in the 1980s (ms in the Cammie Henry Research Center, Watson Library, NSU). Later, she and Janet Ravarre Colson began collaborating on a genealogical database for Louisiana Creole genealogy (See Appendix II). On the west coast, Creoles began gathering and sharing family information. Louis Metoyer and his family began publishing a monthly newspaper called Bayou Talk in 1993. Published in Los Angeles, Bayou Talk is nationally disseminated.

In the north, inspired by the Mills' work, Kathleen Balthazar-Heitzman started another New York-based newsletter, Cane River Trading Company, to further exchange of stories and genealogy among the nationally scattered Creole families. A desk-top publication, Cane River Trading Company is widely distributed among Cane River families.

Joseph Moran, a trained artist, mounted a photographic exhibit on the people of Cane River. His black and white photographs spoke clearly of continuity and identity. His drawings, paintings, and photographs have been shown widely. He has also designed and written brochures for the St. Augustine Historical Society, particularly one on the church. He is collaborator in this study, the "Creole voice" of the team.

A recent Creole artist, Earvin LaCour, has produced a series of local theme paintings. His work stresses the Cane

River country. His tryptic, on a discarded door from Melrose Plantation, stresses Creole architecture, *Grandpere 'Gustin*, and St. Augustine Church.

In summary, there seem to be three major intellectual developments that focus on the Cane River Creole community. The first was literary-folkloristic which resulted in local color novels and romantic history - all but "outside" authors and artists; the second was sociological and historical and spawned the two major objective works on sociology and history of the Creole community. The third period has been stimulated by a national awareness of Creole culture. This last period has seen increasing Creole literary, artistic, and research participation, i.e. Creoles writing, painting, singing, doing genealogy for themselves, most often by themselves, to insure their children know who and what Creoles are about.¹

1. We Know Who We Are: . . . by H. F. Gregory and J. Moran
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