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HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

June 2015

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, June 18, 2015, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speakers for the program will be Andrea and Gladys Dedeaux. Their topics are the Valena C. Jones School and the St. Rose De Lima School. *Reservations are required* and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must insist that you please call by noon on Wednesday, June 17, 2015,** to make your reservation, to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people, and to apprise us of the number for whom to prepare. The price of the lunch is \$10.00.



“Pearl Rivers”

Eliza Jane Poitevent
Holbrook Nicholson

1843—1896



A Stroll Down Old Town Bay St. Louis With Pat Murphy

Join us to see Old Town Bay St. Louis the way it used to be! Local historian and photographer Pat Murphy will discuss the history of Bay St. Louis and show photos of homes and businesses back in the day! The presentation will be held on **Tuesday, June 23, 2015, at 5:30 P. M.** at the Bay St. Louis—Hancock County Library, 312 Hwy. 90, Bay Saint Louis, MS.

Pearl Rivers The Poet within Eliza Poitevent Nicholson

By
James Keating, MD

Eliza Jane Poitevent Holbrook Nicholson was a famous historical figure of the 19th century who was born in Hancock County in Gainesville, MS, in 1843. She was a distinguished poet, who used the *nom de plume* “Pearl Rivers.” In addition, she was the first woman newspaper publisher in the South (*The Daily Picayune* later

The Times Picayune). She and her second husband built a grand vacation home in 1887 on the Waveland waterfront called “Fort Nicholson.” Today a Magnolia Historical Marker sits on the house site near the corner of Nicholson Avenue and Beach Boulevard. This house was destroyed by a storm in 1893, but another was soon built as a replacement. She also lived in Picayune with an uncle and his family during part of her childhood and is credited with naming the towns of Picayune and Nicholson after her newspaper and her second husband, respectively. She is a favorite daughter of both Pearl

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**LOBRANO HOUSE
HOURS**

MONDAY — FRIDAY
10:00AM — 3:00PM
Closed: 12:00—1:00 (lunch)

MISSION STATEMENT

“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

River and Hancock counties.

Preferring to be called “Pearl” during her lifetime, Ms. Nicholson continues to be a subject of interest for historians. A local historian and poet, Don Wicks, has launched an extensive research project after collecting two hundred of her poems and fifty of her newspaper articles. He published a short biography in 2014 and has completed three chapters of a full biography, hopefully to be published in the near future. Information gleaned from files of Delta State University, The Historic New Orleans Collection, and the Tulane University Archives were analyzed by Wicks in his mission to produce a manuscript that will “share the essence of who she was and how she came to be the icon that she is.”

The evolution of the poet Pearl Rivers began in the childhood of this gifted, sensitive, but lonely country girl. She wrote poetry as early as age fourteen, and her first publication was at age eighteen. Early poems such as “Myself” describe a child of nature growing up in the piney woods of Picayune:

No other child grew on the
place
A merry roughish elf,
I played “keep house” in
shady woods
All by my little self.

Miss Poitevent was sent to the Amite Female Seminary in Liberty, MS, for boarding school, which was a combination of high school and finishing school for young ladies of the wealthy plantation class of the antebellum South. During this period she fell in love with William Cole Harrison. However, the romance was discouraged by her family. Fortunately many of her love letters to him have been located in the Tulane Archives. Her poem, “A Soldier’s Grave” (1866), may reflect her anguish during the Civil War:

There may be hands clasped in
prayer
This soldier’s hand had
pressed
And cheeks washed pale by
sorrows’ tears
His own cold cheeks caressed.

After graduating from the seminary in 1859, she returned to her uncle’s plantation, “The Hermitage.” Her first published poem, “A Little Bunch of Roses,” appeared in the *Daily Picayune* in



Waveland home of Eliza and George Nicholson

1866:

Then keep my bunch of roses,
Let your lips their leaves
bedew,
And always love remember
I will keep my heart for you.

In 1870 Miss Poitevent was hired as a literary editor by the *Daily Picayune*, for which she began writing exclusively. In 1872, she married the proprietor of the newspaper, Alva Holbrook, an event which greatly disturbed the first Mrs. Holbrook. In 1873 Eliza published a book of poetry, *Lyrics*, containing fifty-one poems, most of which were simple and naturalistic verses about such subjects as the forest and wildlife with the book receiving favorable reviews. One poem in particular, "The Singing Heart," describes emotional difficulties related to a traumatic event in her life: a physical assault by the first Mrs. Holbrook wielding a gun and an ax!

The world has bruised the
singing heart,
It has wept tears like dew
And slander, with a poisoned
dart,
Has pierced it through and
through.

Alva Holbrook died in 1876, and Pearl inherited the newspaper. She married George Nicholson, her business manager, in 1878 and ran the business for twenty years. However, her development as a poet suffered because she had little time to write verse.

Later in life, Pearl rejuvenated her poetic skills. Two major poems were published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1893 and 1894 entitled "Hagar" and "Leah," the names of two famous Biblical women. "Hagar" received national acclaim and is considered Pearl Rivers' masterpiece:

Hagar loves you. Oh! Come
with me dear lord.
Take but your staff and come
with me. Your mouth
Shall drink my share of water
from this jug
And eat my share of bread
with Ishmael;
And from your lips I will re-
fresh myself
With love's sweet wine from
tender lips pressed.
Ah! Come dear lord. Oh
come, my Abraham.

In her lifetime, Pearl Rivers was considered an important Southern poet.

Pearl Rivers, or Eliza Jane, was a gifted writer, but history remembers her life more as a pioneering and successful businesswoman than as a poet. Against the wishes of her family and in the mid-19th century that disapproved of women of class working in the world of men, Mrs. Nicholson rose to the challenge of running the *Daily Picayune*. Under her stewardship from 1876 until her death in 1896, the *Picayune* emerged from bankruptcy to become the leading newspaper in the South. She revolutionized the newspaper business in New Orleans with innovations such as feature stories, literature, and book reviews. In addition, she created new signed columns of interest to women and children, medical advice, science and agriculture, comics, and fashion.

The causes that Mrs. Nicholson promoted during her remarkable career include animal rights, honest government, and improved public education. She did not become a political activist for women's suffrage. However, she hired women writers such as Dorothy Dix and promoted their careers, giving them equal pay.

In her private life, Eliza's marriage to George Nicholson was successful, and they produced two

children. She died of influenza on February 15, 1896, just eleven days after her husband. She and her husband are buried in Metairie Cemetery in New Orleans.

SOURCES:

- Brady, Patricia. "Eliza Jane Nicholson" in *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009.
- Dyer, Charles Lawrence. *Along the Gulf*. New Orleans: William E. Myers, Pub., 1894.
- Guerin, Russell. *Early Hancock County*. Denver: Outskirts Press, Inc., 2014.
- Scharff, Robert. *Louisiana's Loss, Mississippi's Gain*. Lawrenceville, VA: Brunswick Publishing Corp., 1999.
- Wicks, Don. *Pearl Rivers, A Brief Biography*. no pub, no date.

**"Best Thing I Can Tell
You About My Life Is..."**

By
Irving Meggs
as told to
Elizabeth Veglia

Childhood...

"I was born and raised in Waveland, on Jeff Davis Avenue. They used to call it 'Billy Goat Street' 'cause everyone there had a billy goat. They used them to keep the grass down.

"I had a double-team wagon when I was a boy and would hitch 'em up, two of 'em. And they could pull almost as much as a horse. Big old goats. 'Mohamatins,' they called them. Big old goats!

"I'd go out into the woods with them, and cut fire wood, come and put it in the fire place. Mama cooked on a wood stove, that's all we had.

"We had mosquito bars, so the mosquitos couldn't get to you. We didn't have screens. But the

mosquito bars would make the bed so hot, Mama would make us go out and cut palmettos and she'd hem them around—that's how we would fan. Sometimes she would paint them, they would look like real fans.

.....

"I can see [my mother] out there with the iron pot, boiling clothes and then she would be stringin' them up on the line. We had two horse tresss and would make mattresses out of moss with a big mattress needle. We had to get moss and hang it up on the fence and scald it. Mama would do the ticking and make mattresses for us. Sometimes they would make 'em out of corn shucks.

"We had cows on Jeff Davis, but that's the time before you had the stock laws. You could let your cows run all over. All back here in them days, you see where the shopping center is now? When I was a little boy, that was where they used to go to cut stump wood there with horse and wagon.

"Papa died at 69. He was a good, good man. But if you wasn't good, he had a board 'bout that long, and he had an old razor strap. And he just had to look at that thing hanging by the sink. If we didn't do right, he'd put that thing on us three times. He called it 'cat-o-nine tails.' If he put that on you, be a long time 'fore you do anything wrong again!"

Dodging Alligators...

"We used to walk to St. Rose to school, about two-and-a-half miles. We'd cut through these woods right here before they had all these canals. By the side of the railroad tracks, they had a fence by it to keep the cows off. They had a step over it, we'd have to walk that step. When we'd come out, we'd be over there by the sand pit. They had ca-



Irving
"Uncle Goon"
Meggs,
age 90

nals, and you'd have to watch out for the alligators. They was alligators right around here. In the spring, you could see 'em walking across the street.

The Horse That Knew...

"They had a horse every morning that, when Papa wouldn't get up early enough to feed it, that horse would come to the window and shake it and holler, you know, go, 'Neeeee.'

"And I'll tell you another funny thing. When Daddy died, he had a heart attack, that horse he *know* he died. Everybody know that over here. The undertaker come with the funeral, down the back road. And that horse ran halfway to Bay St. Louis behind that funeral. He *know* Papa was in that hearse dead.

"The funeral went from here to Bay St. Louis, to the cemetery. There was a horse trough where the horses could drink. It's still there now. Some people would walk with the funeral, but they couldn't go as fast as the horses, so they'd just be a little late gettin' there. Some were able to have Model-T Fords. Daddy had a 1926 Ford—you could get that for but \$500 in them days, brand new!

"We didn't have no undertaker parlors then. But we [held a wake] in a house. We had plenty

food to eat and drink, and people would sit around. More like a party than a sorrowful thing.

Quantee...

"Things was so cheap in them days. You could do so much with that little money. I would see Papa go down to the Bay with a horse and wagon. He'd go with \$10, he'd have a sack of feed for his cows, and half the wagon be filled with groceries.

"Used to get a thing, they'd call it, 'Quantee.' They give you beans and rice and a little piece of meat to go with it. Give it to you in a grocery store. They call it 'lagniappe.' Creoles call it 'Quantee.'

"A white lady told me one day. She says, 'Irving, remember the good old times?'

"I says, 'The good old days?' I says, 'Yes, ma'am. I remember those days.' But I say, 'The good old days is *today* for me.'"

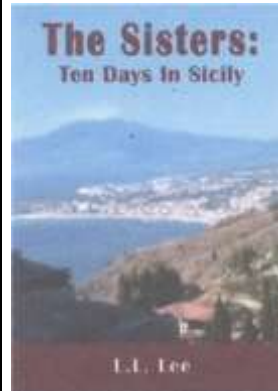
SOURCE:

Vinsonhaler, Chris, ed. and Elizabeth Veglia, Project Director. *Pearls: Myths and Memories of Hancock County, The Renaissance Project*. No publication information given.

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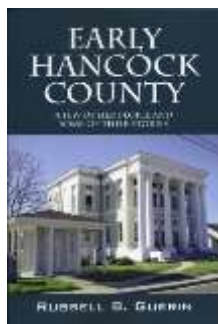
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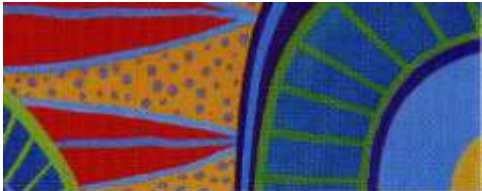
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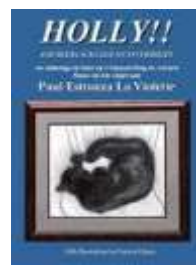
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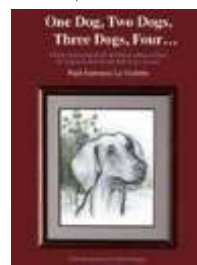
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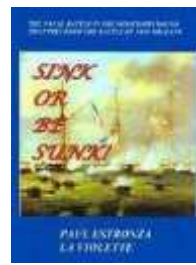
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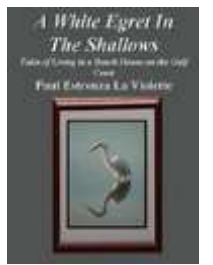
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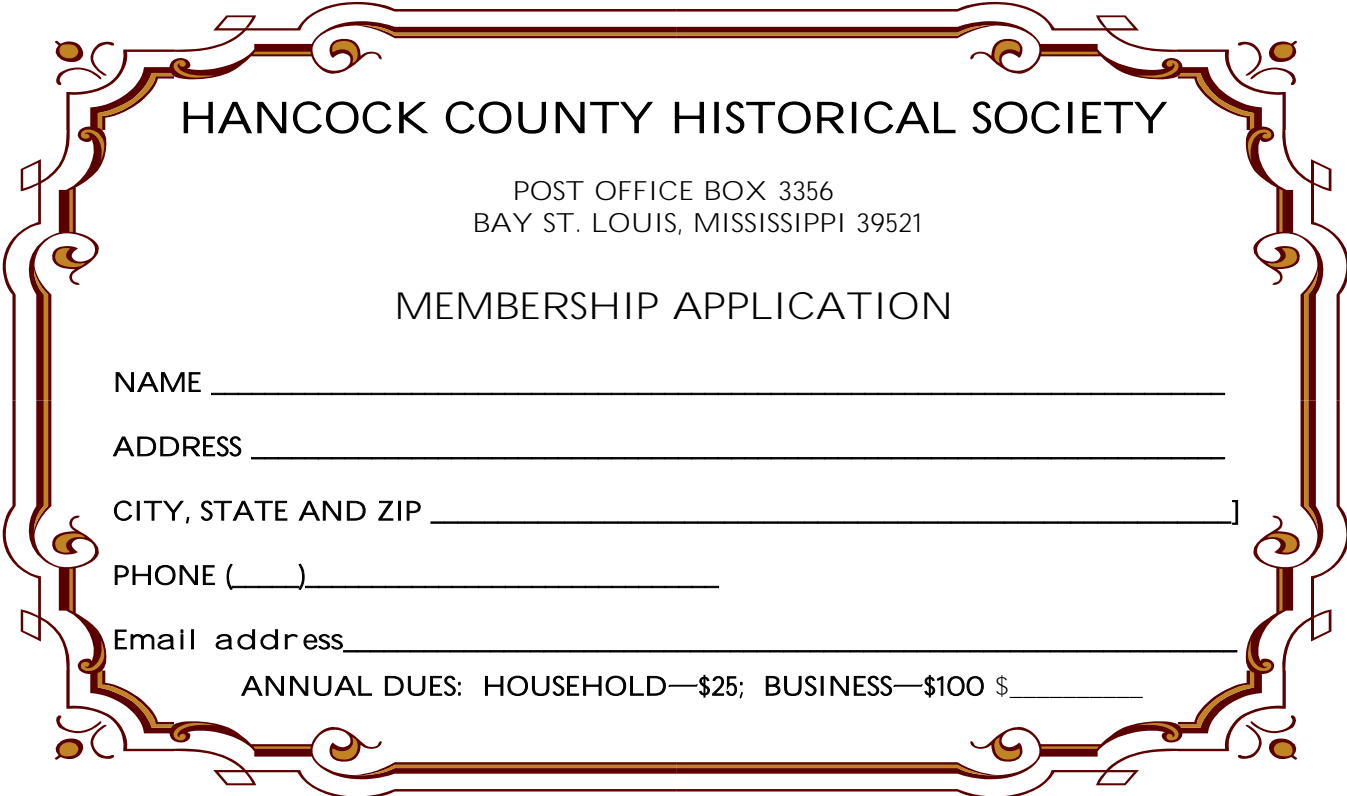
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