Why Bayou Folk Museum Received Its Name

by Mildred McCoy

Questions asked most frequently by visitors to Bayou Folk Museum are, "Who was Kate Chopin?" and "Why has this place been named Bayou Folk?" To be asked these questions by tourists from afar is not surprising, but when local people pose the same questions the time has come to enlighten and inform.

Students of American literature in today's colleges and universities could supply some of the answers because of the revival of interest in this trailblazing author and her works. Leonidas Rutledge Whipple in Library of Southern Literature published in 1907 said "Kate Chopin shares with Cable and Grace King the honor of having achieved for the Creole a permanent place in American Literature."

Just who was this woman who achieved fame in an era when female authors were hesitant to sign their names to their writings, and what part did the locale of the Cane River Country play in her writings?

Kate was born Katherine O'Flaherty in St. Louis, Missouri Feb. 8, 1851, daughter of Thomas O'Flaherty of County Galway, Ireland, and Eliza Farris of St. Louis.

It is the Farris line which gave her French heritage because of their connection with the Charleville family. Kate's maternal grandmother was Mary Arthemise Charleville, the daughter of Joseph Charleville and Victoria Verdon. Kate's mother. Arthemise, had two nephews, Landry and Joseph Charleville, who spent most of their lifetimes in the Village of Cloutierville. Descendants of the Joseph Charleville family still remain in this Cane River area.

In later life Kate revealed that she owed many of her short stories to her maternal great-grandmother, Victoria Verdon Charleville, who spent the latter years of her life in the home of Kate's mother.

Though Kate had family ties with the Charleville family, there is no mention of her having visited the Cane River Country prior to her marriage. In 1870 she became the bride of Oscar Chopin and spent the next 10 years of her life in New Orleans.

In 1880, Oscar's business failed and he moved his wife and their six children to the Chopin Plantation at Cloutierville to begin anew. From the church records of St. John the Baptist Church we find their last child and only daughter, Lesia, was baptized by Father J. M. Beau lieu shortly after their arrival in this area.

Kate's residency in the Cane River Country was cut short by the death of Oscar in 1882. She was forced to return to St. Louis in 1883 but she took with her a wealth of material, memories, understanding of the Creole, free mulatto and negro, and wonderful folklore which she combined with her keen sense of humor to become one of the most outstanding short story writers of her time.

Her first story "Euphrosyne" (1886), later published in "Century," under the title of "A No Account Creole" is the first short story in the "Bayou Folk" book which was her compilation of her Cane River stories. One of her most widely recognized short stories, "Desiree's Baby," is also found in Bayou Folk published in 1894.

The terrain of the Cane River Country has undergone vast transformation since the late 1800's. With levees, drainage canals, and the clearing of wooded areas and lake bottoms it is not easy to picture this section of the state as Bayou Country. The scenery that Kate found and used as the locale of her stories has changed but many of the bayous and lakes remain to this day and rise into prominence when they act as the reservoirs of excessive rain waters such as we experience from time to time.

This explains the inundation of farm sites and home sites which now stand in the lowlying sections of this parish. At one time they were lake bottoms or bayous flowed there. The old settlers would never have built or settled in these areas because at the time they came these places were under water most of the time.

These bayous, all tributaries of Cane River, were lined with small farms and home sites in the late 1800's and it was these simple country folk that Kate chose as the characters of her short stories. Some of these bayous were bayou Derbonne, Bayou ne d'agle, Bayou Camitl, Bayou Barbue, Bayou Cherette, Bayou Pierre, Bayou Cypry, Bayou Cocodrie, Bayou Brevelle, Red Bayou, and Flat Bayou.

From one of the Bayou Folk Stories, "In Sabine," Kate wrote, "This was the disreputable so-called 'Texan' who a year ago had run away with and married Baptiste Choupic's pretty daughter Tite Reine, yonder on Bayou Pierre, in Natchitoches Parish." From another story, "Beyond the Bayou," she opened with "The bayou curved like a crescent around the point of land on which LaFolles's cabin stood."

So these were the people that Kate immortalized, the simple folk, the inhabitants of an area steeped in tradition, superstition as opposed to deep devotion to God, these are the "Bayou Folk."

Until recently Kate Chopin's "Bayou Folk" was out of print - was classified as rare edition - sold at exorbitant prices and could not be checked out of libraries. Today, thanks to Gregg Press, Bayou Folk has been reprinted in cloth back and copies are now available at Bayou Folk Museum. Because a gifted lady walked with simple Bayou Folk over 80 years ago and recognized the potentials this area offered as a background for Creole short stories, the heritage of the vast Cane River Country lives on and on.