PIE'S A LA MODE

May 23, 1966

N.O. Women Writers of Gay Nineties Cited

By PIE DUFOR

Back in the days when women were still leading more or less sheltered lives, that is to say in the Gay Nineties, New Orleans had a handful of women who did prodigious things with pen or tongue.

There were the Gordon sisters, Jean and Kate (while third sister Fanny kept the home fires burning), who stumped New Orleans and the legislative halls, waging endless vocal campaigns for social, health and political reforms.

There was Pearl Rivers, pseudonym under which Ellen Jane Poitier Holbrook Nicholson wrote, whose editorial pen on The Picayune was not only a source of entertainment for readers but a force for community betterment as well.

There was Grace King, who had a name for herself as a historian as well as a writer of charming Creole stories in the days when regionalism was popular in American literature. A disciple and friend of Charles Gayarré, Miss King inherited the famed historian’s mantle.

Her “New Orleans, The Place and People,” is still a standing book and her biography of Bienville, written more than 50 years ago, is the only full length work on the founder of New Orleans.

Mary Ashley Townsend, who wrote under the pseudonym of Xarifa, had already had two volumes of poetry published by 1869, and “Down the Bayou” (1882) before the Gay Nineties began.

There was Mollie E. Moore Davis, whose husband was editor of The Picayune. She was a poet, short story writer, novelist and playwright, with a growing reputation, both as a journalist and as a literary worker of a higher sort.

In his foreword, Joe Jefferson wrote: “Mrs. Field’s work . . . speaks for itself, and its strength and beauty cannot be enhanced by praise . . . These pages are filled with poetry and truth, wisdom and philosophy. The writer takes a broad and generous view of human nature, which seems to have been gathered through experience of others whose observation is keen but kindly.”

“Catherine Cole’s Book” contains in 301 pages, 25 essays, the most famous perhaps being entitled “Queen Anne Fronts and Mary Ann Backs,” in which Catherine Cole appraised the description to a New Orleans house.

“Once upon a time,” she began, “it was my fortune to live across the way from a house that had a Queen Anne front built on to its plain Mary Ann back. I believed the new front on my neighbor’s house to be purely Queen Anne because they told me so, and they had been informed by their architect. I am the more inclined to believe that that front was Queen Anne, because nowadays, any style, whether imitated in bedsteads, sideboards, or houses, that cannot be otherwise accounted for, is known by the merest by . . . to be Queen Anne.”

Catherine Cole described the house where her neighbors had lived happily “in one of those big, bleak, angular, and inartistic residences with a gallery upstairs and down, a hall, dining and a wing in which were located servants’ rooms and cooking apartments.” But there came the day when “the old house was moved back and aesthetic carpenters soldered on to it a gorgeous, gabled shingled anomaly, that, for the purposes of indistinctness, was referred to as Queen Anne.”

From her musings over the Queen Anne front and Mary Ann back, Catherine Cole drew a moral:

“I think I wasted a great deal of time over this architectural incongruity before it occurred to me that a more serious fault, and far more irreparable, is to be found in people who are permanently afflicted with a sort of mental or moral disproportion that can only be explained by saying they are closely aika to my neighbor’s house with the Queen Anne front and the Mary Ann back. The Queen Anne front Christian who does all his praying in church; the Queen Anne front philanthropist who only gives when the gift is certain to be published; of the Queen Anne clergyman who only takes time to be socially intimate with rich parishioners. . . . On the plain, modest every-day-looking muscular structures of daily life, how many people are there who build Queen Anne fronts of stucco and Swiss shingles, in which to house shams of fashion, sham elegance, sham tastes, sham philanthropies, sham virtues, and sham enterprises?”

Concluding this amusing, but philosophically sound little piece, Catherine Cole spoke words even more true today than they were in 1897:

“In modern American life everything tends to the facade. . . . What us, for truth’s sake, be true to ourselves and when we build Queen Anne fronts remove the suspicion of imitation flaxness that is inevitable suggested by the Mary Ann back.”

Times Picayune
Page 7. Dec. 3.
May 23, 1966