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**Book became family affair**

By HOLLY DeVille
Advocate correspondent

LAFAYETTE — Mary Alice Fontenot had written 13 books and had retired from 40 years of newspaper work, when someone requested that she write another book to be used in Calcasieu Parish high schools.

Mrs. Fontenot, 74, turned to her daughter, Julie Landry, for help. Two years later their book, The Louisiana Experience, was published.

Though intended for students, the book apparently has a larger following. It was published last fall and is already in its second printing.

Besides being used in Calcasieu Parish schools for courses in Louisiana studies, an Iberia Parish high school also is using the book.

Mrs. Fontenot already is known to Louisiana school children. She is the author of the nine "Clovis the Crawfish" tales.

Mrs. Landry, 39, is head of the English department at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau.

When Mrs. Fontenot decided to take on the project, she felt that, since the book was intended for education, it should be written with a teacher's assistance.

"I'm so geared to newspaper writing I tended to capsule things," Mrs. Fontenot said. "That's where Julie came in."

Mrs. Landry describes her role in writing the book as "mainly editorial."

"I expanded paragraphs, structured chapters in a way that I knew would be acceptable to teachers. I also helped with the research," she said.

"I felt it was my duty to make sure the material was in a certain format," Mrs. Landry said. "If we teach students to look for ideas in certain places in a paragraph, then I owed it to my fellow teachers to put those ideas in those places."

As Mrs. Fontenot completed chapters, she turned them over to her daughter for revision.

"We'd talk it over, and I'd do it over," Mrs. Fontenot recalls. "She made me do a bunch of them over."

Mrs. Landry admitted that being her mother's editor wasn't an easy job at times.

"When a person is of the stature of writing of my mother — and she's my mother besides — for me to say 'I think this ought to be written differently' is very difficult."

"But after we got going, we decided that, if it was going to be an effort of the two of us, then I'd have to do what I'd have to do," Mrs. Landry said.

The book focuses on Louisiana culture, with attention to Indians, folklore, burial customs, architecture and agriculture.

The book is also a source for anecdotes. The chapter on folklore tells the story of a Breaux Bridge bootlegger during Prohibition who posed as a Catholic priest as a cover for his thriving business. Government revenue men politely tipped their hats to the "father" as he drove by them in his Model T Ford loaded with moonshine.

The authors also explain the origin of voodoo, which was brought to Louisiana by slaves. Many native superstitions, such as the "gris-gris," an object believed to ward off evil or bring bad luck, also originated from African folklore.

Mrs. Fontenot and her daughter went to local libraries and newspaper offices to do research, but they also used interviews as another way of gathering information for the book.

"In a project like this which focuses on culture, a tremendous amount of research came from just talking to people, being observant and taking notes wherever we went," Mrs. Landry said. "We found ourselves traipsing through graveyards, poking into anything that gave us a clue as to what Louisiana is like."

And as to what makes Louisiana people what they are, "mother interjected."

They admit that the book is a reflection of their love for Louisiana.

"Actually, when you read the book, it sounds like we're working for the Louisiana Chamber of Commerce," Mrs. Fontenot said. "We have only good things to say about the state. Naturally, we did accentuate the positive."

Her daughter agreed: "From a cultural standpoint there's nothing negative (about Louisiana). Everything cultural involves what people do and what they think. There's nothing negative to be said about culture."

But the writers admit that there is one bad thing about life in Louisiana and they felt compelled to include it in the book.

"There is a reference to pollution, both water and air," Mrs. Fontenot said. "We couldn't ignore it."

Mrs. Landry hopes the book will help clear up the many misconceptions people from other states have about Louisiana.

"I think Louisiana has gotten a lot of bad press," she said. "I lived away from here for 11 years, and people I met were always surprised that I was educated and didn't have a strange accent."

"Mrs. Fontenot, who said she is retired — but not really — is looking for another writing project.

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"I wish there was something else we could get into," her daughter said. "There probably will be. It just hasn't surfaced yet."