Free Men of Color: The Louisiana Story

OUR PEOPLE AND OUR HISTORY.
By Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes.
Translated and edited by Sister Dorothea Olga McCants, D. of C.
Louisiana State University Press.
$7.95

By RAY SAMUEL

Sister Dorothea has done it again! Would that we had more like her to bring to this mono-lingual age some of the gems of French Louisiana literature. Remembering her delightful and informative "They Came to Louisiana..." It is no surprise that her scholarship would not lie dormant. It hasn't. This time she has given us the celebrated work of Desdunes, which, in the original, is one of those landmarks collectors of Louisianaana seek for years. To have it now, in English, faithfully translated, is a notable event.

First, let us set aside any discussion on the theme: "Was there ever such a person as a black Creole?" You will simply have to do your research on this for yourself and arrive at your own conclusion. If you do accept the premise that Creoles of color existed and were part of the history of Louisiana, and still are for that matter, then we can proceed with this review.

The foreword by the Rev. Charles E. O'Neill, S.J., skillfully puts the importance of Desdunes and his work in perspective. He tells how the free men of color came to Louisiana, how many of them originated here, and how they fared in libertinism, colonial Louisiana. It is well known that free men and women of color became extremely wealthy, owned slaves, and moved among as respected ladies and gentlemen, except in several singular instances, such as not being able to vote or hold office. He traces the restrictions of wars and economic conditions on these people apart, apart from the whites as well as from other blacks. Getting this picture in such intelligent and accurate focus, you are ready to learn what Desdunes has to say.

This New Orleans-born man of color came into the world in 1849, son of a Haitian father and Cuban mother. He worked at the Customhouse, where he rose to a rather responsible civil service status, always with the urge to write and to help his race progress. He organized the Citizens Committee which brought the celebrated Plessy V. Ferguson case to the Supreme Court. Almost totally blinded while weighing granite blocks about 1911, he lived until 1928, and is buried in St. Louis No. 2. His major work "Nos Hommes Et Notre Histoire," here translated, earned him a place in the Hall of Fame of Louisiana letters.

The compilation of memoirs of prominent people of color is highly fascinating, shedding light as it does on a number of remarkable men and women of New Orleans about whom very little has been known. Certainly few of these accomplished citizens of our city have been recognized for their talents in business, the professions, the arts, and for their charities. Perhaps the best known are the Philanthropist, Thomas Lafon; and Norbert Rillieux, whom Desdunes describes as "the most famous of the Creoles."

His invention of the vacuum pan method revolutionized the sugar industry. It is proper that his portrait may be seen on the walls of the New Orleans Tourist Center today, among the notables of New Orleans history.

Nowhere has there been a more eloquent plea for humanity and understanding than in Desdunes' tributes to the people of color who distinguished themselves, their race and their city in the past century.