Bayou Folk Museum

The Kate Chopin Home
Cloutierville, Louisiana
Bayou Folk Museum  c. 1810

Bayou Folk Museum, built by Alexis Cloutier and later the home of renowned author Kate Chopin, is today a tribute to the bayou folk who populated the area during the 1800s and the woman who brought them to fame.

The restored home, framed by beautiful magnolias and a graceful wrought-iron and brick fence, was already quite old when Kate arrived in 1879 with her husband Oscar and five children. Built by slaves between 1806 and 1813, the structure typifies early nineteenth century homes of the area.

The ground level, with only a dirt floor, was originally used as a storage area. The second floor living area was approached from the outside by a side stairway to the upper balcony and is still accessible from the outside only. The family’s quarters contained a large living room, large family bedroom, and three smaller bedrooms. An inner stair-case leads from the second floor to the attic, where construction details can be clearly seen. Four fireplaces share a central chimney.

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The original out-buildings are no longer standing. On the grounds were a kitchen, stables, a barn, and a cabin where the cook lived. To the north of the house stood the Chopin plantation store, which Kate managed for a short time after Oscar died.

Two small buildings have been added. Behind the main house is a structure that for many years served as a doctor’s office. Moved to the property in 1938 and now restored with the belongings of several plantation doctors, the office is dedicated to Dr. Eleanor M. Worsley, the first woman doctor in Natchitoches Parish. Adjacent to the doctor’s office is a 100-year-old restored blacksmith’s shop containing farm tools and equipment dating from the 1800s.

The Kate Chopin home is now owned by the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches. Established as Bayou Folk Museum in 1965 by Mildred McCoy, a life-long resident of Cloutierville and admirer of Kate Chopin, the home was later given to Northwestern State University. It is an official Louisiana Landmark listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Kate Chopin 1851-1904

In 1899, Kate Chopin published what is considered her finest work—The Awakening. Yet because of its controversial nature, the novel was met with shock and outrage. The reaction prompted Kate’s gradual withdrawal from writing and contributed to her much delayed entry into the halls of literary fame. A master storyteller, she was 75 years ahead of her time.

Kate O’Flaherty was born in St. Louis in 1851. Brought up by three generations of French-Creole from Louisiana, Oscar Chopin. Kate survived the next difficult years with the support of her remaining family and numerous friends and with a comfortable income from her mother’s and husband’s estates.

In 1889, encouraged by friends, she published her first poem, and her writing career was launched. Many of her works first appeared in periodicals such as Vogue, Atlantic Monthly, and Harper’s Young People, and were later published as collections.

Kate’s stories and poems reflected her open, independent nature. Many were drawn from the memories of better times in New Orleans and the recollections of the bayou folk of Natchitoches Parish.
When Kate published *The Awakening* in 1899, she was 48—at the prime of her creativity and popularity. Her daring story described a woman's sexuality and desire for self-fulfillment. She may have had some idea of the reaction her novel would cause in Victorian America, but she was hardly prepared for the total censure it brought. In St. Louis and other cities, the book was condemned and banned from public libraries. Many of Kate's friends and acquaintances shunned her, and her regular publisher rejected a third collection of short stories without comment. Shaken, she never fully reentered the literary arena.

In 1904, two days after a visit to the St. Louis World's Fair, Kate Chopin died of a brain hemorrhage. Her literary reputation lay tarnished and her writings almost forgotten. Not until many years after her death did she receive the recognition and acclaim she had long deserved.

The first Kate Chopin biography was published in 1932 by Father Daniel Rankin. Twenty years later, a French translation of *The Awakening* appeared, followed by the first English reissue in 1964. In 1969, Norwegian Per Seyersted wrote *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* and *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, both of which were published by Louisiana State University Press. A British edition of *The Awakening* appeared in 1978, followed by several other editions. In 1979, Northwestern State University of Natchitoches published Seyersted and Toth's third book, *A Kate Chopin Miscellany*.

Interest in Kate's work continues to grow. Today she is acclaimed not only as a great woman writer but also as a classic nineteenth century American storyteller.

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*Life*

*A day with a splash of sunlight,*  
*Some mist and a little rain.*  
*A life with a dash of love-light,*  
*Some dreams and a touch of pain.*  
*To love a little and then to die!*  
*To live a little and never know why!*  

—Kate Chopin, 1899