By Bill Brown
Staff Writer

Catherine Van Court said many years ago that she wrote "This Old House" in 1937 to "portray a phase of American life that has disappeared.

"By stressing the fortunes of one family I hope that the reader may get an illusion of reality and thereby glimpse the charm which life in the old south had," Van Court says.

Van Court's "Old House" was located 12 miles southeast of Natchez, Miss., along the banks of the Homochitto River, with frontage also on Sandy Creek.

It was on the Courtland Plantation, 2600 acres of fertile farmland, thick clusters of timber and meandering streams, just two miles from the Homochitto.

The cabin remained empty for eight years. In 1825, Courtland's sister, to whom he had bequeathed the property, decided to expand it, and name it after her brother. She constructed seven more rooms around the original four.

Smith lived in his home in solitude for just a matter of months. On February 13, 1817, Courtland Smith was found dead in his bed, with the point of an arrow embedded in his heart.

What did others think? They preferred to believe that White Apple, the chief of the Natchez, had returned from his burial mound as the foundation for his home.

Revenge? Retribution? Reprisal? Not according to solid timbers and fitted with thumb grooves and pegs. His sister, Adeline Baker, was Catharine Van Court's grandmother.

In addition to enlarging the house, she built a three room cottage close to the main house and connected it with an uncovered stone terrace. There were servant's quarters, a dairy, a smoke-house, two outside kitchens and large stables. The brick quarters erected for the field hands were among the most spacious and comfortable in Mississippi.

It was here that Catharine Van Court was born, not by design, but out of necessity. Her mother had planned to leave early for the hospital in Natchez. The rains came, and the usual placid, winding Sandy Creek filled rapidly. It spilled over its banks and flooded the only road out of Courtland Plantation. Catharine was brought into this world at Courtland House.

It was from this vantage point that she would watch history unfold before her. The Civil War passed by the front door between 1861 and 1865. Catharine's father went off to battle, and she stayed at Courtland Plantation with her mother and grandmother.

Please see Old House B3
Her book, written when she was 83 years old, is a diary of memories of "This Old House." It tells of learning to determine the age of rattlesnakes by the number of rattlers it had; of the opening of the burial ground and discovering the skeletal remains over which they had been living, and of finding arrow-heads and Indian pottery. She decided quickly that her great-uncle Courtland had shown poor judgement in deciding to build his cabin where he had.

Catharine Van Court had never owned the Plantation where she grew-up. She moved from Courtland Plantation in 1891 after her marriage. The property was passed from her grandmother to a relative on the grandmother's side of the family. Van Court lived in St. Louis and Memphis for the rest of her life, but returned often to see "This Old House."

Van Court always maintained a subscription to the Natchez Democrat, and it was in this paper that she read in 1932, that Courtland Plantation had burned to the ground shortly before they sold the plantation. Brooks has inventoried the trees on the property. He can tell you there are 73,459 trees on the land, of different varieties; 65 percent are hardwood and 35 percent are softwood. Brooks is negotiating with the National Forest, hoping that the remaining 854 acres can be integrated with the Park, restoring once again all of Courtland Plantation.

Over the years, many people have visited the land. Singer Wayne Newton was there twice, drawn by its beauty and serenity. He decided that he would not be able to spend enough time there to warrant the purchase price. Others could not finance the purchase. The asking price for the property is $1,350,000.

Brooks said that there has been a lot of interest shown by potential buyers from the Lafayette area, but so far, the National Park System appears to be his most interested client.

Courtland Plantation
The land is an area of unspoiled beauty. It is a spot where one can sit by the creek and hear the gentle breeze whisper through the trees. Courtland Plantation is history, of life like it once was. It is so real, those whispers sound like they could be the voices of White Apple, Courtland Smith, or any number of those other stalwart human beings who made Courtland Plantation what it was. It helped forge the legend of a southland — gentle, relaxed, and honorable — a Camelot sort of place that still lives in the history of this great nation.

"This Old House" remains ghostly — no photographs were ever taken of the old structure. Parts of the out-buildings still remain — decaying quietly. The cistern still is there and the old road to where the house used to stand is still in evidence.

According to H.P. Brooks, he knows of only three copies of Catharine Van Court's book that are still in existence. As long as one book remains and people read and thirst for knowledge of the past, "This Old House" will always be a part of our nation's heritage.