

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions
By Ned Hémard

Withering Heights

When one mentions the Presbyterian Church, the name that first comes to mind is that of the Scottish Calvinist clergyman John Knox. This dynamic religious leader of the Protestant Reformation founded the Presbyterian denomination and was at the beginning of his ministry in Edinburgh when he lost his beloved wife Marjorie Bowes. In 1564 he married again, but the marriage received a great deal of attention. This was because she was remotely connected with the royal family, and Knox was almost three times the age of this young lady of only seventeen years. She was Margaret Stewart, daughter of Andrew Stewart, 2nd Lord of Ochiltree. She bore Knox three daughters, of whom Elizabeth became the wife of John Welsh, the famous minister of Ayr. Their daughter Lucy married another clergyman, the Reverend James Alexander Witherspoon.

Their descendant, John Witherspoon (son of another Reverend James Alexander Witherspoon), signed the Declaration of Independence on behalf of New Jersey and (in keeping with family tradition) was also a minister. In fact, he was the only active clergyman to sign the historic document. Moving further down the family tree, New Orleans born Laura Jean Reese Witherspoon, Academy Award winning actress, is descended from both John Knox and Declaration of Independence signatory John Witherspoon.

Reese did not get to play Emily Brontë's Cathy in "Wuthering Heights" but she did portray Becky Sharp in Thackeray's "Vanity Fair". She is also universally known as blonde attorney Elle Woods in the "Legally Blonde" box office smashes. Her first feature role was in "The Man in the Moon" in 1991, and then there was "Pleasantville" in 1998, "Cruel Intentions" in 1999 and "Sweet Home Alabama" in 2002. As June Carter Cash in "Walk the Line", Reese landed the Academy Award, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild Award for Best Actress in 2005. New Orleans had an additional connection to the Academy Awards in 2006 when Helen Mirren won for her role as Elizabeth II in "The Queen".

Reese Witherspoon was born March 22, 1976, in the former Southern Baptist Hospital to Dr. John Draper Witherspoon and Betty Reese. But Reese wasn't the only Witherspoon actress to hail from the Big Easy.

Cora Witherspoon was born in New Orleans on January 5, 1890, and became a noteworthy character actress in 48 films of the 1930s through the 1950s. She was in "Libeled Lady" (1936) with Jean Harlow, "Marie Antoinette" (1938) with Norma Shearer and Tyrone Power, "Dark Victory" with Bette Davis and Clare Booth Luce's "The Women" (both in 1939). Her most notable role was as W. C. Fields' nagging wife in "The Bank Dick" (1940).

Fields is Egbert Sousé, which he informs others is pronounced "Sou-zay ... *accent grave* over the 'e'." Reiterated during the movie, it is not an *accent grave* at all but an *accent acute*. Fields has the movie take place in Lompoc, California (which had its start as a temperance community), and it is there that Sousé regularly visits the Black Pussy Cat Café. Fields lambastes Lompoc again by mispronouncing the town's second syllable as "pock" rather than "poke". This unemployed tippler is henpecked by three generations of women including his wife Agatha (played by Cora Witherspoon, who often took the roles of overbearing society matrons and harridan hausfraus).

Sousé asks the bartender at the Black Pussy Cat Café, "Was I in here last night and did I spend a twenty dollar bill?"

Bartender Joe Guelpe responds, "Yeah."

"Oh boy," sighs Sousé, "what a load that is off my mind? I thought I'd lost it."

The audience discovers that Lompoc has something in common with New Orleans. It is revealed that the Times-Picayune is not the only newspaper of that name. While Sousé sits on the bus line bench, he is reading Lompoc's Picayune Intelligencer when he quite accidentally aids in the arrest of a bank robber and the recovery of the stolen cash. This misdiagnosed misanthrope is then bestowed hero status and a job as "Bank Dick". And today the Picayune Intelligencer is the name of the official W. C. Fields Fan Club newsletter.

Cora Witherspoon died November 17, 1957, and is buried in Metairie Cemetery.

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