

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Dear Dorothy

Before there was a "Dear Abby" or "Ask Ann Landers", there was a "Dorothy Dix" and her career flourished in New Orleans during the first half of the Twentieth Century. Among other things, she wrote about happiness:

"Happiness is largely a matter of self-hypnotism. You can think yourself happy or you can think yourself miserable."

"You never saw a very busy person who was unhappy."

"We are never happy until we learn to laugh at ourselves."

Dix's most popular single article was a ten-point plan for happiness entitled "Dictates for a Happy Life", which included the suggestion:

"Make up your mind to be happy. If you are ever to be happy, it must start now, today."

And, of course, she wrote on dating and marriage:

A few words of love, she observed, were more important to a woman than having a man work himself to death for her. To men, speaking words of love was an embarrassment they had to endeavor so that they could find wives and never have to resort to it again.

"Nobody wants to kiss when they are hungry," she wrote. Thank goodness, in New Orleans good food is in abundance — and ergo osculation, as well.

Her realistic advice was humorous and concise, but also sound and sympathetic. Was it better to marry someone who adored you, a writer inquired, though you felt only affection for him, or to marry someone whom you adored, though his feelings were not intense?

"Marry the one you love," answered Dorothy Dix. "Marriage lasts a

long time. It seems longer with someone who bores you."

A young male suitor wrote that one evening he took his girl to dinner, then to the theater, then dancing. Would it have been all right to kiss her when he said goodnight? "No," Dix replied. "I think you did enough for her."

"Dorothy Dix" was the pseudonym of Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, born Elizabeth Meriwether near Woodstock, Tennessee, on November 18, 1861. There a well-mannered, whiskery old relative, who lived on the family property, taught Elizabeth to love Dickens, Shakespeare and other great writers of literature. As "Dorothy Dix" she would become a tremendously popular advice columnist in the early twentieth century, and (at least during her lifetime) Louisiana's most famous writer. Her advice column ran for fifty-five years and was read by people all over the world. Although her many avid readers often believed she lived in their own hometowns, she began her journalism career after a chance meeting with her next-cottage door neighbor Eliza Nicholson, the owner of the New Orleans newspaper *Daily Picayune* in 1893. By 1940 (at her peak), with an estimated audience of 60 million readers, Dix became the highest paid and most widely read female journalist of her time and recognized everywhere on her travels abroad. Her picture graced the sides of European buses, and adoring fans mobbed her in the Philippines.

Just like "Dear Abby" who came after her, Meriwether wrote under a different name than her own. Pauline Philips created the pen name "Abigail Van Buren" in 1956 by combining the biblical name Abigail from the Book of Samuel with the last name of former President Martin Van Buren. Pauline's twin sister Eppie Lederer wrote a syndicated column under the *nom de plume* of "Ann Landers" from 1955 to 2002. Their careers began about four or five years after Dorothy Dix's ended.

Elizabeth Meriwether, who married George Gilmer (her stepmother's rakish ne'er-do-well brother), first used the pen name "Dorothy Dix" in 1896 for her column in the *Picayune*; "Dorothy", because she liked the dignity of the name, and "Dix" in honor of an old family slave named Mr. Dick who had saved the Meriwether family silver during the Civil War.

The woman who would become America's expert on romance had little of it in her own life. Within a few short months of marriage Elizabeth realized that George Gilmer was mentally unstable. He would be institutionalized from time to time, leaving Elizabeth with no source of income. The stress of coping with her husband's illness eventually brought her to the Gulf Coast in hopes of seeking a better atmosphere. As part of her own therapy, she turned to writing. And she was pretty good at it, too.

Eliza Nicholson started Elizabeth on the "vital statistics" page of the *Picayune*. She then moved up from obituaries to recipes and soon to theatre reviews. At first mawkish and wordy, Dix was in no time excellent at her craft, writing in an unadorned style and refreshingly direct to the point. In 1896, Eliza hired Elizabeth to write *Sunday Salad*, an advice column for "womankind" tossed full of "crisp, fresh ideas ... a dressing mixed of oil of kindness, vinegar of satire, salt of wit." Soon the column was renamed *Dorothy Dix Talks* and, under that name, it was to become the world's longest-running newspaper feature.

Her compassionate yet witty column subsequently attracted the attention of publisher William Randolph Hearst, who in 1901 enticed Dix to join his *New York Journal*. Dix's first articles for the *Journal* were immensely popular — a series on the hatchet-wielding temperance agitator Carrie Nation. Her next assignment was to be the paper's crime reporter. She visited jails all over the country interviewing murderers, reporting on every trial that grabbed the nation's attention. There was the bigamist who married thirty-six women. His secret was getting them all to talk about themselves. And then there was the white slaver who left pieces of a young girl's scalp in his fireplace. Another story told of a woman who lived for four years hidden in her lover's office.

After seventeen years on the crime beat, Dix threw in the towel. She had never stopped writing her advice column, so in the 1920s she returned to New Orleans. Letters by the hundreds poured in each week with connubial questions asking, mainly, how to get a husband or how to put up with the one they had. Dix's own spouse, in the meantime, left home one day and never came back. He died after some years in 1931 in a mental institution, still speaking ill of his wife. In her column Dix scolded other women for being self-pitying, nagging, or vain — and not be too quick to abandon guilty husbands. In response to suggestions that Dix should divorce her own unstable husband she opined, "I never once thought of divorce. I could not say to others 'Be strong' if I did not myself have strength to endure."

Dix continued dispensing advice for several more decades:

"There isn't a single human being who hasn't plenty to cry over, and the trick is to make the laughs outweigh the tears."

"It is a queer thing, but imaginary troubles are harder to bear than actual ones."

"Confession is always weakness. The grave soul keeps its own secrets, and takes its own punishment in silence."

"The price of indulging yourself in your youth in the things you cannot afford is poverty and dependence in your old age."

When men reached what Dix termed "the age of indiscretion", they had "a sudden yearning for romance — the last call to the dining car." She urged the wives to "sit tight" for the children's sake and wait for the phase to pass.

The rival that most men were sure to encounter was not tall and dark but small and pink. "The first baby for all time puts the husband's nose out of joint."

The column's international popularity began to soar in 1923 when Dix signed with the Philadelphia-based *Public Ledger Syndicate*. At various times her column was published in 273 papers.

In addition to her newspaper columns, Dix was the author of numerous books such as *Hearts A La Mode* (1915), *My Trip Around the World* (1924), *Dorothy Dix, Her Book* (1926), *How to Win and Hold a Husband* (1939) and *Every-Day Help for Every-Day People*. Her advice column appeared right up to her death in New Orleans on December 16, 1951, at age ninety. She was mourned by a multitude of followers, all looking for love, or at least looking for answers. Dix delivered.

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