

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Li'l Liza Jane ... Newspaper Publisher

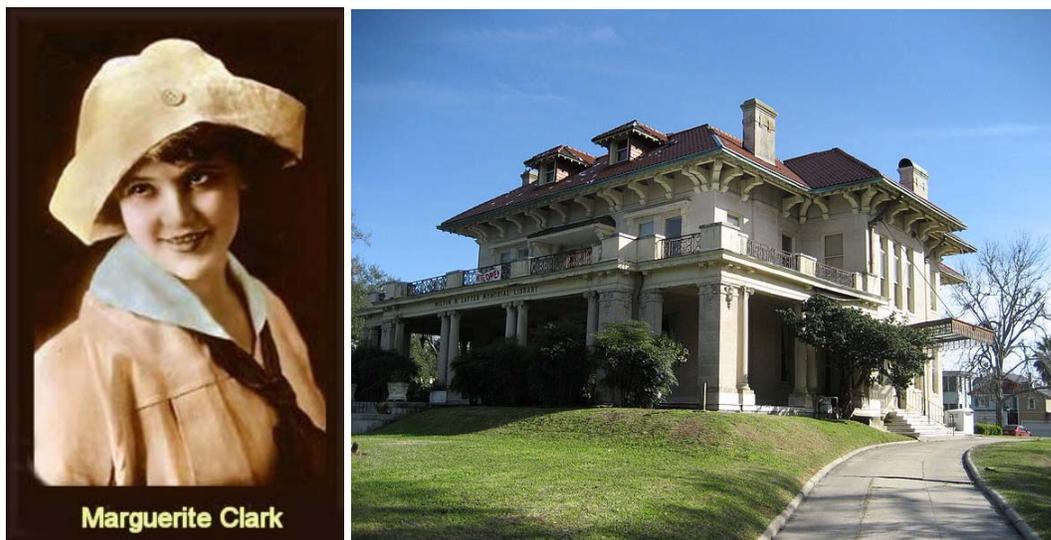
The first Jazz recording on a phonograph record was by Nick LaRocca's Original Dixieland Jass Band (ODJB) on the Victor Label (No. 18255), recorded on February 26 and released on April 15, 1917. The two sides were "Livery Stable Blues" and "Dixieland Jass Band One-Step". The band consisted of five New Orleans natives who would later change "jass" to "jazz" when they discovered that youthful pranksters would obscure the first letter of the word "jass" on their promotional posters. This record was immediately popular, and within months sales reached a million and a half copies. A *Maison Blanche* Department Store ad in New Orleans touted the recording as "positively the greatest dance record ever". The Jazz Age, aka the Roaring Twenties, was beginning to roar.



But the group had previously signed a recording contract with Columbia. In order to capitalize on the new jazz ballyhoo (and to provide a replacement for the ODJB), the Victor Talking Machine Company promoted Earl Fuller's Famous Jazz Band. On September

10, 1917, Victor released Fuller's recording of "Li'l Liza Jane", written by Countess Ada de Lachau in 1916. The song had been featured in the play "Come Out of the Kitchen" which ran at George M. Cohan's Theatre (on Broadway and West 43rd) from October 1916 to May 1917.

The beautiful and petite film actress, Marguerite Clark (4 feet-10 inches tall), played the lead role in the movie version of the play in 1919. "Come Out of the Kitchen" was a silent movie romance produced by Famous Players-Lasky and distributed by Paramount Pictures. It was filmed in part in a beautiful 14-room Greek Revival mansion known as Ossian Hall (construction beginning in 1848) in Pass Christian, Mississippi. Previous guests included Andrew Jackson and Benjamin Butler. The imposing residence burned down in 1956.



Actress Marguerite Clark and her home on St. Charles Avenue

Marguerite Clark (February 22, 1883 – September 25, 1940) had married the charming Harry Palmerston Williams (lumber, sugar, mineral leases and aviation) of Patterson, Louisiana, in 1918, the year before the movie. She retired from films in 1921 to spend time with her husband at their stately New Orleans home on St. Charles Avenue (today the Milton H. Latter Memorial Library). The couple was active in New Orleans society. Marguerite reigned as queen or "*Tsaritsa*" of the first Alexis ball at the Tulane Theater in 1924, wearing a gown said, at \$5,000 then, to be the most expensive for a queen in Carnival history. She was also in the court of the ball of the Mystic Club. At one time, Harry owned forty-two planes, making him the largest individual owner of aircraft in the world. One broke the speed record at the Chicago World's Fair, reaching an unbelievable 305 miles per hour. After Harry P. Williams (October 6, 1889 – May 19, 1936) died tragically in a plane crash in 1936, Marguerite sold the assets of his Wedell-Williams Air Service to Eastern Airlines the following year. Marguerite died in 1940 at age 57. She and Harry are buried together

in Metairie Cemetery.



Playbill from "Get Out of the Kitchen" with hit song sheet cover

Harry P. Williams' brother was Lewis Kemper Williams, who, along with his wife Leila Hardie Moore, were philanthropic civic leaders and the founders of the Historic New Orleans Collection.

"Li'l Liza Jane" has always been a popular song, especially in the Crescent City, and Huey "Piano" Smith (of "Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu" and "High Blood Pressure" fame) recorded a stellar New Orleans version for Ace Records in 1959 (with a jammin' sax solo of Dvorák's "Humoresque"). When the New Orleans Jazz and Rhythm & Blues group, the New Orleans Nightcrawlers recorded the song in 2001, it became "Funky Liza". And the BlueBrass Project (composed of Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews, Big Chief Monk Boudreaux, bluegrass musicians and others) did a rousing rendition in 2004.

But this story is about another diminutive Eliza, one who was the first woman in the United States to own and publish a daily metropolitan newspaper.



Mrs. George Nicholson, nee Eliza Jane Poitevent, aka Pearl Rivers, featured in the Philadelphia Inquirer, January 7, 1888

Eliza Jane Poitevent (1843 – 1896), of Huguenot ancestry, was born near Pearlinton, Mississippi, in 1843. Her mother became ill and had relatives raise her in nearby Hobolochitto, Mississippi. Eliza began a literary career as a young poet and was published in several newspapers under the *nom de plume*, "Pearl Rivers". The *Picayune* in New Orleans (begun in 1837 by George W. Kendall) offered her a job as a literary editor when she was a mere twenty-one years of age. She added articles on art and fashion, as well as additional literary content. Two years later (and a month after New Orleans' first Rex parade), she married the paper's publisher, Colonel Alva Morris Holbrook, who was almost three times her age. This created a problem with his ex-wife who, returning from New York, went psycho-shooting twice at Eliza and missing. She then crowned Eliza with a bottle of bay rum, after which the new Mrs. Holbrook escaped dripping in blood. Good thing, too, for the deranged first wife then took an ax to all the furniture. This tantrum was followed by a protracted and messy court battle.



Mr. Holbrook did not live much longer after all this brouhaha, plus his newspaper was subject to several lawsuits and thousands of dollars in debt. In the 1874 Soards' City Directory, the *Picayune* advertised itself as "a conservative journal owned by Southern men" with a single copy available for 5 cents. Holbrook died when Eliza was only twenty-six, and she inherited the paper under these dire circumstances. Her family tried to convince her to return home, but she would hear nothing of it. She guided the *Picayune* (later merged with the *Times* and eventually the *States-Item*) for the next twenty years (1876-1896), increasing its circulation and making it a financial success.

This she credited to the paper's astute business manager, George Nicholson, who she wed in 1878. Eliza showed great creativity, adding a society page called "The Society Bee", political cartoons, sports coverage of the Pelicans (and other teams) and Dorothy Dix's popular advice column. Dix's real name was Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, and her column was the prototype of those of Abigail "Dear Abby" Van Buren and Anne Landers (twin sisters, Pauline and Esther Friedman). The paper also took strong stands against inhumane sporting practices and cruelty to animals.

George Nicholson died February 4, 1896, and Eliza Jane Poitevent Holbrook Nicholson died on the 16th of that same month. The paper was left to their sons, Leonard Kimball and Yorke Poitevent Nicholson. The *Picayune* stayed under Nicholson control until 1962.

There was even a famous black singer and banjo player who lived in New Orleans named John "Picayune" Butler. Touring the Mississippi Valley and beyond during the first half of the nineteenth century, he was one of the first documented black entertainers to have had a profound impact on American popular music. And just what, one might ask, is a *picayune* – and where did the *picayune* come from?

The Spanish *peso* was a silver coin in widespread use in the New World after 1497. It had a nominal value of eight *reales*, which were often obtained by dividing the coin into eight "bits" (hence the phrase loved by pirates' parrots, "pieces of eight") or quarters ("two bits"). That's where "two bits, four bits, six bits, a dollar" comes from. No cheers, please. Due to the prevalence of these silver pesos, they became a standard of international currency. As a result, the Bohemian *thaler* and American dollar had roughly the same value as the *peso*. But the lowly *picayune* was worth only half a *real*. Its name comes from the French *picailon*, derived from *picaïoun*, a term from Provence that means a small coin. This half a "bit" was therefore about 6 ¼ cents

(close in value to a nickel), the original price of the paper (and hence its distinctive title). Due to the coin's meager value, by extension "picayunish" can mean "of very little worth" or "trivial". After Eliza Jane's reign over the *Picayune*, this could no longer be said to be true.

PEARL RIVERS AND HER HOME.—There has been much inquiry as to who is the woods nymph, or rather Nayade, who slugs so sweetly under this pseudonym. Perhaps we might as well tell her anxious readers, not only in the *Picayune*, but in all respectable journals into which her verse so gracefully runs, that our poetess takes her name from that beautiful stream, Pearl River, near the mouth of which she was born. She is a maiden of hardly adult years, Eliza Poitevent, the daughter of Capt. W. J. Poitevent, well known to most of our business men as a builder and owner of steamboats, and a manufacturer of lumber at Gainesville, on that river, about twenty-five miles across the plain from the Bay of St. Louis, which is now, as Gainesville formerly was, the seat of justice of Hancock county, Mississippi.

The Picayune, March 17, 1868, reveals the identity of "Pearl Rivers"

Being such an impressive figure, she was given the privilege of renaming the town of Hobolochitto to its present name of Picayune, Mississippi. The town was incorporated in 1904, and four years later it was annexed into the newly formed Pearl River County. In 1922 it became a city. She named it for her beloved paper, which itself was named for that insignificant bit of change.



Ossian Hall in Pass Christian, with its enormous ionic columns, scene location for the 1919 film, "Come Out of the Kitchen"

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