

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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MISS LILLIAN A. ACHILLES 1871-1941

“What footnote can be added to the life of a woman who, small, delicate and reserved, towered above the crowd and by character and ability became a unique personality and a community institution?”

“From an early love of learning and of books developed Miss Achilles’ life’s passion, her alter ego, Swan Library. To generations of school children she was its living personification, its gracious mistress, almost the library itself. She was friend and counselor, teacher and guide---and even philanthropist.”

“Out of that largely vanished world of formal etiquette and custom into which she was born, Lillian Achilles succeeded in escaping and becoming herself, perennially young in spirit, adapting herself to the times, becoming more mellow with the years and yet fundamentally one of the few remaining feminine counterparts of the ‘gentlemen of the old school’”. These editorial comments from the Orleans Republican following her death in April 1941, indicate Miss Achilles’ effective service, her civic, social and personal accomplishments for mankind which lauded to her this high esteem.

She was born in Ridgeway, the daughter of Albert S. and Ellen Brown Achilles. Her younger brother Joseph B. Achilles was for many years the County Historian. Upon her graduation from the Albion Academy, she conducted a private primary school for a short time. Following this she served for 12 years as librarian of the Albion Town Library. That library which was eventually absorbed by Swan Library was located on the second floor of Central School, which later became the American Legion building. Through Miss Achilles’ personal friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Wm. G. Swan she helped arouse their interest and managed to persuade them that a fine library would be of great benefit to the community. The Swan Library came into existence in 1900 and Miss Achilles faithfully served that institution for the next forty-one years until her death. Her library science training was secured at Chicago University.

“She had a sure knowledge of what was best; her sympathetic and understanding interest in individual tastes was great; her deep interest in people, above all in children, drew into the library many who caught from her a love of reading that will make life happier for them.”

Miss Achilles was a fertile writer herself and possessed remarkable poetic talents. She was a devoted member of the Albion First Baptist Church and a member of the Schoolmates Reunion, Albion Historical Club and Business and Professional Women’s Club.

It has been forty years since her passing, yet this poem which she penned just a few weeks prior to her death suggests her eternal life.

Easter

“I laugh at dissolution,” I who know
The garden’s grace, the dark seed’s mystic story;
Who watch in creeping green the life-sap flow,
The parting earth, the emerging Springtime glory.

I laugh with you, my sunny daffodils,
My crocuses, all sunny-eyed and gay.
You rose from death, your life the law fulfills;
Earth tried to hold you, but you could not stay

There is no death, my soul. Old fears outride;
There’s just a call and then a glad surprise.