

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian



## A Tribute To Cecilia A. White 1911-1987

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On behalf of the Orleans County Municipal Historians I would like to pay tribute to the memory of Cecilia A. White, Medina Historian, who passed away recently in Medina Memorial Hospital after a long illness. She was a devoted historian and since her appointment to the post 25 years ago, had many accomplishments to her name in the field of historical research and interpretation. Her lengthy obituary which appeared in the Journal Register on Sept. 11 certainly gave testimony to Ciel's accomplishments and many well-deserved awards during her life-time. To publish here a biographical sketch of her life, would only reiterate what appeared in her obituary. Therefore, I'm going to let Ciel speak for herself. It seems that back in 1982 Ciel was interviewed by Helen McAllister through the Orleans County Historical Association's Oral History Project. Through Ciel's love of local history she wished to impart historical appreciation to others. Therefore, what better way to pay tribute to the honor of one whose heart was so intrinsically a part of Medina's history than to learn from the life of this most respected lady in her own words.

Here then, follows numerous excerpts from the Oral History interview: Ciel speaks, "I was born in Medina on April 4, 1911 in my Aunt's home down on Gulf Street. My parents are Anna Radzimski Hoffman and Joseph Hoffman. Shortly after my birth, they moved to Shelby Basin for a short while and then purchased this home here at 573 East Avenue where it's been in the family ever since. I was about four years old when we came over here.

"In those days the conditions were bad and everybody worked, including my mother and myself, as soon as I was able to do so. I was a husky young gal and in the summertime my mother would take me down on the muck farm because she felt I could work right along with her.

"I went to school during the school year, but on Saturdays and in the summer, which is when they needed the help the most, I worked on the muck.

"My father worked for Bill Gallagher as a mechanic. Mr. Gallagher was a road builder and contractor, and my father worked for him a good many years. Then he went to Heinz's.

"During the regular season (on the muck) when you were weeding, as it was called, you got paid by the day. If I remember rightly, the women got \$1.50 a day, but the kids only got \$1.00. I guess they figured you wouldn't do as much or that you would monkey around so much, or something. But it was by the day, and it was from seven (a.m.) to five (p.m.). You would have an hour for lunch and, of course, everyone would

have to bring her own lunch. Our job was dependent on the crop; onions and carrots required weeding, and after the lettuce had reached a certain height it had to be thinned out because the end product was a head lettuce. . . rows were actually, I would say, a quarter of a mile long. You would start out in the morning and go down the end of the row. The other thing was you were not right next to the next person. . . You'd be working a single row between your knees straddling this row, then they would skip a row and that was your "coming back" row. . . As I recall, the ladies that worked with Mother were Polish; my mother's sister and some of the other people from down in the Gulf Street area. This was true on the other muck farms (they all had the same crops as I recall).

"The one thing that I remember very distinctly in all the mucklands were the wind breaks — the rows of trees. I think they were Lombardy (trees) because they would break off a stick and put it in the ground and another tree would come up very quickly. Everything grew very fast. This helped prevent the wind from removing the top soil, the black muck.

"As I got older and realized that I was working on the muck farm while some of the kids (friends) in school were working in the store or something, I got a little self-conscious of the fact that I was working on the muck farm. It was sort of degrading — you know how kids are. So, Mother finally said that when I got into High School I wouldn't have to go and work on the muck.

"Mother kept the money (I earned) and it was primarily a family "kitty." We had bought this home here on East Avenue and it was mortgaged. We never had that kind of money, and we wanted to pay off the mortgage. The family was one where they didn't get anything unless they paid cash. That was the idea. It all went into the "kitty." Of course, Mother bought all my clothes and my books, and I think I got a dime to go see "The Perils of Pauline" and "Tarzan and the Apes" at the old Diana Theater on Saturday, if I was good during the school year and if I didn't have to work. So I never had an account of my own.

"Another thing I didn't mention but I think it would show the attitude of the people working; they sang a lot. One of the things they sang were many of the old Polish hymns. I can hear those echoing even today because all the workers knew them. The ladies sang as they went along in their work.

"But in those early days there was, more or less, a "caste" system. In those days you called it "living on the wrong side of the tracks." There were the poor people and the rich people. The rich people were generally known as the "400." That was the way they said it in those days. . . . these people had established businesses on Main Street or in industries in town and had made a considerable amount of money. They were wealthy by the standards of that day. Had built some very lovely homes, and brought their children up with the finest of everything. Consequently, we on "the other side of the tracks" meeting them in our bloomers and our sweater, and probably at the end of the day, very dirty, were considered "poor trash," or "poor whites." We were in a different category, even though we washed ourselves and cleaned up just as well as they did. None-the-less, you felt this; and this was true in school.

"You see my folks went to Sacred Heart Church and there the language was Polish; we had never spoken Polish in our house. I couldn't even say the alphabet. They tried to teach me but I didn't have much luck. So, Mother thought I should go to St. Mary's and make my First Communion. She enrolled me there for the one year. I think it was the fifth grade.

". . . I remember that the settlers in this community came over from Europe in the late 1800's, and they didn't have the opportunity for an education, and they were bound and determined their children were going to have this education. Consequently, they were uneducated and their work was of the laboring class, while those I speak of as the "400" had the benefits of a good education. So it was rather obvious in those days of this class distinction.

"But when I grew up I began to realize that this was a type of mental barrier. I think most of the people here today never think of it in the same light. Now there may be a few, but that has passed. Of course, the Stock Market crash, and the bank failures, and a few other things took some of the kinks out of the pocketbooks of some of the "400" . . . I always said, "If you do an honest day's work, you gotta be proud", and I always was.