

Mississippi Women: Their Histories Their Lives

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Significant contributions to history and society aren't always made by the well known. That point is made immensely clear in this new book from the Mississippi Women's History Project.

The collection, penned by historians, activists, and scholars, profiles seventeen women from Mississippi's past and present. Some of the women are famous in their native state and beyond, like writer Eudora Welty, civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, Confederate daughter Winnie Davis, and poet and educator Margaret Walker Alexander.

But others profiled made their contributions out of the spotlight, in churches, scientific laboratories, private businesses, courtrooms, and classrooms. The editors, in their preface to the book, said they deliberately sought a mix of famous women and lesser-known women "whose so-called ordinary lives radiated extraordinary meaning."

Scientist Elizabeth Lee Hazen is one such "ordinary woman." Hazen, who died in 1975, ten years shy of her hundredth birthday, made crucial scientific discoveries that led to a treatment for yeast infections. Felicité Girodeau, who was black, helped build the Catholic faith in Natchez, recruiting many other black people to her church. Suffragist and activist Pauline Van de Graaf Orr was a founding faculty member of a Mississippi women's college. She fought for years to equalize the curriculum at the college so that female students received the same caliber of education as male students, and she campaigned for female college administrators.

The authors are careful to cover all aspects of their subjects' lives, which brings even more personality and humanity to their depiction of these remarkable women. Readers learn about the women's professional lives, as well as their families, volunteerism, hobbies, and passions. Such a presentation will help modern female readers identify with these historical paragons.

The book, which spans from 1791 to the present, also deserves praise for providing an unbiased accounting of history. The authors objectively report about their subjects, presenting the women's choices and mistakes without passing judgment about them. For example, they do not hide the fact that some of Mississippi's most prominent suffragists campaigned for voting rights for white women only, with little concern for the electoral freedom of the state's black women.

As with most anthologies, Mississippi Women suffers slightly from having so many different authors. Some writers simply have more flair than others. Hence, a few profiles drag, mired by inexperienced or less talented writers, while others are biographical page-turners. Still, the writing flaws are slight and tolerable, given the fascinating subject matter.

AMY JOYNER (January / February 2004)

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