

## MARY L. SHAFFTER

## Creole Women†



Ladies' bathing suits. June 11, 1898.

Creoles are the descendants of French or Spanish, born in Louisiana. Incorrectly the term is applied to any one born and living in New Orleans or its vicinity. Indeed there is a broader misapplication common in some parts of the state, where fresh eggs, Louisiana cows, horses, and chickens are called creole eggs, creole ponies, etc.

New Orleans, in reality, is two cities, the dividing line being a broad, tree-bordered avenue, running east and west from Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River. "Up town," or the south side of this avenue, which is called Canal Street, is the home of the American population, while "down town," the north side, is the French or Creole Quarter. Up town the streets and the houses and many of the residents are new. It is a progressive, a self-made, a new city. Down town is the old town, with little improvement since the days when the houses were first built. Occasionally, a creole family crosses the line, as it were, and goes to live up town, but they rarely become Americanized, for, above all things the creole is conservative.

To-day the wealth of the city is in the American portion: thirty or forty years ago its wealth and refinement were centered in the French Quarter. Not much wealth remains there, but the people still possess what money cannot buy—the chivalry of their men and the grace and beauty of their women.

The women are called beautiful, and justly so. It is true that as the years creep on apace, they incline to *embonpoint*<sup>1</sup> and the down on their upper lips often darkens and deepens into a very perceptible line. Despite these facts, a creole woman grows old gracefully, she never becomes coarse looking, and her hands never lose their distinctive marks of refinement.

There live no lovelier girls than those one meets in creole society in New Orleans. Such figures, lithe yet full, such shapely heads, with crowns of glossy black hair, such a clear olive complexion, and great dark eyes, which speak before the arched red lips,—who can condemn the heart that is taken captive by the bewitching beauty of *la belle creole*?<sup>2</sup>

Creole women are artistic by nature; they paint and play and sing. They talk well and are good at repartee. They usually speak several languages, French being their mother tongue. They emphasize with

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1. Stoutness, plumpness.

2. The beautiful creole.

gesture, and occasionally surprise the listener with a *Mondieu!* or *O ciel!*<sup>3</sup> which, with them, is no profanity.

As wives, creole women are without superiors; loving and true, they seldom figure in domestic scandals.

The creole woman entertains beautifully. Her salon, her toilet, show the refinement of her taste. In her manner there is none of the American "gush"; she receives with unaffected cordiality, which has the true ring. She is careful in the selection of her friends, for down in the *vieux carré*<sup>4</sup> of New Orleans money cannot purchase an entrance into society.

Creole women, as a rule, are good housekeepers, are economical and industrious. When one pauses to think that these women were reared as princesses, with slaves at their command, one realizes that noble blood has made noble women. They never speak of their poverty, or proclaim their ingenuity in supplying a dainty table from a slender larder. They have accepted their lot, they attend to their homes, they make their cheap dresses with their French taste and wear them with the grace of a *grande dame*.<sup>5</sup> There are many creole women who have striven hard with pride, and have wished to die rather than to acknowledge their poverty, but whose better nature conquered, and they now hold honored places among the bread winners of to-day.

Creole women have large families. This they do not regard as a misfortune, after the manner of some of their more progressive sisters. Their babies are made welcome and tenderly reared. Especially are the girls the object of much solicitude. Above all their beauty must be preserved, their hands and feet, their glossy hair and white teeth must be cared for. They must learn to dance, to sing, and to embroider. Their religion, too, must not be neglected. At ten or twelve they must go, arrayed as brides, to take their first communion. The next few years are spent at a convent, and at sixteen or seventeen the girl is ready for society. She receives with *maman*, visits with *maman*, shops with *maman*, goes to balls, the opera, and to church with *maman*. Sometimes it happens that a gentleman visits the house say five or six times; if so *papa* asks his intentions. If he expresses friendship only, he is then requested to discontinue his coming; but if, on the other hand, he declares his love, all things being desirable, the visitor becomes a suitor, the engagement is announced, the girl wears the honors as a *fiancée* but a short time, and then becomes a wife.

While there is about creole women that refinement that one admires, a *noblesse oblige*<sup>6</sup> that one respects, a dependence that attracts love, it must be acknowledged that as a class they are not progressive. They are tender, loving mothers, they care for the health and beauty of their children, but they know nothing of the beauty and development that

3. "My God!" or "Heavens!"

4. The French Quarter or "old city." See above, p. 6, n. 9.

5. Great lady.

6. Literally, "nobility obligates"—the benevolent or charitable behavior regarded as the obligation of those born to privilege.

come from physical culture. They train the little feet to dance bewitchingly, but are horrified at the suggestion of a thick-soled, broad-heeled boot and a five-mile walk.

They are accomplished rather than intellectual. Women's rights, for them, are the right to love and be loved, and to name the babies rather than the next president or city officials.

Musically gifted, they prefer a gay *chansonette* to the intricate passages of one of Bach's fugues, and they would rather wander through the realms of poeise than to venture into the shadowy region of metaphysical laws.

They are not club women, they do not aspire to fame, and it is true that the average creole woman cannot compete, in some respects, with her American sisters.

When the pictures in books do not make creole women proud and pure and loving, capable of great development morally and mentally, women of whom Louisiana should be proud, then it is simply because the painters painted without a model and the writers never knew the password by which to gain admittance into the society of creole women.

## WILBUR FISK TILLET

[Southern Womanhood]†

Among the many changes that have taken place in the Southern States and among Southern people within the past thirty years, some of which are the direct result of war, and others the simple and natural development of the times, there is none more significant and worthy of notice than the change that has taken place in the condition, the life and the labor of Southern women.

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We might conveniently divide our subject into these three heads: (1) the Southern woman before the war; (2) the Southern woman during the war; (3) the Southern woman since the war. Were this our mode of presenting the subject, it would be to give three pictures of the same woman, and not of three different women. The virtues that adorn and ennoble the Southern woman of to-day find their explanation and origin

† From "Southern Womanhood as Affected by the Civil War," *The Century Magazine* 43 (November 1891): 5-16. For a more recent discussion of ideologies of southern womanhood, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988).

Kate O'Flaherty was eleven years old when the Civil War broke out. She lost a beloved stepbrother, who died of disease when returning from the Confederate Army. The O'Flaherty family was staunchly anti-Union; the Chopin family left Louisiana when the war broke out and spent those years in France. Emily Toth comments that for Kate O'Flaherty the war meant "street violence, constant fear, and sudden death" (*Kate Chopin* [New York: Morrow, 1990] 70).