



acadiana profile



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Remembering

Mary Alice Fontenot

Friend of children
and creator of

Clovis Crawfish

**Why So Much Cancer
In South Louisiana?**

**Restoring The Past
In Washington, La.**

**Home For Retired
Veterans Being
Built In Jennings**

**Camellia Bridge
Finally Opened
In Lafayette**

*Oysters Rockefeller,
Quiche Lorraine
And Other Great
New Orleans Recipes*

The Enchanted World Of Mary Alice Fontenot

Though she has gone to her eternal reward, the characters she created – especially Clovis Crawfish – live on in the hearts and imaginations of many, many children.

By Julie Fontenot Landry

(Editor's note: Mary Alice Fontenot was surely Louisiana's best-known and -loved author of children's books. Here, her daughter, Julie, shares her memories of the mother she loves and the writer she admires.)

Wake up, Julie! Come see! The fairies danced last night! They left a ring of toadstools on the grass!”

Such was my childhood with my mamma, Mary Alice Fontenot, author of the Clovis Crawfish series of books and storyteller *par excellence*.

Mamma, I think, wanted to believe everything her imagination conjured up, and that was plenty. Even better, she shared that imagination with my childhood friends and me. She not only regaled us with fairy stories but loved hearing us squeal in delicious fear when she told about the headless painter who walked the railroad tracks behind my grandparents' house on full-moon nights or the *feu follet* that appeared as a large ball of fire in the doorway of a young woman who broke a promise to her dying mother.

She said those stories came from her Scotch-Irish mother, who loved to tell tall tales, but since my grandmother died

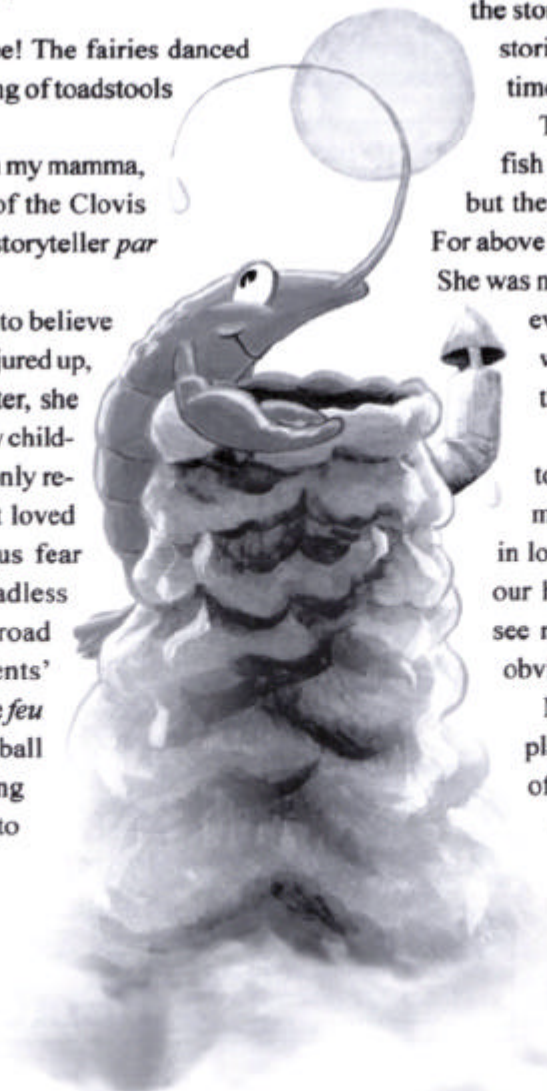
when I was only seven, I never got the chance to verify that. I do know that my mother loved to tell tall tales, and the taller the better! The more dramatic and bizarre the story was, the better she liked it. And the stories always had a moral, though sometimes it seemed unfair.

That changed with the Clovis Crawfish stories. They always had morals, too, but theirs were satisfying, never disturbing. For above all things, my mamma loved children. She was not the kind of woman who had to hold

every baby she saw, but once a child was old enough to listen, she was like the Pied Piper. Children flocked to her.

When I was in the fifth grade, she took over as our afternoon teacher for most of the year, and my classmates fell in love with her. When they came over to our house, I never knew if they came to see me or her. In fact, sometimes it was obvious that she was the attraction.

My mamma was an avid gardener. Our place in Eunice was often named Yard of the Week by the Garden Club. Because of a brush with a pre-cancerous skin condition when she was 30, Mamma avoided the sun, but she was always out in the yard in the early morning and the late afternoon. Mamma knew that





At the height of her popularity in the late 1980s, Mamma displays some of the Clovis Crawfish books that helped to make her one of the most prolific children's authors in Louisiana history.

— Photography by
P.C. Piazza,
The Advertiser,
November 1989

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certain bugs kept away other bugs, so she offered a nickel to any child who would bring her a praying mantis to let loose in the yard. Rusty Moody sold her the same mantis three or four times. She probably knew it, but she paid him anyway.

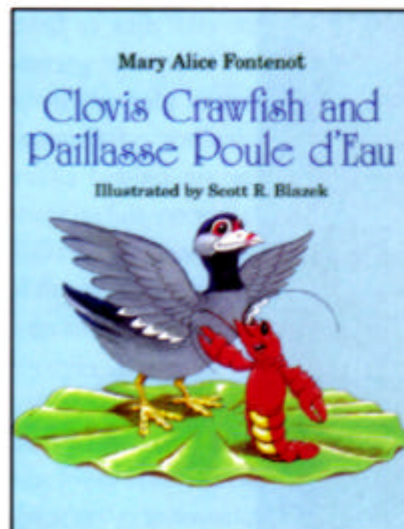
Because of Mamma, I was never afraid of the creatures that lived in the yard. She taught me to stay perfectly still if a bee or wasp landed on me, and I was never stung. I had a pet lizard named Lizzie and even a pet cockroach named Archie. I had a rabbit that lived in a kitchen drawer, and we had a yard full of chickens, ducks and guineas, and, of course, my daddy's bird dogs. I had a dog and a cat as well. Once we found a raccoon in the bamboo that bounded our yard on three sides, and we kept it for awhile. I'm not sure what happened to it. Probably Daddy let it go in the woods.

By the time I was born, Mamma had already begun her writing career. She had always been a good writer, winning school prizes at St. Edmund's before she eloped with my daddy at the age of 15 and moved from Eunice to Crowley. At one point after my sister and brother

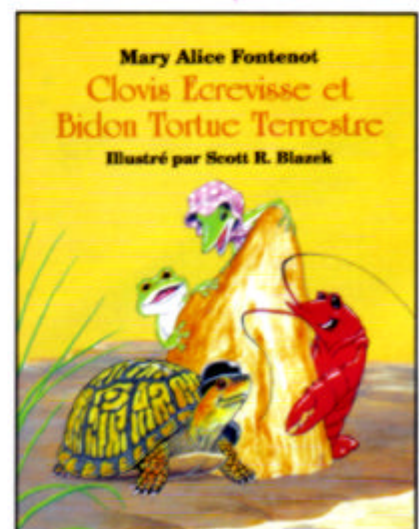
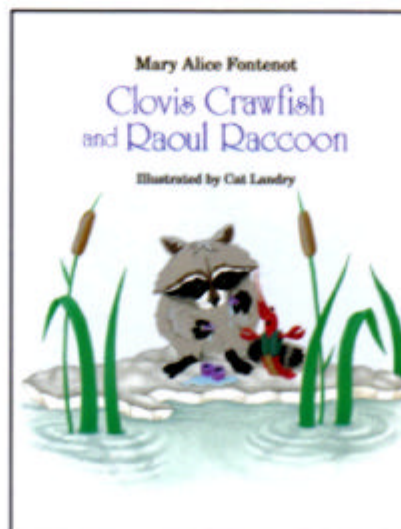
were in school, she went to trade school and learned to type, becoming a secretary at the Hodges stockyard in Crowley. At about the same time, she became a charter member of the Beta Delphian Club, founded to support culture and the arts. At each meeting she gave a talk on a book she had read. The club was instrumental in getting a library for Crowley, and soon it became her task to read one of the latest books to arrive at the library and to write a review for the Crowley paper, *The Signal*. She was astounded and delighted when they offered to pay her for it; she would have paid them for the chance to be published!

While she was still in Crowley, she met the novelist Frances Parkinson Keyes, who had decided that the rice industry would make a good setting for a novel and had moved to Crowley to write it. Mrs. Keyes found Mamma through Daddy, who was a rice miller, and ended up employing Mamma to do research for her. She was so pleased with Mamma's work that she dedicated the book, *Blue Camellia*, to Mamma, and then, when she wrote the sequel, *Victorine*, she named a major character after my brother, Dale Fontenot, who by that time had been killed in a plane crash. Having a book dedicated to her meant so much to Mamma that she made sure that nearly all her books were dedicated to someone – family members, friends, people who helped to promote her books, even children who were special fans.

When I was about two, Daddy was hired as manager of the River Brand Rice Mill in Eunice, and we moved to Mamma's hometown. Looking for something to keep herself busy, Mamma went to the Eunice weekly newspaper, *The New Era* (which became today's *Eunice News*), and offered to write book reviews. The publisher, Burton Grindstaff, who was to become a lifelong friend, did not need book reviews, but he did need a



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women's news editor and said my mother could do the job at home and turn in her work once a week. Thus began her career in journalism, a career that was to span more than half a century. Burton taught her to write journalistically, and she went on to write for *The Daily Advertiser*, *The Rayne Tribune* and *Church Point News*, the *Iberville South of Plaquemine*, *The Daily World*, and finally back to *The Crowley Post-Signal*. In addition, she was sometimes published in the *Morning Advocate* and *Acadiana Profile* magazine.

In 1957 she decided she wanted a college degree, so she passed a high school equivalency exam and enrolled at SLI (now ULL), staying in Lafayette during the week and coming home to Eunice on weekends. I was in the boarding school at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, courtesy of Mrs. Keyes. Mamma was at SLI only a semester, however, when Daddy became very ill. After he recovered, he went to Mississippi to open a new rice mill, but rice was new to Mississippi, and no one knew if the venture would be a success. So, instead of going with him, Mamma moved to Lafayette, getting a job at *The Daily Advertiser*.

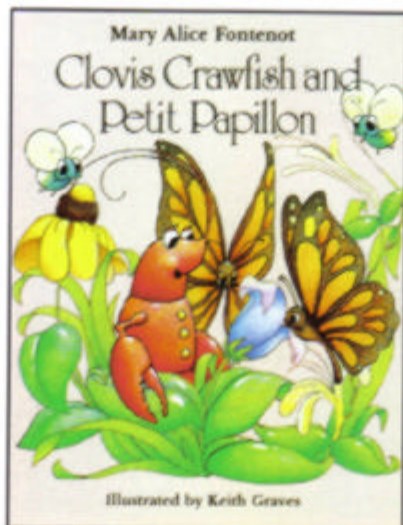
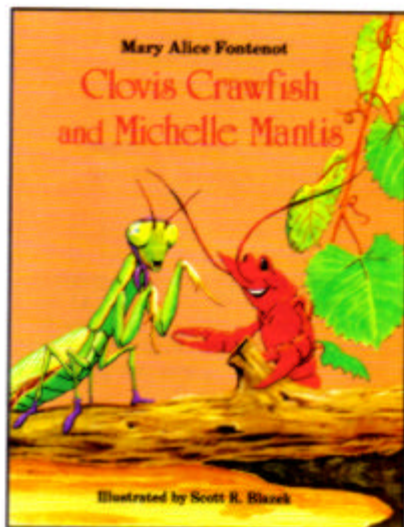
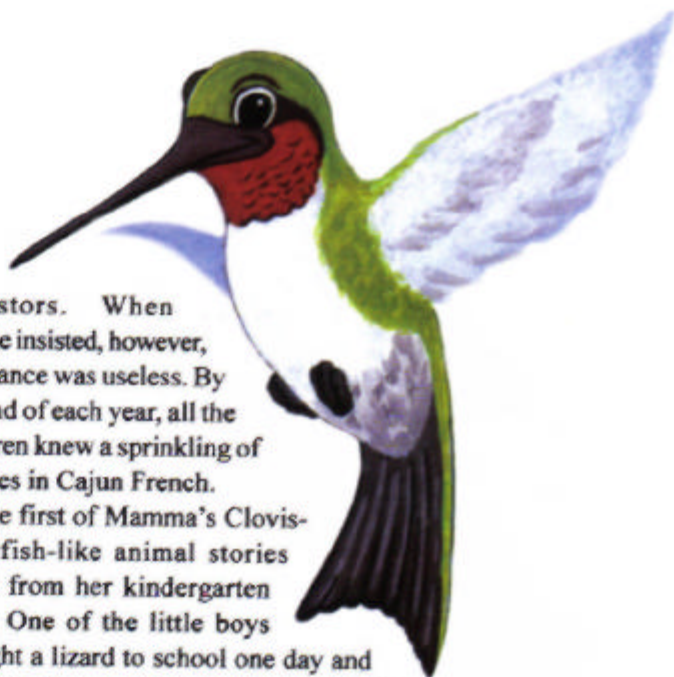
It was at *The Advertiser* that Clovis Crawfish was born.

Mamma had done such a good job with my fifth grade class that when Msgr. Martel, the pastor at St. Anthony's, needed to replace a kindergarten teacher who was expecting, he asked her to take over. She kept the job for two years. Louise Olivier, a friend of Mamma's and one of the pioneers of the Cajun cultural revival, insisted that she teach the children some French. Mamma protested that the only French she knew was the Cajun French she had learned from her father, Valery Barras, and the little standard French she had picked up through her own efforts at learning to read and write the language of her

ancestors. When Louise insisted, however, resistance was useless. By the end of each year, all the children knew a sprinkling of phrases in Cajun French.

The first of Mamma's Clovis-Crawfish-like animal stories arose from her kindergarten days. One of the little boys brought a lizard to school one day and was creating pandemonium among the girls. To quiet down the children, Mamma began to tell them a story about a lizard. After that, some child brought a little creature every day, and the stories continued. Of course, since they were all Louisiana creatures, they would all know a bit of French. It was also important to Mamma to teach the children something about the scientific characteristics of the creatures and to make them seem appealing to keep the children from being afraid of them. Thus, without ever taking an education course, Mamma had discovered holistic teaching, covering ethics, science, French and community building in one lesson. It was a formula that served her well in the Clovis Crawfish books.

While she was at *The Advertiser*, someone who knew of her kindergarten experience asked her to teach a Saturday French course to children at the Lafayette Museum. Her students loved her, and when one of them





Mamma conjured up all sorts of characters for the Clovis Crawfish series, and her talented illustrators helped bring them to life with paint, brushes and canvas. Here, Clovis

waves good-bye to a new friend, Michelle Mantis, as several of Clovis' other buddies look on.

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A mostly self-educated woman, my mother loved to read books and she loved to tell others about them. **Left:** Mamma (left) gives an oral book review of *Blue Camellia* to a New Iberia women's club, circa 1950. The lady to the right is unidentified. This book, written by novelist Frances Parkinson Keyes while she resided in Crowley in the 1940s, was dedicated to my mamma, who worked as background researcher for the book. **Above:** Always feeling at home in the world of journalism, Mamma takes a break from her writing, about 1963, during her tenure with *The Daily World of Opelousas*.

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☛ *The first of Mamma's Clovis-Crawfish-like animal stories arose from her kindergarten days. One of the little boys brought a lizard to school one day and was creating pandemonium among the girls. ☛*

went to Japan with his family, she wrote to him, always including in her letters an animal story with some French words in it. She was at work (on *Advertiser* time) writing one such story, about Willie the Worm, when she was caught in the act by the women's news editor, Lydia Krauss. Mamma expected to be fired, but instead Mrs. Krauss suggested that she publish the story in the newspaper.

The stories soon became a regular feature. Willie the Worm gave way to Calvin Crawfish, crawfish because it was a typical local animal, and Calvin after photographer Calvin Blue.

One person who really liked the stories was USL English Department head Mary Dichmann. When she met Mamma at some function, she urged her to get the stories published in book form. Mamma was so flattered that someone of Dr. Dichmann's distinction was even interested in her work that she began to believe in the stories herself. Under the influence of Dr. Dichmann, Louise Olivier, Msgr. Jules Daigle, and her cousin, State Comptroller Roy Theriot, she began to see that she could have a role in the Cajun cultural awakening that was beginning to happen around her.

That's when Calvin gave way to Clovis. She had already decided that her main character would be a benevolent, strong, authoritative figure. The person who came to mind was Clovis Durio, the beloved police chief of Eunice, who was equally at home jailing criminals and playing dominos with me in the City Hall garage while Mamma was rehearsing upstairs with the Eunice Little Theater group. The name Clovis had the added advantage of being that of the first French king.

First she tried sending the story to national publishers, but all she got was rejection slips, each saying the story, "Clovis Crawfish and His Friends," had only regional appeal. Finally she sent it to Claitor's Publishing in Baton Rouge. Bob Claitor was mainly a publisher of law books, but he at once saw the possibilities. The next step was finding an illustrator, since a book for small children needed pictures or drawings. Mamma called on a Eunice friend, graphic artist Reginald Keller. Reginald's illustrations became the standard that all subsequent Clovis illustrators have emulated. Some feel that Reginald's black and white drawings have never been surpassed. The first Clovis Crawfish book was published by Claitor's in 1961.

There are now 17 Clovis Crawfish books, and the series is published by Pelican Publishing Co. of Gretna. The eighteenth is in production. Since Reginald Keller, seven illustrators have worked on the books: M.J. Richard, Keith Graves, Eric Vincent, Christine Kidder, Scott Blazek, Cat Landry (my daughter), and Julie Buckner. The later books in the series are in full color, and each contains a song.

When she first began to include songs, Mamma, who was an accomplished pianist, wrote lyrics, melody and arrangements herself. Often, however, she enlisted the help of family members and friends to write the musical arrangements, not because she needed help, but because it pleased her to have people she liked involved with her work. She gradually turned over more and more of the song creation to me. Although I never had Mamma's musical talent or discipline, she was always hopeful that if she gave me enough musical tasks, the talent she believed was

☛ *Mamma was so flattered that someone of Dr. Dichmann's distinction was even interested in her work that she began to believe in the stories herself. ☛*

there, below the surface of my natural indolence, would eventually come out.

Mamma was very conscious of her lack of formal education, even though anyone who knew her would have sworn she had multiple degrees. Despite the fact that her academic knowledge, mostly self-acquired, was both broad and deep, she was always in awe of people with advanced degrees and always wanted her work to be associated in some way with people with credentials or celebrity. Toward this end, she would often ask others to write forewords, to provide pronunciation guides, to write music, and so on, so that their names would be connected with hers. She said this would help the books to sell because it would give those people a stake in the success of the books, but it also seemed to give her a sense of security, an imprimatur of legitimacy.

Throughout the series, she gave her characters alliterative names, knowing from her experience as a kindergarten teacher that alliterative words were helpful to beginning readers. Often she included names and events from her own life or historically relevant people and events. For example, Bayou Queue de Grenouille, where Clovis lives, comes from Bayou Queue de Tortue, which figured prominently in Mamma's two-volume history of Acadia Parish. Fernand Frog came from Mamma's uncle, Fernand Barras, and Fédora Field Mouse was named for his wife. Denis Dirt Dauber was

☛ *Many characters' names came from Eunice friends. Leo and Laurice Lightning Bug were named for Leo and Laurice Ardoin. Bidon Box Turtle was named for a gentleman who was nicknamed Bidon.* ☛

named after the patron saint of France. Mamma loved the musical *Gigi*, so she named Maurice Mosquito Hawk after Maurice Chevalier, who was in the film version, and Gaston Grasshopper after Colette's main male character. Andrew Armadillo came into the stories to reflect the movement of Texas oil people into Louisiana in the early twentieth century.

Many characters' names came from Eunice friends. Leo and Laurice Lightning Bug were named for Leo and Laurice Ardoin, who owned an electrical supply company. Bidon Box Turtle was named for a gentleman in Eunice who was nicknamed Bidon because of the derby hat he always wore, but the surname the box turtle gives when asked is Calhoun, after the owner of Pelican Publishing. Mamma chose Buckingham for his middle name to accentuate his Anglo background.

Sometimes the stories and songs in the Clovis books arose simply from the scientific reality of the characters or the moral she was trying to teach, but sometimes they had deeper meanings for Mamma. Mamma was less than five feet tall, and her characters often reflect the intimidation that short people feel around tall folks.

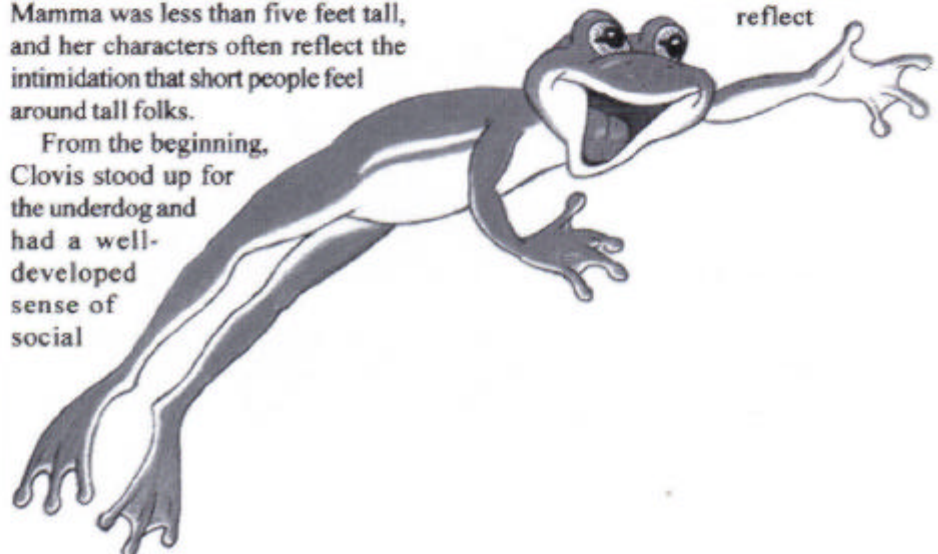
From the beginning, Clovis stood up for the underdog and had a well-developed sense of social

justice. This was not surprising to anyone who knew Mamma. Once she was invited to judge the queen's contest at the Crawfish Festival along with columnist Ann Landers. As she walked along the street in Breaux Bridge during the parade, she noticed a couple of young white men jeering at a black marching band. She told them to stop, and when they didn't, she reiterated her admonition, whopping one of them with her purse. The jeering stopped.

Mamma invented the character Echo Gecko after she came to live with my husband Michael and me in 1996 and got to know the little orangey-pink Mediterranean geckos that inhabit our yard.

By the time Mamma wrote the story of Raoul Raccoon, she had had surgery for a staph infection and was suffering from Parkinson's disease. When the characters encouraged Raoul in song to forget his misery and remember good health, I feel she was encouraging herself not to give up, no matter how bad she felt, which was pretty awful some days.

Other children's books besides the Clovis series reflect



my mother's life. After dealing with her own three children, numerous nieces and nephews, kindergarten students, and 22 grandchildren and step-grandchildren, Mamma knew well the tension that develops when children want to be independent but do not want to lose the security of their parents. She developed this idea in *Tuh-Tye: The Last 'Possum in the Pouch*.

One of her favorite places in Lafayette was the old Sans Souci bookstore, among the first places to hold an autograph session for her. Her story about Annabelle the white mouse, which has yet to be published in book form, is set there.

When she began writing the Clovis stories, Mamma relied on her own observations of nature and those of family members for the science lessons in her stories. Later, however, she began to back up what she knew with library research and consultation with fish and wildlife personnel. In any case, she loved research,

which had always been part of her work as a journalist, and she was great at interviewing. Her breadth of knowledge and her sincere interest in people helped her to formulate questions that would elicit maximum information from the person with whom she was speaking.

She had box upon box of index cards bearing her research for her Acadia Parish histories, her biography of Sheriff D. J. "Cat" Doucet of St. Landry Parish, and *The Louisiana Experience*, which she and I wrote together. All of this stood her in good stead when she wrote historical feature stories for the *Crowley Post-Signal* and hosted a radio program on KSIQ in Crowley (in her eighties).

Mamma was also a natural performer. After her work became well known, she was often asked to speak to organizations and in schools

and libraries.

When she began to speak, even small children became silent and listened raptly. When she read her stories, she gave each character its distinctive voice, and the children's faces reflected the emotions the characters were



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● *When she began to speak, even small children became silent and listened raptly.* ●

feeling. She also developed a lecture that she called "A Light Look at Cajun Culture" to use with adult groups. She included in it several stories that she made up and that have now become part of the folklore of the area. For example, she explained the migration of Cajuns to east Texas with the story of the pirate who was shipwrecked along the coast near Cameron. He wanted to get back to Jean Lafitte's camp at Galveston, so he walked toward the setting sun. Whenever he took a step, his peg leg made a hole in the sand. Cajuns coming along later saw the holes, thought they belonged to crawfish, and followed them all the way to Texas.

Mamma was very prim and proper in her behavior and in her speech. She never used even the mildest form of profanity or obscenity. However, she had a great sense of humor. To illustrate the Cajun's amorousness, she told the story of Théophile, who was wringing his hands and groaning as he stood by his wife's coffin.

"What I'm gonna do? What I'm gonna do?"

His friend came to console him, saying, "Mais, Théophile, how come you carrying on like that? You still a young man! You gonna find yourself another wife."

"I know," Théophile replied. "Mais, what I'm gonna do tonight?"

Mamma was still writing Clovis Crawfish stories almost up to the day she died. When her kidneys failed the first time in February 2002, she came up with the idea of having Clovis and his friends move away from the bayou because Madame Rat-Musqué had returned, and Clovis did not want to be eaten.

At that point in her life, writing was becoming more and more difficult and her handwriting harder and harder to decipher. She had had to give up



*While Mamma found great satisfaction
in making up stories and writing them,
she was never happier than when she
was reading her books to children.
She always said she wanted to be
remembered as a friend of children.*



Mamma and I posing for a publicity photo to help promote a book we co-authored, The Louisiana Experience, published in 1983.




typing after writing a memoir of Bishop Jeanmard. She would jot down a few notes and I would discuss them with her and try to transcribe them. Because her Parkinson's medication made her groggy much of the time, she had difficulty pulling the story together. I have all the notes, and one day I will do as I promised her and finish the story. She wanted me to take over Clovis where she had left off, but those are shoes I doubt I could ever fill.

As Mamma's stories are read by subsequent generations, as people's


♥ *Because her Parkinson's medication made her groggy much of the time, she had difficulty pulling the story together. I have all the notes, and one day I will do as I promised her and finish the story.* ♥

lives are enriched by the history that she preserved, and as her jokes make their way across the country and beyond, she will continue to make her mark on the world.

She always said she wanted to be remembered as a friend of children, and I'm sure that will be the case. The teacher in me can look at her work, admire it, analyze it, and wonder at the mind and spirit that produced it. But to the child in me – and I'm weeping as I write this – she'll always be my mamma.



**Clovis
Crawfish**
books by
Mary Alice Fontenot, *Cajun Night Before
Christmas*, and other Louisiana titles available
from Pelican Publishing Company,
1-800-843-1724 or www.pelicanpub.com



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