

# *“Sixty Years of Salon Memories”*

By

Genevieve Munson Trimble

As one grows older, one’s memory becomes the most unreliable of witnesses.

Who said that?

I did to Ann Bruce and Diana Jones when they asked me to give the opening program as a 60 year reminiscence for this important year of Le Petit Salon.

It put me in mind of that wonderful duet sung by Maurice Chevalier and Hermione Gingold in the movie *GiGi* in which they sat together and tried to recall the important events of their long years of knowing each other. Oh yes, they kept saying, I remember it well – all the while a study in contradictions.

You wore a gown of gold, Chevalier recalled

No, I was all in blue

Am I getting old, he asked finally

Oh no! Not you.

So if I don’t seem at all times to remember it well – please forgive and understand!

The first thing I was certain of was that Ann and Diana had it wrong. I couldn’t possibly be the Salon’s oldest living member – if not in age, in terms of tenure of membership. How could that possibly be? I immediately got out the Salon Directory and painstakingly

went down the list, checking each member from A. to Z. And unbelievably, there it was:  
Genevieve Trimble 1948. Over 60 years ago!

Where had the years gone? It came to me that in 1948, the Salon and I were both in our mid-20's – the Salon being 24 years old at the time and I a little bit older when I first entered the doors of this building.

What was my first impression when I attended that first afternoon reception? I remember it well! Everyone, I thought, seemed to me to be rather matronly. Why they were all at least in their 40's. Many of them arrived in cars, driven by chauffeurs – very impressive. Apparently back then they didn't have to walk those treacherous sidewalks from the public garage.

They all wore hats, some of them very ornately flowered and veiled. All wore white gloves and all were in afternoon dresses or suits – not pantsuits, Heaven forbid!

I was with proper hat and gloves myself, having been given strict instruction beforehand by my Aunt who was a Board member and undoubtedly the reason I had been asked to be a member in the first place.

If not just because of my Aunt, perhaps it was because of my close proximity to the Salon itself. My husband Bud and I had just come down from Chicago back to our roots in the South to live in New Orleans and had bought a house in Chartres Street just blocks from the Salon.

It was an enchanting world to me! So many well-known writers and artists were living around me. I was doing free-lance writing at the time and it was stimulating to be there. Tennessee Williams was there and it was very exciting to meet him for coffee at the Coffee Pot Restaurant which I learned later was the first headquarters of Le Petit Salon and where it was founded.

In my daily walks around the Quarter, I often passed by and admired this beautiful old house in St. Peter Street with its iron balconies and gate and handsome Greek Revival door, always closed, and I had been told that it was the clubhouse of Le Petit Salon, one of the most exclusive and prestigious women's organizations in New Orleans. You can imagine how honored I felt to be invited to enter those gates as a new member!

Though to someone still in her twenties, I may have thought at first glance the members of the Salon looked a bit matronly, it did not take me long to discover that they had more energy than I had. I was awed by how active, outstanding, accomplished, charming and entertaining these women were and how dedicated and efficient they were in the running of the Salon.

And who was the very first to greet me and extend her white-gloved hand in welcome? Why, the head of the receiving line, the famous Dorothy Dix, Mrs. Meriwether Gilmer, who was still President of the Salon in 1948. What a thrill it was to be greeted by this legend of the journalism world. I – and millions of others – read her column every day and hung upon her every word of wisdom and wit. I knew that she had begun her career when Mrs. Eliza Jane

Nicholson, owner and editor of the old *Times-Picayune*, bought one of her stories for three dollars. It was William Randolph Hearst, looking for new journalistic talent, who spotted her work in the *Picayune* and hired her for his *New York Journal*.

Her first murder trial story was the sensation of the decade; she covered the famous Stanford-White slaying and soon became the best known girl reporter in the nation – a fact that caused one judge to comment “I see Dorothy Dix has just arrived in court. The trial may now proceed.”

Being the second president of the Salon, following the famous Miss Grace King’s death, is believed to be the only office that Dorothy Dix ever held and I was told it took a great deal of persuasion to get her to agree to accept the offer.

Many years later, I was to find an old letter written to Mrs. Marcus Feingold who must have been the Chairman of the Nominating Committee at the time:

Dear Mrs. Feingold,

I still think it would be better for the Salon to have a President who could give it more time and service than I can but if the members still desire to honor me with that high office, I shall feel that I am drafted and have no choice but to accept the compliment.

Signed,

Dorothy Dix

Although reluctant to accept the honor, once President she must have enjoyed it, for Mrs. Gilmer was President for almost 20 years.

Dorothy Dix died on December 16, 1951, just a few years after I became a member. I remember there was a memorial service for her held here at the Salon that December, attended by all of us members of the Salon and the Gilmer family. Mrs. Stanley Arthur, her great friend and confidential secretary, read a poem. George Healy, editor of *The Times Picayune*, gave a talk and Herman Deutsch, the well-known columnist, gave a tribute.

Of course, as soon as I became a member I was issued my coveted share of stock. Although the Salon had been founded at the Coffee Pot headquarters in 1924, it was not until a year later, in 1925, that it moved into its permanent home, here at 620 St. Peter Street. And 21 days after its purchase of this house, the Salon amended its charter. Why? To incorporate itself in order to issue stock for the purpose of paying the expenses attached to the purchase of the building.

The Charter would now read, "The capital stock of the corporation shall be twenty thousand dollars (\$20,000) divided into 800 shares at the par value of twenty-five dollars each. At this point members were allowed – encouraged, really – to purchase as many as 10 shares each as an attractive investment.

It would not be until June 29, 1989, that the Charter would be amended again in a reorganization, the purpose of which was to change the Salon to a non-profit status – i.e., a 501c (3) tax-deductible organization. Members were asked to surrender their shares of stock in exchange for \$19.24 per share. As far as I can recollect, nearly everyone donated their shares. But there were a few of us who, for the sake of sentiment, held on to the stock. And I must confess, I was one of the culprits, for here is mine for you to see, found in the bank box of the Whitney Bank after my husband's death in 2004. And I discovered that it was signed by Dorothy Dix, and I actually had become a member of the Salon on November 10, 1947, almost to the date of today, 62 years ago.

From the beginning, I was very curious to know about the origin of the Salon but no one could exactly tell me the details. It was all subject to conjecture!

Several of the older members felt that the Salon was an outgrowth of another old club, the Quartier Club, which used to meet in the Jackson House just across the street. That seemed possible, but others were certain that it had derived from a close alliance with our neighbor to the left, Le Petit Theatre. That seemed even more believable since, in the early days, the Salon was often the hostess for gatherings after the little theatre performances – and some of the star actresses were indeed the Salon's own members.

Mrs. William Tompkins West, who would become one of our Presidents, said her Mother was an early member and she felt that the Salon grew from a group of ladies who once

lived in Esplanade Avenue and, steeped in Creole and French tradition, had earlier begun having little salons of their own – i.e., receiving at home on certain afternoons of the week.

That seemed very plausible to me when I discovered that Miss Grace King, the famous writer and first President of Le Petit Salon, was for many years famous as well for her Friday afternoons at her home on Coliseum Place.

But one thing was certain beyond doubt! Le Petit Salon was organized at the location on St. Peter Street which is today's Coffee Pot Restaurant.

I was also very curious about the history of this beautiful old house. It was Mrs. Ernest Villere, one of the members, who first told me that this house was built by her great-great grandfather in 1838. His name was Victor David and he was one of the numerous Frenchmen who came here from France in the wake of the fall of Napoleon. She did not know exactly what date it was that he came, but it was before 1819, for that was the year he and a young woman named Anna Rabasa were married just across the way at the St. Louis Cathedral and the marriage was performed by none other than the celebrated Pere Antoine.

David became a prominent citizen of the city and one of the most wealthy from his successful hardware business. In 1837 he purchased this lot in the most stylish part of the city and began work on the building. He was meticulous in its construction and it is considered to be Greek Revival at its best, a jewel of the Quarter, and one of the most distinguished houses in the city. How fortunate, I thought for us, that the far-seeing ladies of the Salon in 1925 had the foresight to acquire it and to preserve it.

Sam Wilson, the late architect, once wrote “to the ladies of the Salon belongs the distinction of having taken the first steps in the restoration and rehabilitation of the Vieux Carre – and one of the most significant acts was to save its architectural heritage by its purchase of the Greek Revival residence of Victor David”.

That is a distinction we have inherited and which as members of today we should always be proud.

Now what you may ask did the Salon look like back in 1948?

Very much the way it does now in 2009. The rooms, as I recall, were all painted cream-colored, I remember someone referred to it facetiously as “New Orleans beige”.

The pieces of furniture, largely gifts and bequests of former members, were very much the same as they are today.

There hung the same two handsome chandeliers of hand-painted Sevres porcelain and bronze in the drawing room and dining room that I learned came from the girlhood home of Mrs. William Tompkins West, who would one day become president of the Salon. It was beneath these, she later told me, she danced in 1910, the year she made her debut and was Queen of Carnival.

There was the rosewood set in the dining room which once belonged to Pierre Soule and was used by him in the Embassy when he was U.S. Ambassador to Spain.

There was the Mallard rosewood parlor set bequeathed by Madame George de Montrond. And the lace and embroidered panels that hung at the windows of the drawing



room and dining room, painstakingly done by hand by Mrs. Attilius Bassetti and her daughter, Madeline, also early members of the Salon.

Shortly after I became a member, the panels finally disintegrated and had to be replaced. Mrs. Thomas Carter Bruns-Bernard, who lived down the street in the Pontalba, and was noted for her good taste and decorating talent, was appointed to replace them at the windows. She worked very diligently on the replacement and finally the day came to unveil them. A remnant of the curtains she chose is tastefully still hanging there today – but Mrs. Bruns had added something extra – valances rather fancifully draped in the dining room, as I recall, and swagged in ropes of crimson and cream striped fabrics. I must have been on the committee because I remember I was there with the group. We all applauded and told her how much we admired them. “Well, I don’t!” Mrs. Bruns said in the very emphatic way she spoke when she was sizing up a situation of which she didn’t approve. “Hanging up there, all they remind me of are chicken entrails”. I don’t know where or when Mrs. Bruns had ever seen chicken entrails – but, over our protests, down they came, never to be seen or heard of again.

A new addition to the Salon when I became a member was the installation of the elevator, a much debated innovation. It seems Mrs. Gilmer highly objected. A letter that she wrote in 1948 to Mrs. Charles Buck, the longtime chairman of the Board of the Salon, who really ran things, went like this:

“Dear Mrs. Buck:

A rumor is going the rounds that there is a plan on foot to erect a baby elevator in Le Petit Salon that will have a carrying capacity of only 3 passengers at a time. At this rate of speed, it would take a couple of days, more or less, to get our members upstairs to the refreshments which appear to be highly relished by all of them. So far as I can see, the only recourse is to build a shaft in the patio, not ornamental but practical. But you and Mrs. Frierson, the efficient Chairman of the Stock and Building Committee, can talk it over. I hate very much to even make a suggestion to you as you are so efficient and clear-sighted.”

Mrs. Gilmer ended by acquiescing and donating \$5,000 toward the elevator and the rest was given by Mrs. Cecil Guy Robinson and Mrs. Roy B. Harrison.

And speaking of the refreshments, I remember quite vividly that my first observation of the afternoon teas was that apparently the refreshment committee was operating on a tight-fisted budget because the afternoon teas seemed to me to be quite frugal.

Mrs. Herrick Lane, a wonderful lady and friend and an ardent member, was in charge of the teas when I first came and was noted for her delicious hot biscuits and bacon, passed sparingly among the guests as were the sandwiches which disappeared like magic. Apparently this tradition of so diligently adhering to the right-to-the-penny budget was inherited from our founders.

Witness the first report that I later found in the archives written by Mrs. W.E. Weeks, a longtime Chairman of the House Committee, regarding the Thursday afternoon teas:

“The opening tea was given on December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Full membership attended (almost 250 were present). We served 750 sandwiches, 350 cakes, 4 pounds of candy, 3 ½ gallons of coffee, 2 pounds of pecans and about one million biscuits.”

She then makes the happy notation, typical of her reports, that it cost “an average of 14 cents a person”!

We are being fed a lot better today, but apparently this right-to-the-penny handling of funds has no doubt contributed to the fact that we are solvent today even in this bad economy.

And what about the programs? From the start, the Salon’s Thursday afternoons were famous for their entertaining, high-caliber versatility. Alice Montana and Pauline Jackson were the longtime housekeepers when I first came. Pauline died not so long after, but Alice was here for almost 50 years.

It was she who remembered and told me that in the early days programs were confined to the drawing room floor. The other floors of the house, including this auditorium, were apartments bringing in much-needed income.

The piano, she recalled, was placed by the front window in the drawing room and a platform provided for the speakers. Each week she and Pauline laboriously brought up the folding chairs from the ground floor, arranged them informally around, salon-like, in the drawing room and dining room, and took them down immediately following the program to make room for the afternoon tea.

There was nearly always music of some kind to accompany the programs which sometimes resulted in a very unusual double-billing – such as the one I found in the social column of the *Times Picayune* in our scrapbook. “Mr. Shepherd will speak on the Impact of Relief Programs on Local Government followed by songs by Mr. Theodore Montegut.” I suppose Mr. Montegut was brought in to lighten the effect of such a heavy, boring subject.

Our own Salon members were often the performers – Mrs. Eberhard Deutsch and Mrs. Allen Johness, Mrs. Otto Schwartz, Miss Jessie Tharp and other actresses who belonged to the Theatre next door – who sang, acted, and gave readings at the drop of a flowered hat.

There was one taboo; an unwritten, unspoken rule! While the programs must be entertaining, instructive and embrace au courant topics, religion and politics of a controversial nature should never be introduced. The ladies of the Salon did not want any ruffling of feathers or feelings!

Our Thursday afternoons made headlines on the society page each week back in 1948. “Le Petit Salon Opens its Doors Thursday” would be emblazoned across the page. Then followed a story in great detail by the society editor of the *Picayune* who reported enthusiastically about what Mrs. So-and-So wore and who poured tea and what colorful flowers were on the table, followed by a long list of members who had attended. All of these long accounts were read avidly each week by the many members who were there to see if their names were listed. The long list of names usually ended with the words, “and one or two

others". No one wanted to be in that anonymous category. For a long time, I was one of those one or two others!

Now who were some of the outstanding women here when I came and who have now departed who played such a part in the history of the Salon and who will always live in my memory?

Besides Mrs. Gilmer, there was Mrs. Charles Buck, who was a human dynamo and, who for years, as Chairman of the Board, ran the Salon as she did innumerable committees and organizations in New Orleans.

There was Mrs. Stanley Arthur, Dorothy Dix's confidential secretary, one of the wittiest women I ever knew, who herself authored such books as *My Husband Keeps Telling Me to Go to Hell* and later co-authored with Harnett Kane *Dear Dorothy Dix*. I remember when Mrs. Arthur first met me saying dryly "Young woman, you are entirely too young to be here in the Salon. You haven't even reached the mid-life crisis!"

There was Mrs. George Frierson, for a long time Chairman of the Stock and Building Committee, a former Vice President and dedicated member of the Board. Mrs. Frierson had a beautiful antiques shop on Royal Street in a building which she owned and where she lived.

There were artists!

Miss Alberta Kinsey, an honorary member and well-known artist who lived in the Myra Clark Gaines House at 823 Royal and who painted virtually every patio in the Vieux Carré, was one of the pioneers of the French Quarter restoration.

There was the noted sculptress, Angela Gregory, whose master work, the monumental statue of Bienville, stood at the Union Passenger Station and now resides at Decatur Street.

There was Ethel Crumb Brett, the talented technical scenic director of the Le Petit Theatre next door. For a time, I volunteered at the Little Theater and grew to know Ethel well.

My main accomplishment at the Little Theater for which I would be recognized would not be my acting ability, sad to say, but rather the fact that when the theater was dark, closed for the summer, since I lived but a few blocks away, I was appointed by Ethel to come everyday to feed the theater cat – Minoo. I remember well even to this day how spooky it was to go into that vacant theater calling Minoo out of the darkness. Bud, my husband, was appalled at my accepting this task: “Why you don’t even like cats”, he said. “I don’t like cats” I admitted, “but I do love Ethel Crumb Brett”.

The Spring Fiesta was a big thing in the social world when I first became a member. The Salon was one of the eager participants opening its rooms for the home tours. Some of the members of the Salon were the ladies who organized and ran it. There was Mrs. Philip Werlein, who lived in St. Ann Street and was noted as an outstanding preservationist.

There was Mrs. Jefferson Hardin who lived in the corner apartment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Upper Pontalba. There was Mrs. Robert Laird. Both of these ladies were co-chairs of Patios by Candlelight. Mrs. Laird, a beautiful accomplished woman, mother of the Laird twins – now our members, Katharine Livaudais and Harriet Martin – became one of the recipients of the coveted *Times Picayune* Loving Cup.

There were noted newspaper women:

Flo Field, a blithe spirit, who wrote a well known play, *A la Creole*.

Miss Anna B. Ellis, Society Editor of the *Picayune* as was Alice Dameron, and Elizabeth Kell Perkins who wrote for the *Item*.

There was Mrs. John T. O'Ferrall, who died in 1973 and whose memorial is the Salon Courtyard which she tended so faithfully even when years encroached upon her.

There was Mrs. Jacob Morrison. Mary was an ardent and early preservationist and one of the first to come to live in the Quarter in the 1930's and continued her work in preservation as an early member of the Vieux Carre Commission and Vieux Carre Property Owners and the Preservation Resource Center until she died in 1999.

There was Mrs. Kemper Williams who with her husband General Williams had their residence in Royal Street in the building we know now as the Historic New Orleans Collection. Bud and I spent a number of unforgettable evenings at dinner there when the Williams lived there. How lovely it is that so many ladies who are preservationists of the Historic New Orleans Collection are now active members of Le Petit Salon.

I have been a member, an officer, or Board Member under the administrations of the following 19 presidents:

Mrs. Meriwether Gilmer

Miss Mary Wing Tebo

Mrs. William T. West

Mrs. Lawrence Himel  
Mrs. Charles T. Henley  
Mrs. W. Rogers Brewster  
Mrs. Charles Lafayette Brown  
Mrs. Arthur Geary  
Mrs. Chester Mehurin  
Mrs. Jerry Nicholson  
Mrs. George Hopkins  
Mrs. David Aiken  
Mrs. Robert Barkerding  
Mrs. Beauregard Avegno  
Mrs. Herbert Livaudais  
Mrs. Jon Roth  
Mrs. Jesse Adams  
Mrs. William McNeal  
Mrs. Robert N. Jones

Time does not permit me to list all the outstanding service to the Salon and accomplishments these ladies represent. I shall have to leave this to be chronicled by some future Salon historian.



One late afternoon this past summer I sat alone in the drawing room upstairs working in preparation for this program. The shades were pulled, the furniture shrouded as it is for the summer closing – and an eerie feeling, almost of loneliness, crept over me since I realized that I had never before been entirely alone in the Salon. I was quite overcome by memories and emotions as I looked around. Where had the 60 years I was to talk about gone, I wondered?

Where were all the ladies I remembered with their remarkable flowered hats and white gloves? Where was Mrs. West, for instance, who had danced in 1910 under those same chandeliers where I now sat? And Dorothy Dix whose hand I was so proud to shake in 1948– and Ella Merriam Wood who had painted her portrait, still there on the wall across the room?

Where were the afternoon teas? Looking through the doors to the dining room, I could almost see again in the dim light Mrs. Lane passing the hot biscuits and bacon, and that venerable old Salon member who Mrs. Lane once told me came when she was even far past 90 every Thursday afternoon to put some of the hot biscuits in her purse to take back to St. Anna's where she lived. And that's why, Mrs. Lane told me, there were never enough biscuits!

But wait! I suddenly thought looking upward, never have Mrs. West's chandeliers looked so polished – and look at the moldings and walls of Mr. David's house – have they ever been more meticulously preserved? Look at that stunning blue color of the hall, the recommendation of a color expert of historic houses – a far cry from the drab New Orleans beige that I remembered.

Alice Montana and Pauline Jackson, whom I knew so well, are gone but here are Leanna and Barry – how could we have more efficient keepers of the house?

It is part of the continuity of life that life rushes in to fill its own vacancies.

Mrs. Deutsch and Mrs. Johnness, venerable actresses, have passed away but look who has come in their stead – such people as M. I. Scoggin and Ann Bruce and others of Le Petit Players, and program chairmen who so brilliantly give us our programs each week.

Some of our Presidents have sadly gone, but have we ever had a more gracious, efficient, dedicated president than our present Diana Jones?

And this is to say nothing of the new members who have come with each passing year and are so diligently continuing to revitalize the Salon and its original purpose.

Hear now the purpose, penned in 1924 by our Founders:

“To keep alive the love of the old traditions of New Orleans and where possible to keep and preserve old historic buildings – to promote enjoyment, harmony, refinement of manners and intellectual improvements, and to revive, promote and continue the pleasant intercourse of the Salon which gives grace and brilliancy to the old Society of this city”.

Where have the past 60 years gone, I thought? Why, they have simply melted into the present.

And so in the late afternoon last August, there we sat alone as the shadows lengthened in the drawing room – just the Salon and I, two old ladies once in their twenties, who had grown old together in the 60 years we had spent in this house – like Maurice Chevalier and

Hermione Gingold, wrapped in memories and visions of the past, one of us unbelievably celebrating an 85<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Am I growing old? The Salon seemed to whisper to me in the shadows.

Oh no, I said, raising my imaginary glass in toast to this grande dame of the Vieux Carré

– Le Petit Salon.

Oh no, I said, not you!