

Home for Good

Author's work will be preserved in new center in Dupré Library

NOT LONG AFTER ERNEST GAINES became writer-in-residence at UL Lafayette in 1983, a colleague in the English Department asked about the status of his original manuscripts.

The author of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* responded that his papers were stored in several trunks in San Francisco, where he had lived before moving to Lafayette.

"What are you going to do with them?" asked the colleague, Dr. Joseph Riehl, a professor of English.

"I don't know. No one has asked me (for them)," Gaines replied.

"Well, I'm asking you," Riehl said.

So the trunks were shipped from California to Lafayette. Their contents became the foundation of a newly established international center for Ernest Gaines studies, which will be built in a now-unfinished section of the third floor of Dupré Library.

Gaines recounted the story during an event held at the library in early March to celebrate creation of the center. Now writer-in-residence emeritus, he and his wife, Dianne, had traveled from their home in Pointe Coupee Parish near Baton Rouge, La.

Gaines is one of the most significant American authors of the 20th century. He is most widely known for *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *A Lesson Before Dying* and *A Gathering of Old Men*.

His work has been trans-

lated into at least 17 languages and has earned him a National Book Critics Circle Award, National Humanities Medal and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, popularly known as "the genius award." *A Lesson Before Dying* was chosen by talk show host Oprah Winfrey as an Oprah Book Club selection in 1997.

Gaines' relationship with UL Lafayette began in 1981 when he accepted an invitation to serve as a visiting professor of creative writing for one year.

"For 25 years, the university's

faculty and students, and the people of Louisiana have had the privilege of having Ernest Gaines here and being able to interact with him on campus. With this center, his legacy will remain here," said Dr. Marcia Gaudet, head of UL Lafayette's English Department. She proposed the center and will serve as its interim director.

UL Lafayette will initially provide \$250,000 for the center. Future funding sources include donations, grants, and royalties from a book about Gaines

to be published by the university's Center for Louisiana Studies.

Manuscripts and memorabilia, such as handwritten drafts of some of his published work and the pens he used to write *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *Of Love and Dust*, have been preserved in the library's Special Collections Department.

According to Gaudet, the new center will also include "all books, journal articles, essays, interviews, theses and dissertations on Ernest Gaines and his work." It will have a complete collection of all published translations of his writing. The center "would anticipate, as well, the eventual donation/acquisition of the remaining Ernest J. Gaines papers to the university. It would be the site of the only complete collection of



Ernest J. Gaines and Dr. Marcia Gaudet at the future site of the Ernest J. Gaines Center in Dupré Library.

PHILIP GOULD

OPRAH BACKS OBAMA



PHILIP GOULD

Some of Ernest Gaines' original manuscripts are displayed in Dupré Library, along with pens he used to write them.

Ernest Gaines scholarship in the world," she said.

The center will coordinate research related to Gaines and possibly other African-American writers in Louisiana. There are already plans to conduct an Ernest J. Gaines Scholars Conference at UL Lafayette in Spring 2010. Gaudet envisions the Ernest J. Gaines Speakers and Writers Series in 2011, which would draw major scholars and writers to UL Lafayette.

"The availability of the author's papers will provide students with the opportunity to understand first hand the workings of literary genius," she stated in a proposal for the center that was approved by the University of Louisiana System and the Louisiana Board of Regents. The collection will also "enhance the university's historic commitment to diversity," she continued.

The Ernest J. Gaines Center will pursue publishing ventures in cooperation with UL Lafayette's Center for Louisiana Studies, Gaudet said. One of the first projects will help raise funds for the center.

This Louisiana Thing That Drives Me: The Legacy of Ernest J. Gaines is in press at the Center for Louisiana Studies. It is a coffee-table book of photographs that was compiled, edited and introduced by Gaudet; Reggie Young, an associate professor of English at UL Lafayette; and Wiley Cash, a doctoral student at UL Lafayette. The photos are accompanied by quotations from Gaines' fiction, essays and interviews. The first 100 copies will be

Did Miss Jane Pittman, a fictional character in a popular novel, and celebrity Oprah Winfrey influence the outcome of Sen. Barack Obama's bid to become the first black president of the United States?

That's a question sure to be asked by scholars who will analyze every facet of the historic contest between Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton, who wants to be the nation's first female president.

Named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people for the past four years, Winfrey stepped onto the national campaign trail for two days in December to stump for Obama. The Illinois senator and former first lady are seeking the Democratic nomination in August.

In her introduction of Obama at a rally in Des Moines, Iowa, Winfrey referred to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, written by Ernest Gaines, UL Lafayette's writer-in-residence emeritus. Published in 1971, his fictional story of a lame, 110-year-old former slave earned critical praise and became required reading in schools across the country. In it, Pittman survived the Civil War, was subsequently emancipated from slavery and lived long enough to enjoy a taste of the freedom promised by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

Near the end of her life, Pittman was living on a Louisiana plantation. She and other blacks there hoped for someone who could lead the black race. "Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he's the One," Gaines wrote in the last chapter.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman was made into an Emmy Award-winning television movie, starring Cicely Tyson, that was first broadcast on Jan. 31, 1974. Winfrey told the more than 18,000 people gathered in

Des Moines that the movie made "a huge impression on me" when she saw it many years ago.

"I can't even remember how old I was when I was watching that movie. But I do remember when Jane Pittman would encounter young people throughout that film, and she would ask, 'Are you the one? Are you the one?'"

Winfrey recalled a scene with Pittman and a newborn, Jimmy Aaron. "I remember her standing in the doorway, her body bowed, frail, old, and holding the baby in her arms, and saying, 'Are you the one, Jimmy? Are you the one?'"

"Well, I believe in '08, I have found the answer to Miss Pittman's question.



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Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama, wife of Sen. Barack Obama

I have found the answer. It is the same question that our nation is asking: 'Are you the one? Are you the one?' I am here to tell you, Iowa, he is the one. He is the one. Barack Obama."

Winfrey's 17-minute speech in Des Moines was posted in two parts on YouTube, a popular web site where people share video clips. By early April, the part in which she refers to Gaines' character had been watched more than 36,000 times.

A total of about 66,000 people attended rallies featuring Winfrey in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina.

A poll conducted in December by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press showed that 60 percent of respondents said Winfrey's support would help Obama's candidacy. ■

AN EXCERPT

This Louisiana Thing That Drives Me: The Legacy of Ernest J. Gaines

(Editor's note: The following is the introduction to a new book published by UL Lafayette's Center for Louisiana Studies.)

By Marcia Gaudet

*When I read Gaines, the poet said,
The sky is not gray, but gold.*

– Isaac J. Black

On Super Bowl Sunday 1981, Ernest J. Gaines received a telegram from the University of Southwestern Louisiana offering him a position. When he decided to return to Louisiana as our Visiting Writer-in-Residence, the sky was certainly gold over our community. For the last twenty-seven years, we have been privileged to be major benefactors of Ernest Gaines' time, energy, and generosity. He has contributed immeasurably to Creative Writing at (the) University of Louisiana at Lafayette while continuing to build an international reputation on the merits of his artistic accomplishments.

Gaines' reputation as a writer and artist is secure. Equally secure is his reputation as a man, as a teacher, as a colleague, as a friend, as a person passionately devoted to his people and his home state. He has deep concern for the land and the people who provide him with the roots of his artistic vision.

This concern is apparent in his quiet activism in preserving and refurbishing the cemetery on River Lake Plantation where his ancestors, friends, and a brother are buried. He and his wife, Dianne, serve as President and Secretary of the Mount Zion River Lake Cemetery Association in Cherie Quarters, Oscar, Louisiana. They ask friends, family, and students to join them for a graveyard homecoming, or beautification day, at the cemetery on the last Saturday of October each year, the weekend before All Saints Day. In a traditional gathering, people come together to pull weeds, plant flowers, whitewash the tombs, eat, drink, and talk among the graves – re-

membering the past and rejoicing in its connection with the community of the present. The cemetery is a peaceful sanctuary, surrounded by sugarcane fields. This is also the time known as grinding, the sugarcane harvest in southern Louisiana. Ernest Gaines may peel a few stalks of sugarcane and instruct a young child or a new graduate student on the proper way to chew it and spit out the pulp, something he remembers from his own childhood growing up in the plantation quarters.

Ernest Gaines has said that his great obsession was to get the property where his ancestors are buried and to maintain the cemetery, where he wants to be buried among the unmarked graves of his people. His writing has given him the power to determine how his people will be remembered. Gaines' narratives of his people have become stories of identity, stories of one's people. Gaines recognized the injustices to his people, and he addressed those injustices in his writing with a gentle but powerful anger. Perhaps more importantly, he recognized the worth of his people. He saw in them something worth writing about, something worth remembering – their character, their concern for others, their ability to survive with dignity, their belief in him and what his future could be. Gaines' stories give us a cultural narrative of the people he knew so well, a history of their lives and who they really were.

Along with his culture's legacy of poverty and injustice, Gaines also received a strong legacy of personal dignity. Using the language of his community, he has made this place and these people a model for the simple but universal rights to one's own humanity, one's own dignity, one's own voice. By giving voice to those who traditionally had no voice outside of the ex-slave quarters, Gaines continues to fulfill his intent from the beginning of his writing career: to give voice to an unvoiced people, giving them the power to affirm their own existence. ■

signed collector's editions to be given to donors who contribute at least \$1,000 each to the Ernest J. Gaines Center.

Gaudet proposed the center in conjunction with Gaines' retirement in 2005. But the plan was shelved when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated parts of south Louisiana later that year. State government temporarily suspended creation of new university centers until the hurricanes' economic impact could be assessed.

Gaudet said scholars from across the globe will conduct research at the Ernest J. Gaines Center. Last year, a professor from Japan and a doctoral student from Egypt traveled to UL Lafayette to view Gaines' papers.

Gaines' work has been the subject of 15 doctoral dissertations at various universities. More than 200 scholarly articles have been written and 12 books published about him.

Gaines told the group gathered at Dupré Library in early March that he owes much of his professional success to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

He described his circumstances when he was invited in 1981 to teach at the university for a year. "I was living hand to mouth. I had just published *In My Father's House* three years earlier. I didn't make any money. Everybody lost money on that book."

In 1983, the university asked him to be its writer-in-residence. He would be required to teach only one course a year and could live in a house in Arbolada Subdivision, adjacent to campus, which had been provided by Ray Mouton, an attorney and UL Lafayette graduate.

"When I first came to Arbolada, that first night, I didn't believe this was happening to me. This house was too beautiful. The furniture was so wonderful. There were flowers in the yard, pine trees, oak trees."

Gaines' good fortune was real. "I was in that house from 1983 to 2003, there in Arbolada," he said.

"Sometimes, I wonder if what's happening today is happening. I wonder if it is not a dream.

"If it's *not* a dream, and it is actually happening to me, I'm one of the luckiest men on the face of the earth for all the things I've gone through, places I've been and returning home. I thank you very much." ■