

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. ■