

CANE RIVER

LALITA TADEMY



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Thanks to Father Victor Vead of the St. Augustine Catholic Church, for permission to reprint the portrait of Augustine Metoyer and the Church of St. Augustine on page 5.

Thanks to Trident Press International, for permission to reprint the image of General Banks's Army crossing Cane River in 1864, which appears on page 212.

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*Dedicated to my mother,
Willie Dee Billes Tademy*

ELISABETH'S DESCENDANTS

Seven Generations

ELISABETH and Marse,
Virginia

ELISABETH b. 1799
and GERASIME b. 1802

YELLOW JOHN b. 1813, Virginia
and DORALISE DERBANE b. 1810

PALMIRE
b. 1821

SUZETTE b. 1825
and EUGENE DAURAT b. 1813, France

GERANT b. 1839
and MELANTINE b. 1840

PHILOMENE
and CLEMENT

PHILOMENE DAURAT b. 1841
and NARCISSE FREDIEU b. 1825

"BET"
b. 1859

THANY
b. 1859

EMILY "TITE" FREDIEU b. 1861
and JOSEPH BILLES b. 1840, France

EUGENE
b. 1866

Baby FREDIEU
b. 1868 d. 1868

"NICK"
b. 1872

HENRY
b. 1875

"JOE F." b. 1877

and FANNIE b. 1873

Baby JOSEPHINE
b. 1878 d. 1879

"MATCHIE"
b. 1880

ANGELITE
b. 1879
and JACQUES

ANGELITE
and DENNIS

THEODORE "T.O." BILLES b. 1881
and GENEVA BREW b. 1892
m. 1911

JOSEPHINE
b. 1885

JOSEPH "MAN"
b. 1887

MARY
b. 1890

NARCISSE
b. 1903

GURITE
b. 1905

JOSEPH "BUCK"
b. 1887

ERNEST
b. 1904

JOSEPH LEE
b. 1912

THEODORE
b. 1913

HENRY EARL
b. 1918

IV
b. 1919

WILLIE DEE BILLES b. 1921
and NATHAN GREEN TADEMY JR. b. 1919

THEODORSIA
b. 1941

JOAN
b. 1943

LEE
b. 1944

LALITA TADEMY
b. 1948

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My great-grandmother Emily died in bed at her Louisiana home at the end of the summer of 1936, with \$1,300 in cash hidden under her mattress. Although she passed away twelve years before I was born, her presence is firmly imprinted in our family lore. Neither my mother nor her brothers ever talk about Emily without a respectful catch in their throat, without a lingering note of adoration in their tone.

I've been told that Great-Grandma 'Tite (Emily's nickname, rhymed with "sweet") was very beautiful, and this is verified by the four photographs I have of her, two of which hang on the wall of my home in California. She was full of life into her seventies, dancing alone in the front room of her Aloha farmhouse on Cornfine Bayou to the music from her old Victrola, high-stepping and whirling to the cheering-on of family gathered on Sunday visiting day. Always, at the end of her performance, she would arch her spine and kick back one leg, little booted foot suspended in air beneath her long dress until the clapping stopped. It was her trademark move. My mother and all of the other surviving grandchildren remember this vividly. Laughter and fun surrounded Grandma 'Tite, they say, describing the flawless skin, thick chestnut hair, high cheekbones, thin sharp nose, and impossibly narrow waist. My

mother has said to me often, each time with a proud, wistful smile, “She was an elegant lady, like Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy.”

I always found this last statement impossible to embrace. I now know that Emily Fredieu was born a slave in 1861, lived deep in the secluded backcountry of central Louisiana, dipped snuff, and drank homemade wine every day, insisting that all visitors, even children, drink along with her. She bore five children out of wedlock over the thirty-plus-year span of her liaison with my great-grandfather, a Frenchman. Interracial marriage wasn’t against the law for all of the time they were together, but it was dangerous and against custom for a colored woman, even if she did look white, and a white man to be together. My great-grandmother Emily was color-struck. She barely tolerated being called colored, and never Negro. My mother, the lightest of the grandchildren, with skin white enough to pass if she chose, was a favorite of hers. It is difficult to reconcile these facts and confirm my mother’s judgment of “elegant.”

I was always unsympathetic to the memory of Emily because of her skin color biases, although I never dared say so to my mother. But at the same time I was envious of Emily’s ability to stare down the defeats of her life and aggressively claim joy as her right, in ways I had never learned to do.

Emily fascinated me for years, an untapped mystery, but my life was too busy to dwell on impractical musings with no identified purpose. I loved my world, jolting awake every morning, impatient to begin the day, savoring the next deal, the next business to build or turn around, the next promotion. For two decades I had hoisted myself upward, hand over hand up the corporate ladder, until I was a vice president for a Fortune 500 high-technology company in Silicon Valley. The position brought all-consuming work, status, long hours, and stock options. But every so often, while reviewing strategic businesses in small, airless rooms, I found myself secretly thinking about Emily, who she was, how she came to be. During budget reviews my mind would drift to Emily’s mother, Philomene, about whom I knew so little, only as a name in a brief two-page family history written twenty years before by a great-cousin and sent to me by my uncle. I began to develop a nagging and unmanageable itch to

identify Philomene's mother, to find out if she lived on a plantation as someone else's property, a slave, or if she had been free.

In 1995, driven by a hunger that I could not name, I surprised myself and quit my job, walking away from a coveted position for which I had spent my life preparing. Crossing back and forth from California to Louisiana, I interviewed family members and local historians, learning just how tangled the roots of family trees could become.

I scanned documents until headaches drove me from moldy basements where census records or badly preserved old newspapers from the 1800s and early 1900s were stored. In assorted Louisiana courthouses I waded through deeds, wills, inventories, land claims, and trial proceedings. Joining the Natchitoches genealogy society led me to some private collections, including letters. The search for my ancestors moved beyond a pastime and became an obsession.

A series of discoveries challenged what I thought I knew about Louisiana, slavery, race, and class. I thought Creole meant mixed-race people, black and white, but was informed in clipped tones that Creoles were only the white French-speaking descendants of the early French settlers, a snobbish distinction that clearly separated them from the black families the Creole men created "on the side," as well as elevating them above their lower-class French-speaking Cajun cousins. I discovered that most plantations were not like the sprawling expanses of Tara in *Gone With the Wind* but were small, self-contained communities, surrounded by farms that were smaller still. I discovered that the horrifying institution of slavery played out in individual dramas as varied as there were different farms and plantations, masters and slaves.

As I tightened my search for Philomene's mother, the trail led to Cane River, a complex, isolated, close-knit, and hierarchical society whose heyday was in the early 1800s. It was a community that stretched nineteen miles along a river in central Louisiana where Creole French planters, free people of color, and slaves coexisted in convoluted and sometimes nonstereotypical ways. In Cane River the free people of color, or *gens de couleur libre*, had accumulated a great deal of land and wealth and were just as likely to be slave owners as their white neighbors.

As a child I had spent many muggy summers in Colfax, a small country town not far from Cane River where both my parents grew up. The road trip there took days, with me sandwiched in tight between my brother and sisters in the backseat of our 1951 Ford, riding cross-country from California to Colfax for our annual two-week stay in July. In 1978 my father and I took a *Roots* trip to Louisiana, my first time to go back by choice. My mother sent me off with a “must talk to” list for her side of the family, and it included an elderly great-cousin living in Shreveport, Louisiana. My father drove us the hundred miles from Colfax, and we were eagerly welcomed into the home of a large, light-skinned woman with dark, piercing eyes. I still remember those eyes. Cousin Gurtie lived alone and radiated something almost touchable—a relish for life, an intensity, an undefeatable spirit. She was chatty, but her mind wandered, one minute talking about her shoelaces and what she had for breakfast, the next spinning tales of distant ancestors, grisly murders, suicides, and forbidden love. I assumed she exaggerated for effect, but I was hooked. It wasn’t until sitting down to write this author’s note twenty-two years later that I realized she was the same woman who had produced the two-page typewritten family history I relied on so heavily in trying to re-create my family’s past. She had not exaggerated.

When I quit my job in 1995 I hired a genealogist to help with the search for Philomene’s mother. It took her two years before she found the bill of sale in a private collection of French plantation records that positively identified Suzette as Philomene’s mother. Only then was I sure that my ancestors were not free people of color. They were three generations of slaves owned by Françoise Derbanne, a Creole widow whose husband left her a medium-size plantation in Cane River, Louisiana. It was then that I resolved I would not allow Suzette or her family to be lost from memory again.

Revealed bit by bit from mounds of documents and family stories, I connected the line backward between these women of my family, daughter to mother. From Emily, back to Philomene, to Suzette and Elisabeth. They were not Mammy or Jezebel or Topsy, the slave images made safe and familiar in *Gone With the Wind* tra-



dition. They were flesh-and-blood women who made hard choices, even in oppression.


Emily's mother, Philomene, came to life before any of the others. She visited my dreams, urging me to tell their stories. No, "urging" is too tame a word, too remote. Philomene *demand*ed that I struggle to understand the different generations of my family and the complexities of their lives. She made it unacceptable that any of them be reduced or forgotten. It defies description in words, this bond I have with Philomene and her ability to reach across four generations to me with such impact. There were demanding days in the beginning when I feared her, a shapeless apparition, usually in the aftermath of her unrelenting hand at my back and the unnerving certainty of her voice in my ear. But the fear was always tempered with respect.

This book is a work of fiction deeply rooted in years of research, historical fact, and family lore. The details of Cousin Gurtie's accounting weren't always supported by other documents I uncovered. Some dates were off, some facts twisted, but I found that each

*Gurtie Fredieu, circa 1928. Said to look like
her grandmother Philomene.*




precious line of her carefully typed history had at its base at least a grain of truth, and a family story had arisen around it. Many official and historical documents had inaccuracies in them as well. The challenge was to marry all of the data. In piecing together events from personal and public sources, especially when they conflicted, I relied on my own intuition, a sometimes intimidating undertaking when I felt Philomene's judgmental presence over my shoulder. There were gaps I filled in based on research into the events and mood of the place and time. I presupposed motivations. Occasionally I changed a name, date, or circumstance to accommodate narrative flow. I hope I have captured the essence of truth, if not always the precision of fact, and that liberties I have taken will be forgiven.



I hope you can put some of these things together better than I did, you may have heard that my Brother or I did not finish School or no one thought me one thing about Typenbut that I know I know it, Smile. My God have blessed me to be here my three scores and ten.

--Cousin Gurtie Fredieu, in a letter recording
our family history written in 1975



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CANE RIVER

PART ONE

Suzette

ELISABETH AND GERASÍME

Descendants

ELISABETH
b. 1799

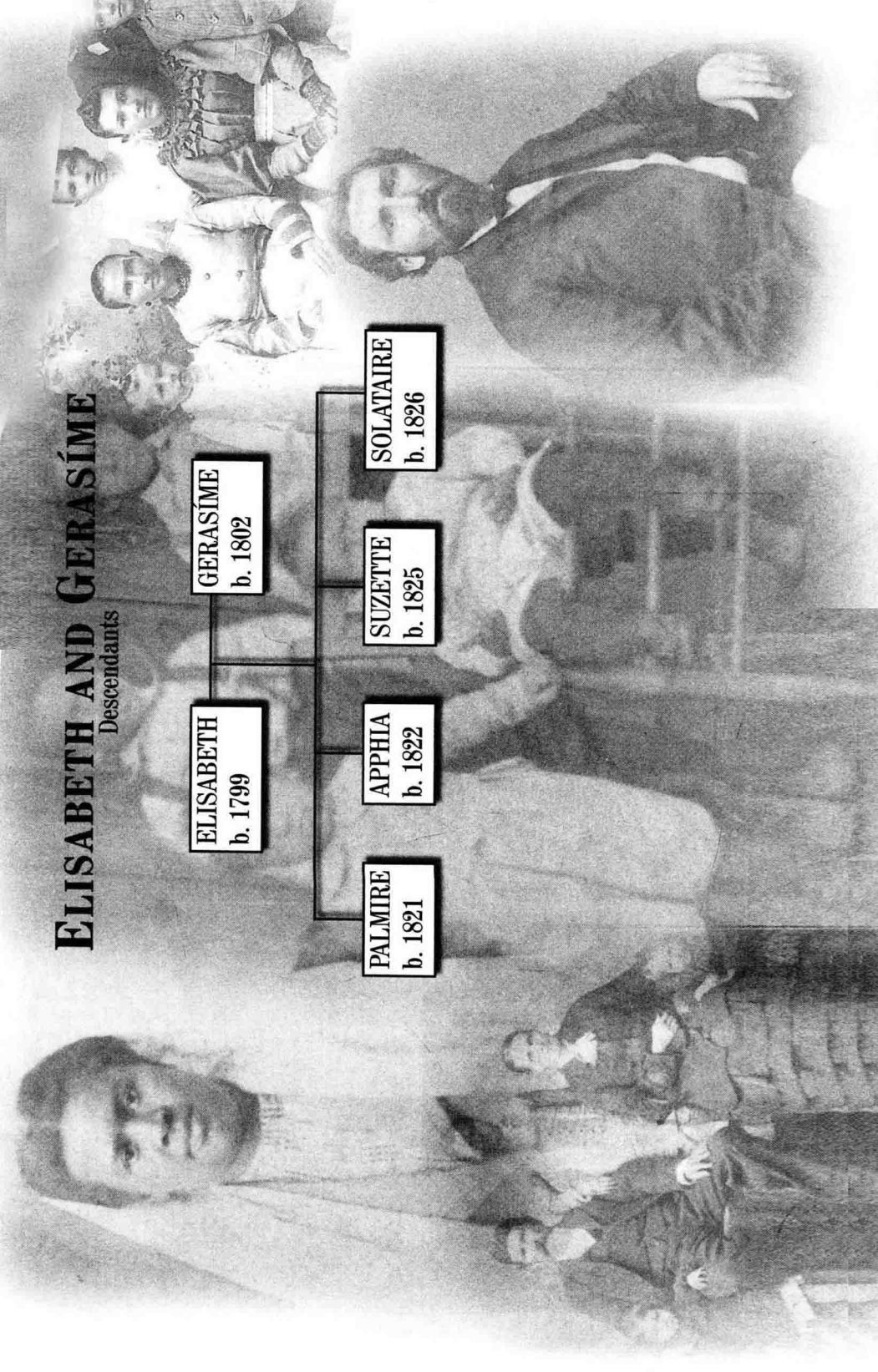
GERASÍME
b. 1802

PALMIRE
b. 1821

APPHIA
b. 1822

SUZETTE
b. 1825

SOLATAIRE
b. 1826





CANE RIVER, LOUISIANA—1834

On the morning of her ninth birthday, the day after Madame Françoise Derbanne slapped her, Suzette peed on the rosebushes. Before the plantation bell sounded she had startled awake, tuned her ears to the careless breathing of Mam'zelle above her in the four-poster bed, listened for movement from the rest of the sleeping household, and quietly pushed herself up from her straw pallet on the floor.

Suzette made her way quickly down the narrow hall, beyond the wall altar, and past the polished mahogany grandfather clock in the front room, careful to sidestep the squeaky board by the front door. Outside on the gallery, her heart thudded so wildly that the curiosity of the sound helped soften the fear. Her breath felt too big for her chest as she inched past the separate entrance to the stranger's room and around to the side of the big house where the prized bushes waited.

Barefoot into the darkness, aided only by the slightest remnant of the Louisiana summer moon, she chose Madame's favorite, a sprawling rosebush with delicate pale yellow flowers and visible roots as long as her father's fiddling bow.

The task didn't take long, going and coming back, and Oreliné's

breathing was still soft and regular when Suzette slipped back onto her makeshift mattress at the foot of the bed. The only evidence that Suzette had been gone at all was a thin, jagged scratch on her bare arm from a thorn she hadn't seen in the darkness.

The day before had started with midsummer Louisiana predictability, so smotheringly hot that the spongy air seemed to push down on Suzette as she hurried to the cookhouse after church. Once there, she slipped a clean apron over her good dress, a loose-fitting dark calico with a yoke neck, one of Orelina's last-season castoffs her mother had altered to fit the girl's small body. Her mother had left room in the dress for a growth spurt. Every last item of Suzette's clothing from undershirt to leggings and shoes had first belonged to her mam'zelle. Although the girls were the same age, Orelina was taller than Suzette by half a head. They made an odd pair, the pale white girl, long legged and gangly as a young colt, and her tiny cocoa-colored nurse, Suzette, with skin like strong coffee after the splash of cream. Suzette's eager smile showed off a gap between her two front teeth. The space was almost the width of a full kernel of corn, and Suzette used it to give more force to her whistle. It came in handy for calling chickens or pigs or for impressing Orelina and Narcisse when they ran the woods together in play.

The added heat from the blazing cookhouse fires made Suzette's dress stick to her as she worked the paddle of the butter churn. Built at a distance from the main house because of the risk of fire, the cookhouse belonged to the Derbannes, along with the cotton and cornfields, the swamplands, the facing rows of eight slave cabins in the quarter, four on each side, and every other living thing on Rosedew, their plantation along Bayou Derbanne.

Suzette looked over to her mother Elisabeth's strong, quick hands as she pulled a gray white dough ball toward her, kneading air into biscuits for the master's breakfast table. When her mother finished the cooking, it was Suzette's job to run the food to the big house while it was still hot and to serve the table.

Der-banne. Fre-dieu. She silently practiced her speaking voice in time to the paddle, hoping her mother would make conversation.

Elisabeth hummed as she worked, her tune deep, slow, and plaintive. Suzette wasn't sure of her mood. Her mother had never taken to Creole French, even the rough version they spoke in the quarter. Elisabeth never achieved the same slurry rhythm that everyone else from the house used.

"How was church?" Elisabeth finally asked.

"St. Augustine was beautiful." *Belle*, Suzette pronounced carefully, wrapping her lips around the word, hoping her French sounded as refined as Orelene's, imagining her words flowing as smoothly as those she had heard this morning at the church. "Old Bertram and I stood outside, but he found us a place where we could see into the sanctuary." *Sanctuaire*. "M'sieu, Madame, and Mam'zelle sat behind a row of *gens de couleur libre*."

Suzette could still feel the wonder of the morning, the long ride in the wagon pressed between Orelene and Narcisse Fredieu, seeing for the first time the broad bell of St. Augustine above the vestibule, the shimmery waves rising off the sun-baked tiles on the gabled roof, the brightly colored glass. But mostly the clusters of people. White, colored, Negro, free, and slave, all dressed fine, all in one place.

Elisabeth grunted. "The free people of color who built that church own more slaves than the Derbannes. They go by their own rules," she said.

"I saw him, *Mère*. When he came outside, I saw Augustine Metoyer himself. I was as close to him as I stand to you now. You should hear him talk. More proper than M'sieu Louis. And his top hat was silk."



Augustine Metoyer and the Church of St. Augustine.