

The Mudcat

The Online Mississippi History Newsletter for Students

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Women at the "W"

The Mississippi University for Women (MUW), originally the Mississippi Industrial Institute and College for the Education of White Girls (II&C), was founded in 1884 by order of the state legislature. It was the first state-supported women's college in the country. The school was founded to give Mississippi's young women a quality education and vocational training. Located in Columbus, Mississippi, the first classes were held in October 1885 with 341 girls enrolled.

The university was also home to strong women like Pauline Van de Groff Orr. Orr was born

in Chickasaw County, Mississippi, in 1861. She learned the importance of teaching young girls when her mother taught her to read. At the age of 10, she decided she wanted to go to an all-boys school. She became a teacher at the II&C when it opened and headed the English and Literature Department for almost thirty years. Orr sometimes had conflicts with the college's male administrators and the Mississippi state legislature over equal education for women. She retired from the university in 1913, but continued to fight for women's education.

By 1920, the college was known as the Mis-



Pauline Orr. MDAH Archives and Records Services.

issippi State College for Women (MCSW). In 1974, MCSW became the Mississippi University for Women and admitted its first male students in 1982. In 1989, Clyda Rent

became the university's first female president.

Today the university continues to work for quality education for both women and men.



A 14199 Miss. Industrial Institute, Columbus, Miss.



Industrial Institute and College, Columbus, Miss.

Ruby Elzy: Mississippi's Singing Jewel



Photo by Woodard's Studio, 1937, image courtesy of the McCracken family. (From *Black Diva of the Thirties - The Life of Ruby Elzy* by David E. Weaver, University Press of Mississippi, 2004)

Ruby Elzy was born in Pontotoc, Mississippi, on February 20, 1908. She began performing locally as a child. Inspired and encouraged by her mother, Elzy went on to sing and study music at Rust College in Mississippi, Ohio State University, and Julliard in New York City. She learned to read music and to sing in French, Italian, and German.

Elzy gave many recitals and concerts during her career. She performed on **Broadway** in all-black revues. In 1933 she got her big break in the film

The Emperor Jones with famed black singer and actor, Paul Robeson. Two years later, she was cast in George Gershwin's **opera** classic *Porgy and Bess*. She played Serena, a woman full of faith and kindness, a role perfect for her. Although she faced personal and professional obstacles after the opera's run, Elzy continued to be successful.

Elzy performed for radio broadcasts in the mid-1930s. She performed for First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. She was invited to perform in a hit reviv-

al of *Porgy and Bess* in California. She stayed in California and continued acting in films but also continued to act around the country. Elzy became ill with a tumor in 1943, but continued to prepare for future performances.

On June 25, 1943, she was admitted to a Detroit hospital for a pre-planned surgery, but unexpectedly stopped breathing after the operation. Sadly, Elzy died at the age of 35. Her memory lives on in her family and her music.

The Married Women's Property Act of 1839

In 1839, Mississippi became the first state to pass a law allowing wives to keep property they owned before their marriage. This paved the way for similar laws around the country. This act is known as the Married Women's Property Act. A court case in 1837 involving a Chickasaw Indian woman helped influence the creation of the law.

Chickasaw Indian Elizabeth Love (also known as Betsy or Betty) married James Allen under the tribe's marriage customs. The couple and their family lived on the Love family Chickasaw

land. In 1831, lawyer John Fisher **sued** James Allen for a **debt**. Fisher asked the local sheriff to **seize** Allen's property, and the sheriff took Betsy's slave Toney. Under Mississippi law, any property a woman bought or **inherited** before marriage became her husband's, which could be seized to settle her husband's debt. By Chickasaw custom, the woman kept her property after she married. In 1837, the High Court of Appeals ruled in the Allens' favor and upheld the Chickasaw marriage custom.

In 1839, the Legisla-

ture took up the issue of married women's property. Support came from legislators who were motivated by their personal debts to create a law that

would protect their wives' property from seizure. The bill was signed into law by Governor Alexander G. McNutt on February 16, 1839.



Today, a headstone and statute in Ponotoc remembers Betsy Love Allen. MDAH Museum Division Education.



Investigate More

You can visit sites and museums across the state to learn more about interesting and exciting Mississippi women!

Walk in the footsteps of Ruby Elzy in her hometown of Ponotoc where you can view a Blues Marker honoring her and others, or visit Rust College in Holly Springs where she studied music.

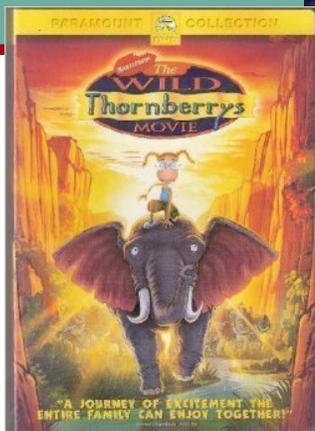
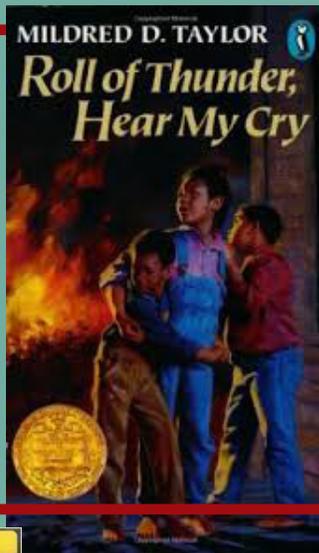


Rust College. Cooper Postcard Collection. MDAH Archives and Records Services.

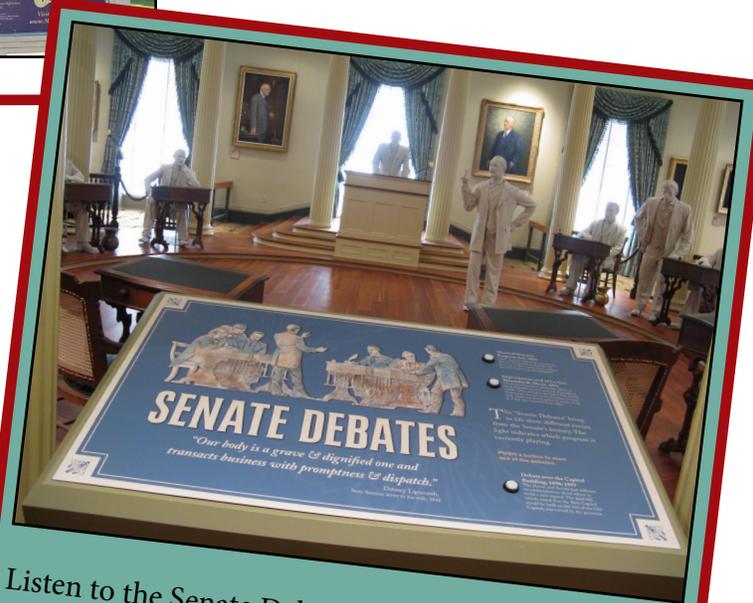


Downtown Ponotoc. MDAH Museum Division Education.

Read the classic children's book *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Jackson-born Mildred D. Taylor. It follows the trials of the Logan family as they endure racial injustices and the Great Depression.



Watch Nickelodeon's *The Wild Thornberrys* to catch Eliza Thornberry, voiced by Purvis native Lacey Chabert, also known for her roles in the movie *Mean Girls* and television show *Party of Five*.



Listen to the Senate Debate in Jackson's Old Capitol Museum where the Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1839. MDAH Museum Division Education.

Cook fun recipes created by chef Cat Cora, a Jackson native who is passionate about nutrition education and reducing hunger. Visit her website at <http://catcora.com/>

Show What You Know!

Vocabulary

Broadway: a street in New York City famous for its theaters, restaurants, and bright lights.

debt: something that is owed or that one is bound to pay to another.

inherit: to take or receive property or money from someone who has died.

legislature: a government body that makes, changes, or repeals the laws of a country or state.

opera: a lengthy, dramatic musical performance featuring vocals, instruments, sets, and costumes.

to seize: to take possession of an item, property, or person.

to sue: to seek justice from another using the legal process.

vocational: instruction or guidance in an occupation, profession, or career.

Check Your Reading:

- ✓ Name two styles of music sung by Ruby Elzy.
- ✓ To which Native American tribe did Betsy Love Allen belong?
- ✓ In what year did MUW get its first female president?

Who is an important Mississippi woman in your life?

Write down her name here and explain what makes her special to you!

Create a Catfish Competition

How would you like to see a catfish of your own creation on the cover of the *Mudcat*? If you're an artist — or even if you're not — craft a cool catfish graphic, send it in to the *Mudcat*, and **YOUR catfish could win a coveted spot on the cover** of the next issue! Send all entries via mail or email to:

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Draw a Mudcat in the box, cut it out, and send it in!

Congratulations to
Eron H. from Tupelo
for her winning
Mudcat!

Check Your Reading Answers:
1989.
opera and blues; Chickasaw;