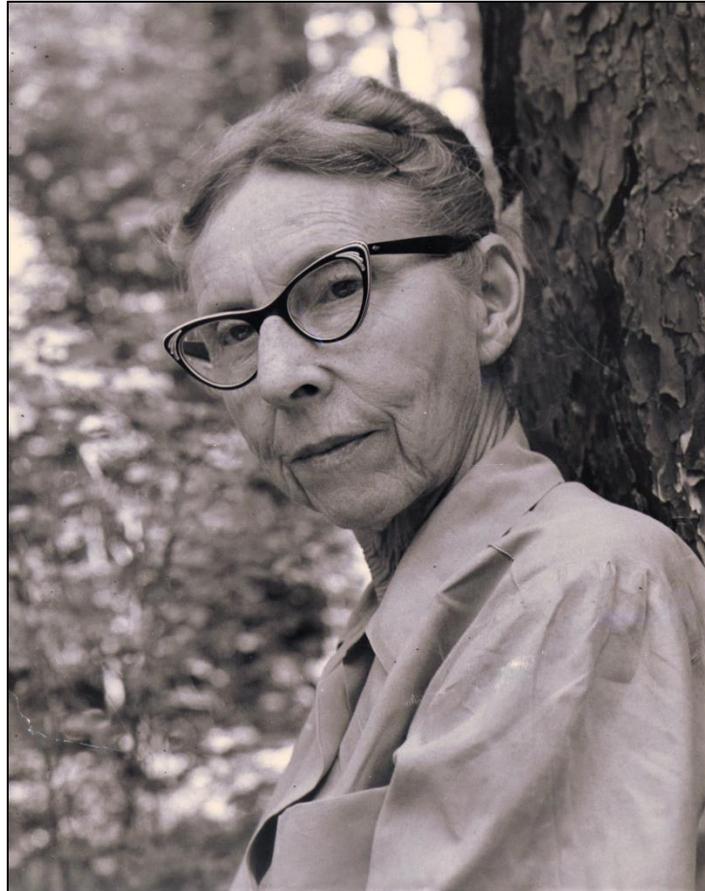




## *SFHM RESEARCH PAPER-9*

### **CAROLINE DORMON: LOUISIANA'S FIRST LADY OF FORESTRY**



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**Cover photo:**

Caroline “Carrie” Dormon, late in life. One of her passions was advocating the preservation of a portion of the Kisatchie Wold—an area of rolling uplands in northern Louisiana covered with virgin longleaf pine forests. (Photo from Northwestern State University CGHRC)

**Photo credits:**

Unless otherwise noted, the photographs are from the collections of the Southern Forest Heritage Museum and Research Center.

**Abstract:**

Caroline C. “Carrie” Dormon was a renowned forest conservationist and one of the most influential American naturalists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an era when women had no role in forestry, she led the effort to establish the Kisatchie National Forest, developed forestry education materials for schools, and promoted support for forestry among civic and community leaders. In addition to her passion for forestry, she advocated education and support for indigenous peoples, wrote important books and articles on native plants, cultivated and hybridized native irises, and led the establishment of a state arboretum.

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# CAROLINE DORMON: LOUISIANA'S FIRST LADY OF FORESTRY

James P. Barnett and Sarah M. Troncale

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of forestry in America was in its infancy. Its proponents were strong-willed men with a determined focus. Women were not and would not become involved in this male-dominated profession for many decades. It was this environment in which Caroline Dormon became involved and aggressively pursued her interests.

She was a quiet and unassuming lady who never married, but was not intimidated by the challenges of advancing her conservation views. She is recognized today as a pioneer conservationist, forester, botanist, illustrator, and as a native plant enthusiast. She was so effective in pursuing her agenda that she has become recognized as one of eight individuals who have significantly influenced America's natural history (Brown 2017).

## THE DORMON FAMILY BACKGROUND

Caroline C. "Carrie" Dormon was born on July 19, 1888, to James Alexander Dormon and Caroline Trotti Dormon at their summer home (named Briarwood) near Saline, in northwest Louisiana. Briarwood is located on plantation land that belonged to Caroline's grandfather and was the traditional site for the family's annual six-week vacation. The Dormons cherished their time spent each year at Briarwood, which offered the family a wonderful opportunity to enjoy the serenity of the forest and the wildlife of the area. Most of the year the Dormons resided at their home in the town of Arcadia in Bienville Parish where James practiced law. Yet, it was the forested Briarwood site that Caroline would long regard as her beloved home.



Entrance gate to Briarwood, used for summer excursions for the Dormon family and later as home to Carrie and Virginia. (photo from Library of Congress Archives)

Caroline was blessed to have an exceptional family. Her father, James, was a well-respected lawyer and was reputed to be one of the ablest men of the Louisiana Bar. He supported his family in comfort and gave them all a good education. He insisted that all of their eight children, including their two daughters, Virginia and Caroline, attend college (Johnson 1990).

Caroline's mother enjoyed literature, and she is remembered by her emphasis on reading and studying. She enjoyed writing poems and stories and even wrote a novel entitled *Under the Magnolias* that was published in 1902 (Dormon 1902). She had a good knowledge of flora and maintained a formal rose garden. Her children were taught to garden and to identify birds by their songs. This inspired Caroline to later publish a book entitled *Bird Talk* (Dormon 1969).

It was Caroline's father, though, who trained the children in the ways of a naturalist. James taught his children to appreciate nature at an early age. During camping trips into the woods, he would point out all sorts of animals, flowers, and trees and taught Caroline both the scientific and common names. If he did not know a name, they would find it by researching the unknown plant or animal in their home library. James Dormon never tired in his study of nature, and he encouraged his children's interest in the subject.

Caroline happily lived as a "tomboy" exploring the outdoors until the age of sixteen when she was sent to Judson, a private college at Marion, Alabama, to learn how to be a proper young lady. At first, she felt uncomfortable around her schoolmates, but later Caroline gained more self-confidence. As she later recalled, "I did not have to be pretty, I did not have to have beautiful clothes! I could just be myself" (Johnson 1990). Both her teachers and her classmates recognized her thorough knowledge and awareness of the natural world. She would question, observe, research, and explore her subject matter.

She graduated from Judson College in 1907, with a degree in literature and art. She taught for several years in Louisiana Schools. But in 1918, Dormon moved with her sister back to Briarwood where she became increasingly interested in forest conservation and native plant collecting.

## **FOREST CONSERVATION**

During this time in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the virgin longleaf pine forests were being aggressively harvested. Miss Dormon became determined to save some of these forests. Her dream was to preserve an area of virgin pine and establish a national forest or a state park in the Kisatchie Hills of northwest Louisiana. She and her sister traveled throughout the area in a Model T Ford identifying areas to suggest as a future national forest. When Miss Dormon read there was to be a Southern Forestry Congress held in New Orleans in 1918, she attended and proposed preservation of some of the virgin forests. Soon afterward, Caroline was invited to attend a forestry meeting in Jackson, Mississippi, where she met and discussed her concerns with Col. William Greeley, the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service. Greeley sent his representative, W.W. Ashe, to meet Miss Dormon in Natchitoches to better understand her proposals.



This is the second cabin built in the 1950s by Dormon at Briarwood. It served as her home for the rest of her life. In the spring, she would take the window screens off so wrens could build nests inside.



Carrie met with Forest Service representatives and, while traveling through the area, suggested interesting places which she believed might be ideal for the establishment of a national forest or park. (photo from Northwestern State University CGHRC)

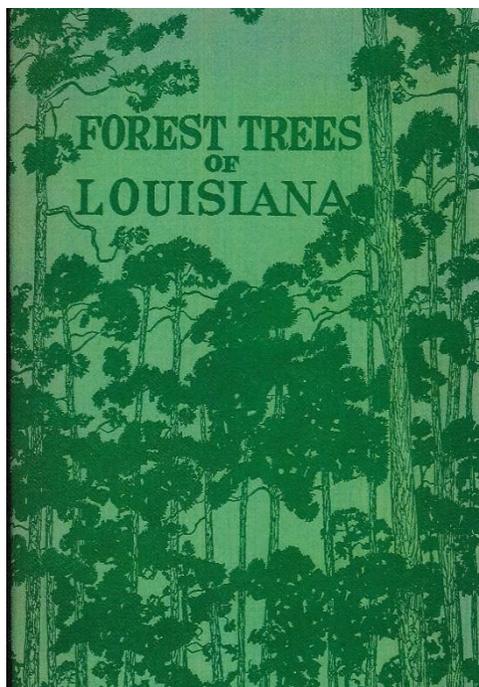
Ashe and other Forest Service foresters met with Miss Dormon and traveled on several occasions through the vast area included in the Kisatchie Hills, but they determined that Louisiana did not have an enabling act that would allow the government to purchase land in the State. Caroline became frustrated with the lack of progress because more and more of the old-growth forests were being harvested.

With the help of one of her lawyer brothers, she wrote an Enabling Act. This she sent to Henry Hardtner, then State Senator, who included it in a forestry bill he was presenting. It passed and became law. In 1929, the first unit of the Kisatchie National Forest was purchased. Because of her influence in establishing the national forest, she was asked to suggest a name for it. She provided the name Kisatchie. The name was derived from a tribe of Kichai Indians of the Caddoan Confederacy, who called themselves "Kitsatchie" (Burns 1968).

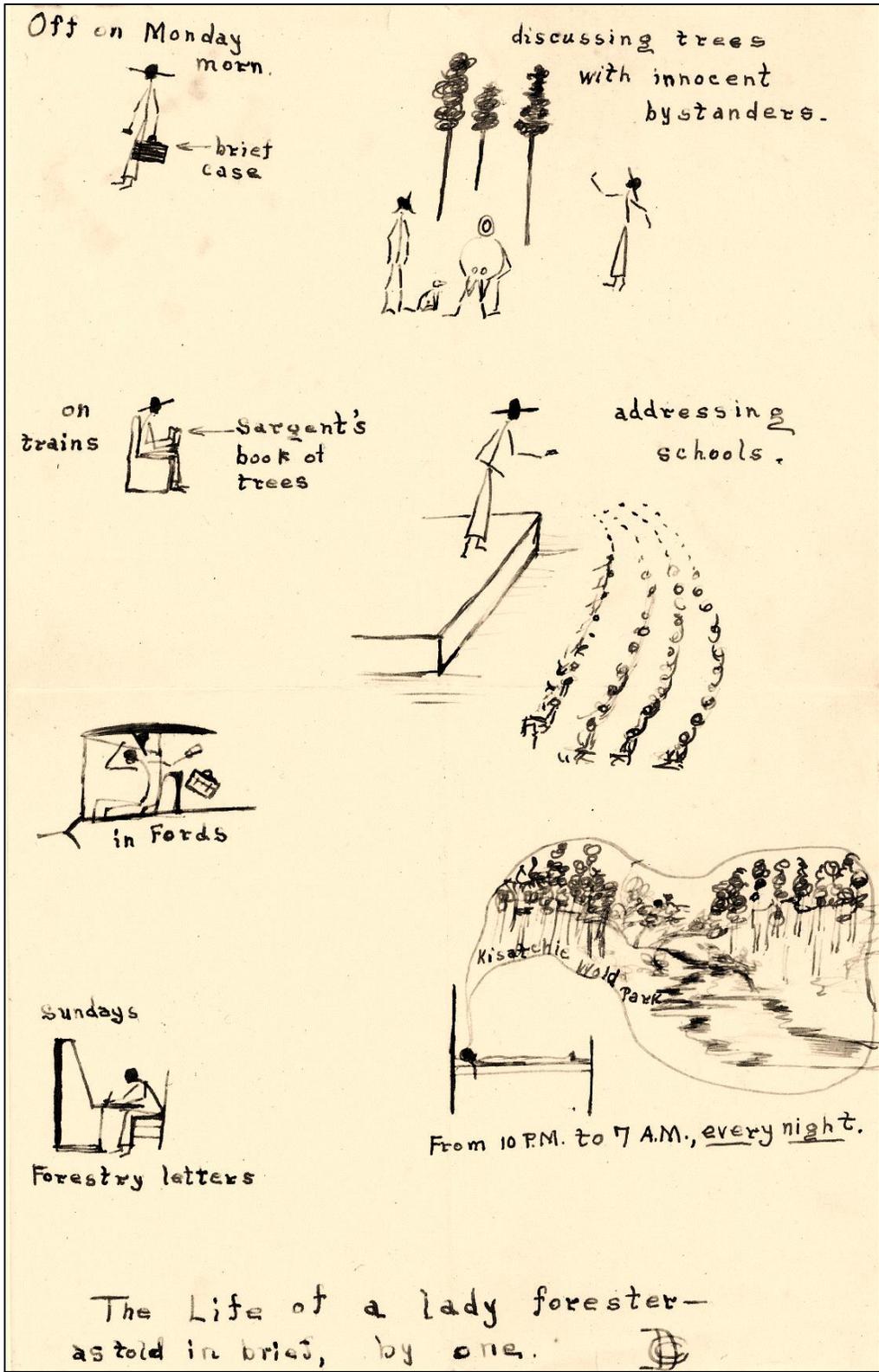
Meanwhile, Miss Dormon became acquainted with Mrs. A.F. Storm, President of the Louisiana Federation of Garden Clubs, and served as her state chair of conservation and forestry. Caroline gave countless lectures to clubs, schools, churches, Scouts, and other youth and adult groups. She learned that in working with wives of influential men, she was more successful in changing opinions than appealing to the men directly. As conservation chairman, she served on the legislative committee to study the state's forestry laws. In 1921, she was hired by M.L. Alexander, Commissioner of Conservation, to handle publicity for the Division of Forestry as an education specialist (Barnett and Troncale 2018). She initiated an aggressive forestry education program in public schools.

In this role, she prepared Arbor Day programs, wrote tree books, conducted teacher workshops, prepared bulletins and artwork, and established long-lasting programs in conservation across the State. This position lasted just two years. Her supervisor, State Forester V.H. Sonderegger had difficulty in supervising any one with more education than him—he had graduated from the Biltmore Forest School's one-year program. She returned to the position in 1927 for about a year, when Sonderegger was replaced by a different forester. Her work was well respected, however, and the State Forester of Mississippi offered her a similar position at a pay scale which she would establish. She declined because she did not want to leave Louisiana (Barnett and Troncale 2018).

She had confidence that Louisiana could be the leading state in lumber production and therefore advocated wise management of Louisiana's forest lands, reforestation, and protection from forest fires. Caroline often boasted of Louisiana's many achievements in the field of forestry—the establishment of the Division of Forestry, model forestry laws, fire protection laws, and the first state forest tree seedling nursery.



Dormon's early 1920s version was reprinted in 1941 (Dormon 1941).



Carrie Dormon's depiction of her life as a forester. Note that she is always shown as wearing a wide-brimmed hat and is always dreaming of creating a "Kistachie Wold Park." (photo from Northwestern State University CGHRC)

Because of her significant contributions to forestry, Caroline Dormon was the first woman to be elected Associate Member of the Society of American Foresters. In a letter urging her acceptance by this organization, W.W. Ashe, her proponent, stated: “Miss Dormon was the first and most persistent worker for National Forests in Louisiana. . . Without question, her efforts have helped shape Louisiana opinion on this policy.” She is called the “Mother of the Kistachie National Forest” because of these unique contributions. In a 1922 issue of *American Forests*, Caroline was recognized as the only woman working professionally in forestry. Ashe wrote to her later that “foresters from all over the eastern United States know of your work” (Barnett and Troncale 2018).

### **OTHER MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATURAL SCIENCE**

Her expertise in other fields was also recognized, and she was employed as a beautification and landscape consultant for several state and private gardens. In 1941, Dormon joined the Louisiana Highway Department as beautification consultant. She was later a landscape consultant for the Huey P. Long Charity Hospital in Pineville, Hodges Gardens (now a State Park), and the Louisiana State Arboretum.



Entrance to the Louisiana State Arboretum near the Caroline Dormon Lodge at the Chicot State Park near Ville Platte.

She did not serve long in these positions because of her great desire to return to her Briarwood home. Caroline did not pursue any career but followed her passionate desire to study, share, and preserve her natural surroundings. There she distinguished herself in many areas. A favorite activity was the testing, propagating, and hybridizing plants, particularly the native Louisiana iris. Her plant paintings have been described as “scientifically accurate and incredible in detail.” These have been exhibited in numerous art galleries and museums.

Caroline stayed in financial difficulty. Her friends encouraged her to concentrate on one money-making prospect such as her paintings and not involve herself with so many other endeavors. Caroline could never be satisfied limiting herself to one field—forestry, botany, horticulture, conservation, ornithology, archeology, ethnology, literature, art, education, or preservation. She wanted to do it all, and she did!

She is the author of several books; the most notable are *Wild Flowers of Louisiana* and *Forest Trees of Louisiana*, now collector's items. Six other major publications deal mostly with native iris species. She received four medals from the American Iris Society for developing outstanding hybrids of Louisiana irises. In these books, and the hundreds of articles, lectures, newspaper pieces she wrote, a steadily increasing sense of urgency is shown to educate the public on the need for conservation. In 1965, in recognition of her lifetime achievements, Louisiana State University conferred on her the honorary degree of Doctor of Science.



Carrie beside her favorite tree, a huge longleaf pine on her Briarwood estate. She named the tree “Grandpappy” because “my very soul lives in that beautiful old gnarled and weather-beaten tree. Oh, my, the tales he could tell of his rugged survival through the storms of life” (Johnson 1990).

### **REFLECTIONS ON CAROLINE DORMON’S CAREER**

None of Miss Dormon’s varied pursuits were driven by a desire for public commendation. Caroline explained, “All my ... life I have gone quietly about the work I love, with no expectation of awards or rewards ...” “I simply loved nature, always, and could no more have stopped studying birds, flowers, and trees and drawing pictures of them, than I could have stopped breathing! ... I wasn’t ambitious; I was just doing what I loved.”

Society's norms seemed empty to Carrie. Late in her life she noted, "I still belonged to the wild." Her happiest hours were those spent in the woods, where she discovered for the first time such priceless treasures as yellow violets, bloodroot, and hepatica (Haag 2002). A friend described Carrie as a young woman as (Snell 1972):

"...tall and sinewy—all whipcord and piano wire—with fresh earth on her hands and apron. There would be a cocklebur or two caught on the hem of her skirt, and hits of leaves stuck to her shoulders. Her complexion was fair. Her hair-braided into a crown or pulled back severely into a bun—was the color of straw. When you were closer you could see that her eyes were the green of chlorophyll and had a quickness about them, like the eyes of a squirrel, conditioned to detect the barest flicker of movement..."

It is interesting to note that when Philip C. Wakeley was recruited by the Forest Service in 1924 to work on reforestation needs, he mentions that there were fewer than 20 professionally trained foresters in the entire South. In this male dominated field, Caroline Dormon had already been working for several years as an advocate for forest conservation and forestry education. It would be many decades before any other woman would assume such a leadership role in forestry. This distinguished, accomplished, and intrepid woman is rightly called "Louisiana's First Lady of Forestry."

Shortly before her death in 1971, friends suggested that she donate her Briarwood estate to a foundation that would become a center for educational purposes in conservation. Today, Briarwood, near Saline, is a nature preserve honoring Caroline Dormon's remarkable contributions to conservation and the natural sciences.

Caroline found comfort in the idea that even through death, she would continue always to be a part of the natural world. She conveyed this concept through a touching poem, in which she requested a special monument of remembrance (Troncale 2016):

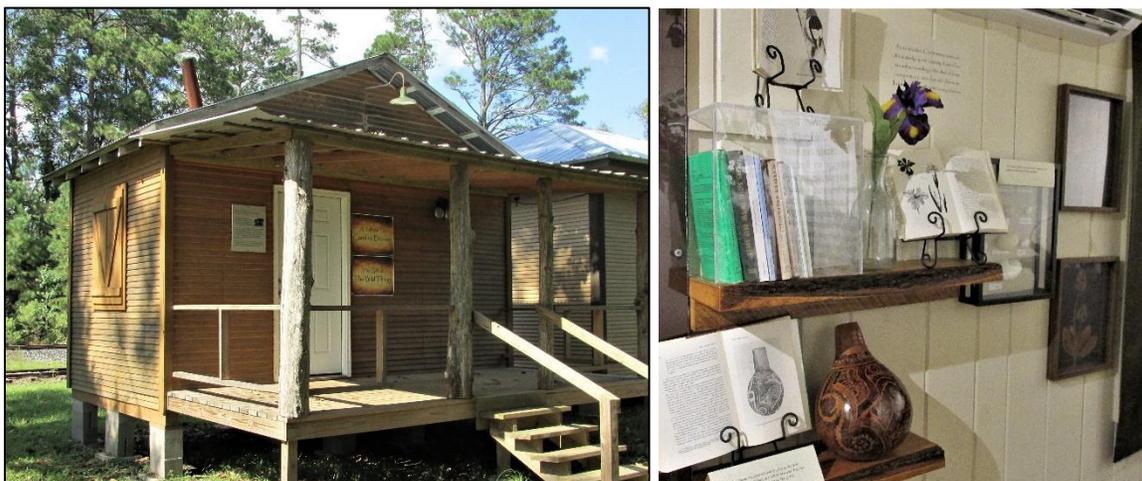
"When I am dead,  
Will someone plant a tree where I lie?  
Then dust shall stir to life again,  
Become a party of beauty rich and infinite.  
What rare fulfillment to become a tree!  
To feel new snow upon my face  
And wrestle strongly with outrageous winds;  
To hold the sun against my cheek,  
And live anew in birth of flowers each spring;  
To gather to my breast the birds  
That speak for me through lovely throats;  
To reach above man's little frets and cares.  
Then I shall touch God—  
And yet keep hold on warm sweet earth I love."

Indeed, Caroline Dormon's desire was granted. When she died at the age of eighty-three, she was buried at Briarwood Baptist Cemetery. There, at her grave, has grown an elegant flowering

dogwood. Thus, even in death, Caroline has not been separated from her beloved nature. Through the life of this small tree, she is granted still her “view of the sky, the wind in [her] face, sweet clean earth---, the whirl of wings... and all [her] “gift of the wild things.”

### **CAROLINE DORMON EXHIBIT AT THE SOUTHERN FOREST HERITAGE MUSEUM AND RESEARCH CENTER**

To honor Caroline Dormon’s extraordinary contributions to forestry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Southern Forest Heritage Museum has developed a Dormon exhibit on Museum grounds. A small early 20<sup>th</sup> century building has been relocated and converted into exhibit space. This exhibit focuses on her contributions to forestry—not just in Louisiana, but across the South.



The Caroline Dormon exhibit building (left) and an interior photo of some of the exhibit material.

Although she worked formally in forestry for only a few years, those years were very productive, and she became recognized across the State and the South for establishing educational outreach to school children and the public. She was truly a unique educator. The goal of the Caroline Dormon exhibit at the Museum is to convey some of her forestry history to the public.

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