

Desperately Seeking Jane—in New Orleans

THE DILIGENT OBSERVER

Your faithful scribe treks to New Orleans. The place Janeites voted, back in '88, as the one they most wanted to meet in! Gardens, plantations, jazz, good food—and most of all, good talk about Jane Austen!

Beverly Roth and Vicki Knowles, Illinois, board the City of New Orleans, Steve Goodman's train, steel wheels rolling 500 miles through the night. My trip is 930 miles—on rubber—with a stop in Memphis and a nod at the ducks at the Peabody. Then on to Jackson (Eudora Welty's home) where a book dealer gives me a New Orleans map. A 35-mile bridge as I approach with Trudy McFarland's (Regional Coordinator, Louisiana) fax-map in one hand, the guide in the other. I'm there—but miss the exit. (Why do they change the names of the streets on each side of Canal?) Lobster on my own, a French chateau for the night, and Thursday—such good weather!—I motor over to the Intercontinental, site of the 16th Annual General Meeting of JASNA.

A quick wave to Miriam and Leonard Bryer of New York on the escalator. Registration and check-in. My 11th conference. I'm going to find the real Jane Austen in the real New Orleans.

I hear Dixieland music. A parade! Ours? No—private party, but let's pretend as we start our first session. Twenty-two Board members meet for two days to get the society's business in order for the next year.

Plenty of things to do beforehand. Ruth and David Mersten, New York, trolley through the Garden District. Mary Suski, California, and Susan Durst, New Mexico, go antiqueing. Illinois members have a casual dinner at the Pearl. I see Bill Hanaway, Pennsylvania, turned away at 7:01 p.m.—one minute past official registration!

Elizabeth Hebert, Florida, presides at the second registration, and then it's opening hour. Bing bang bung—3 plenary sessions in a row! (7 in all—17 academic presentations to come—we're ready for a PhD exam!) Where's Ruth Perry? Here—and hungry. Whisked to a snack shop for sustenance. A search for Judith Terry, British Columbia, her introducer. But she's delayed in Denver. Then a bit of tea. Everyone alert when Maggie Cantrall, Illinois, sparks Rachel Brownstein's discussion with additional Austen-Byron connections.

Friday night—no official reception. But the free time is used to good purpose. The AGM coordinator sets up a gorgeous evening for the Fanny Burney Society's inaugural meeting at one of New Orleans' best restaurants, Bayona. We all rush out—no time to meet anyone new—with old friends. Some try Antoine's (thumbs down), Brennan's (pricey), and Petunia and Commander's Palace (thumbs up). Preservation Hall (\$3) draws the Wisconsin crowd.

By 9 Saturday morning, the coordinator tells me the conference is behind schedule. At the earlier (we're talking *dawn*) business meeting, Joan Philosphos, Wisconsin, makes a passionate plea for a Jane Austen book shop to be

part of conference activities. Juliet McMaster rises to ask that the Canadian dues structure be reconsidered.

We hear Margaret Anne Doody. Only intermittently. Her mike breaks down 8 times! Her introducer can't be heard either. Where is she later? Upstairs in Room 853. Pat Latkin's "Bed and Bath Books" is the place to hang-out, rub elbows with most of the speakers and lots of the attendees: Ruth Perry, Rachel Brownstein, Robert Patten, Keith Odom, Juliet McMaster, Gene Koppel, Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. Margaret Doody is pleased to see her Aristotle mystery novel, although all the Fanny Burneys are sold. Kathleen Glancy of Scotland, Pamela Hardistry and Ruth Bell of Canada chat with old friends, and Pat greets the Hamiltons of Cape Elizabeth while checking 16 shelves and a floor full of books.

I meet someone new! Jane Caruso of New Orleans is one of the 96 first-timers. A reader of Jane Austen for years, she learns of JASNA Friday morning in the *Times-Picayune*. Jane dashes over and signs up for the weekend (\$225), but she misses both mornings due to pet/vet obligations.

Saturday noon, about 70 friends of the Louisiana region troop over to Trudy McFarland's Creole buffet. Jambalaya, onions—red beans—and rice; gumbo, oyster/artichoke soup, and fried catfish; bread pudding for dessert. Abita Wheat and Dixie beer, regional favorites. Is this the real taste of New Orleans?

La la la! I hear an opera! This innovative, imaginative program proves that words don't always tell the story. Vivian Hall, California, was ecstatic to meet again her old friend Joanne Forman, composer of *Lady Susan: The Opera* (although I think we'll credit J. Austen as librettist). Then it's 10 break-out sessions and two more plenaries! Do I sound rushed? When will I have time to chat?

Ah! The program says it's time for fun and spending. The Regency Fair! Even though 20 booths are ready, bartenders at their stations, the hotel needs more time to set up the dining room—opening delayed. Northern California wins hearts with its "Born to be An Heroine" shirt. Marilee Wilkinson, Wisconsin, sells bookplates to assist next year's AGM. Margo Goia (out jogging at 6:30) and Joan Pawelski, Illinois, no athlete, change for the banquet, but offer tee shirts and mugs. The AGM itself devotes a table to R. J. Wheeler's book, *A Clergyman Carried Off to Sea*, featuring a photograph revealing for the first time a sketch purporter to be of Jane Austen.

Then: the quiz. But no quiz. (Calling Joan Austen-Leigh! When she learned there was no quiz in Santa Monica, she sat down and composed one—on the spot! Charlotte Samelstein, New York, Catalina Hannan, New York, and Susan Diamond, Illinois, will have to wait another year to see who joins their winning ranks.) In lieu, the Tennessee Region came to the rescue with a single crostic puzzle. There were 32 winners.

Saturday night was the place to see *everyone*—about 400—because heretofore events had not been open to travelling companions—who registered for a mere \$125 (for banquet and brunch). (Everything has its price.) Vivian Hall said it cost her and Tom \$2700 to take in this year's AGM.

Alas! the food! Sushi chicken? 8 pink corpses atop mushroom mush carried out from our table! Definitely not the taste of New Orleans.

Susan McCartan of Britain, Secretary of the Jane Austen Society, made the toast, "Here's to Jane Austen." Austere, but we rose to the occasion. Several people braved the New Orleans damp and appeared in gorgeous rig, notably Roz Gordon, New York, and Liz Reicker, Ontario, and Carol Medine, California, and Catalina Hannan wearing BBC costumes, Catalina's provided by Sally Norton.

For dinner entertainment, Barbara Larkin, Missouri, and a crew of Columbians worked up 400 packets of anagrams, amusing to solve. Afterward, Margaret Knight, singer/harpist, enthralled the crowd. "This concert is the highlight of the weekend!" I heard.

A map. New York and Illinois share honors as the states with the most delegates. The most-AGMs-attended status goes to Gene Koppel, Arizona, and Lorraine Hanaway, Pennsylvania, on their 16th (that's all there've been). Inger Thomsen, Washington, realizes she has a record even Lorraine and Gene can't top—she's been a member half her life! (Thank heavens she's only 29).

Sunday, the AGM splurges on a tent and tour of Longue Vue, a mansion and gardens. Imagine the surprise of the docents when 400 people sardine'd their way into the corridors in 20 minutes—of course the rooms were taped off. In the tent was "brunch": One piece of bread and a slice of boiled ham plucked off a platter. Cries of "we want our Sunday lunch!" were heard. Well, one mustn't think of money, or food, or even England—just Jane.

Bruce Stovel, Alberta, in spite of mike troubles, gets us in a churchly mood, and wins over the crowd, who, rooted in the soggy ground, it had poured down the night before, are still hungry. Joy Refuerzo and Elsa Levenson, California, model costumes in a preview for the 1995 AGM. Afterward, Irene Dias, Ohio, limerick laureate, closes the conference with her 1994 effort. Irene loves the entire weekend.

Aaah! The weekend. Seven plenary sessions packing 350 people in at the same time is a lot of togetherness, a lot of sit-up and listen as you're read to! In a word—so many speakers, so little time, so little food. (All we wanted was a little jazz, a little gumbo, and a midnight ramble in the Quarter.) But, onward! We await 1995!