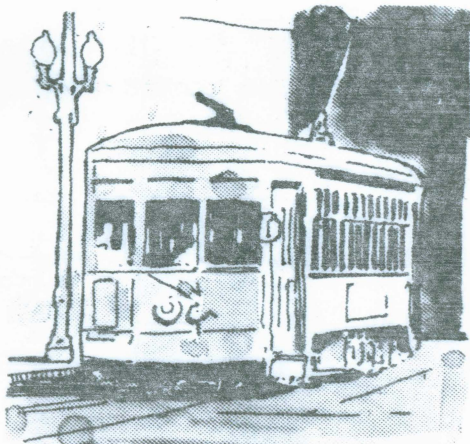


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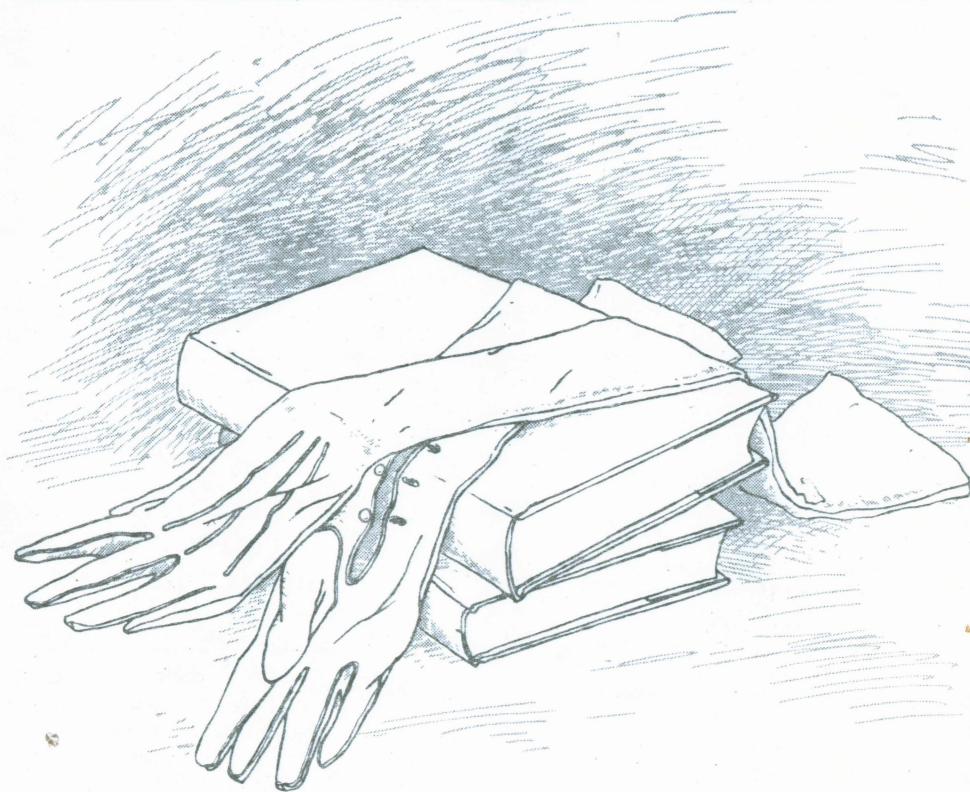
### Thelma

By ERROL LABORDE

**W**hat came to mind first was the mints. That was what I left with the first time I visited Thelma Toole. She was a grand lady who deemed it a quite polite gesture to give her guests a gift. As I left she handed me a D.H. Holmes bag; the bag contained a box of chocolate-covered mints — the box had the remains of a price tag, from Schwegmann's.

That was the sort of life that Thelma Toole lived, pure New Orleanian, crossed between a Holmes style and a Schwegmann's pocketbook. She lived in a simple shotgun home on Elysian Fields near Rampart but her character was more St. Charles near Napoleon.

She was a gifted woman, well-schooled in music and literature. To entertain company she might perform briefly on her



Arthur Nead

piano or sing a few lines from some long remembered poem. In another century Thelma Toole would have made a grand plantation lady charming the local planters and their wives at a time when genteel conversation made for an evening's entertainment. Such a persona was lodged in the spirit of a woman who in the 1980s still considered it inappropriate to appear in public without white gloves and a hat.

But the lady was also a fighter, and it is for that she will be best remembered. One of the most inspiring footnotes to contemporary American literature has to be the

story of Thelma Toole's tenacity in getting *A Confederacy of Dunces*, the manuscript of her deceased son, John Kennedy Toole, published, distributed and promoted. It was the battle of her adult life, and she won.

As the book became famous so did Thelma in her self-appointed capacity as her son's publicist. She was proof that a diamond located in the rough is a diamond nonetheless, as she rather suddenly assumed the role of celebrity. Reporters waited for interviews. NBC flew her to New York for an appearance on the Tomor-

row Show. Johnny Carson called to ask about movie rights for *Confederacy*. The block on Elysian Fields near Rampart along which the elderly push shopping carts from the nearby Schwegmann's had suddenly become a literary curiosity.

Thelma would be putting on her hat and gloves more frequently as she met the demand for personal appearances at which she would tell the crowds at libraries and social clubs about her son and the saga of getting the book published. Some would see her as a calculating woman merely cashing in on another's work. But those who spent some time with her knew better. There were financial rewards from the book's sale, but to an old lady who needed a walker for mobility it was too late for money to make much difference. Her objective was to let the world know about her son — the author.

There were other memories that came to mind last week at the news of Thelma's death at 82. One was of her showing me a picture of the pretty young grammar school teacher that she once was. The teacher would become so enamored with her infant son's education that she would write a series of poems for him to read. There was both sadness and pride in her voice as the elderly Thelma re-read those poems written to interest her favorite pupil in the splendor of words.

Another memory was of a dusty wingbacked chair in the corner of the front room in her home. In response to one of my questions she pointed me towards the chair. Mixed in the clutter on the seat was a folder which I opened. The citation within had recently been awarded posthumously to John Kennedy Toole and read — Pulitzer Prize for Literature.

Thelma Toole's little house on Elysian Fields would have something for the wall not found in even the grandest of homes.