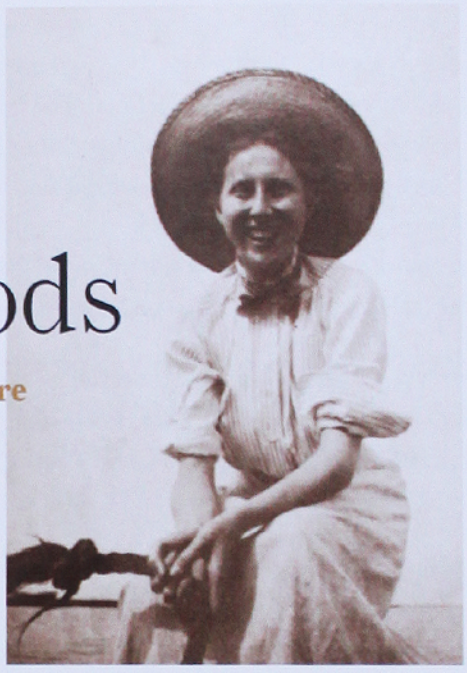
Heart of the Woods

Caroline Dormon, Creating a Safe Haven for Nature



THERE'S NO SHORTAGE OF NATURAL wonders in Louisiana, from its breezy bayous to its fragile wetlands, but one of its truly special spots is Briarwood, also known as the Caroline Dormon Nature Preserve. And to know Briarwood is to know Caroline Dormon, founder of Louisiana's Kisatchie National Forest, one of the state's most influential conservationists and among the first women employed in forestry in America. The "almost-virgin forest with magnificent trees towering a hundred feet tall" is where she vacationed as a child and later spent most of her life, overseeing its care in the name of wilderness preservation.

ABOVE: *Caroline Dormon in her younger years.*
RIGHT: *Entering Briarwood from State Route 9.*

by meghan hogan **photographs by james rosenthal**

BRIARWOOD IS THE FIRST NATURALISTIC SITE RECORDED BY THE HISTORIC AMERICAN Landscapes Survey, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year with almost 200 projects completed. The site is central to the story of Natchitoches, which as the state's oldest permanent settlement is steeped in Louisiana history. Yet, as a "designed wilderness," it might seem an oxymoron to some. "It really raises the question of how you interpret conservation," says HALS chief Paul Dolinsky. Though the land was there long before she was, it's what Dormon did with it that made it what it is today. "A walk through her woods, filled with native southern plants, is a special experience," says Nancy Morgan, former director of the Natchitoches-based Cane River Creole National Heritage Area, who was instrumental in getting focus on the site. "She somehow managed to create an environment that is completely natural, as strange as that sounds." Amidst 120 acres of old-growth hardwood and pine, Dormon scattered over 50 years of plantings, some local to Louisiana and the southeastern states, and others from across the globe. Today, there are approximately 900 species in the Briarwood plant database, not including exotic ones "too numerous to list," says Jessie Johnson, who has managed the site with her husband, Richard, since Dormon's death in 1971. "She used her forest as a canvas," Johnson says, crediting its virgin appearance to Dormon's skills as a landscape designer and artist. "She took into consideration the requirements of each plant and its preferred habitat."

CARING FOR SUCH A PLACE SINGLE-HANDED MIGHT SEEM DAUNTING even to the most seasoned professional, but to Dormon it was a joyous adventure. Born at Briarwood, her family's summer home, in July 1888, she was the sixth child of somewhat unconventional parents who emphasized the importance of education and an appreciation for nature above material pursuits. Her lifelong love affair with the outdoors began on fishing trips and nature expeditions with her father, a lawyer. Her green thumb was courtesy of her mother, a novelist, who gave each child a small garden plot. Their childhoods were spent bird watching, wildflower picking, and playing in the front-yard tree house of their home in Arcadia where they lived most of the year. After each Christmas, they counted the days to going "down the country" for six weeks at Briarwood, a yearly event. It was an idyllic period for Dormon.

In 1904, she went away to Judson College in Marion, Alabama, graduating in 1907 with a fine arts degree in literature and art, only to have her mother die the same year, and her father two years later. And just three months after his death, the Arcadia house burned to the ground.

Dormon, "Miss Carrie" to both her friends and later her students, spent the next couple of years as a high school teacher in Lake Arthur, Louisiana, vacationing every summer at Briarwood until 1917, when, declining her brother's invitation to join him in Alabama, moved there with her older sister, Virginia, to live permanently.

Still in her 20s, she didn't have any grand plans to promote conservation until she noticed the forests of magnificent longleaf pines—not unlike the ones at her beloved Briarwood—along her 20-mile daily drive to Kisatchie School, her new employer. "I was in heaven," she wrote later. The forests were known to few except local loggers, who were just as fond as she was. She took a first step towards conservation by attending the Southern Forestry Congress in 1920. From there she chaired the forestry division of the Louisiana Federation of Women's Clubs, and just months after that, was appointed to the Louisiana Forestry Association's legislative committee.

As a forestry chairman, her success in organizing events such as a tree-planting competition for the Boys Reforestation Clubs of Louisiana was soon noticed by state officials and in 1921 the Louisiana Forestry

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LEFT: *A stream in the Cypress Bog.* **ABOVE:** *Dormon's house.*

Division hired her as one of the country's first female employees—for a forestry awareness job with no official description.

She thus turned her teaching skills to forestry education, visiting schools across the state, determined to plant the seeds of conservation in young minds. In 1923, she resigned from the position over disagreements with a supervisor, but was back in 1927 when she kickstarted projects such as a forestry essay contest and an Arbor Day booklet. Immensely popular with educators, "she was deluged with invitations to speak to local and state groups," writes Fran Holman in "*The Gift of the Wild Things": The Life Of Caroline Dormon*.

YET HER TEACHING NEVER DISTRACTED HER FROM SAVING KISATCHIE. ALWAYS AN ARTIST, a sketch shows her hunched over her desk at Briarwood, where every Sunday she wrote to lumber companies asking to kindly sell their tracts to the government. "What more splendid monument could you leave to do honor to your name?" she asked as she described plans for a park. She enlisted her brother, a lawyer, to draft legislation allowing Louisiana to purchase the land—which took almost 10 years to pass—but in 1929 the state started buying tracts and on June 10, 1930, Kisatchie National Forest was established. Her "singular dream" realized, she retired from her job with the state, living on private projects coupled with activities like running a girls camp and selling canned vegetables.

Dormon spent much of the next several years doing landscape design for Louisiana's Board of Public Welfare and the Department of Transportation and Development. Her work on projects like the grounds of the Midstate Charity Hospital and along stretches of Louisiana highway favored native plantings such as dogwoods, wild azaleas, and crabapples, blended with the shrubs and trees already on site. The formal elements of traditional landscaping—such as the trimming of plants into decorative shapes and the planting of flowerbeds— she considered "horrors." She was a consultant for Hodges Gardens State Park, and advised on plant selection for Longue Vue House and Gardens, the New Orleans estate of her good friend Edith Stern, the daughter of Sears founder Julius Rosenwald. Yet plants were not her only passion. She was deeply interested in American history, particularly that of the Indians and early settlers, again owing to her father, who regaled her with stories as a child. Her nuanced theories on conquistador Hernando de Soto earned her a spot on a presidential commission established in 1935 to trace his route. Appointed by President Franklin Roosevelt, she was the only woman of the seven-member group. She canvassed the state in search of clues left by the explorer, often with her sister as chauffeur.

BUT SHE ALWAYS CAME BACK TO BRIARWOOD TO RE-CHARGE. IT WAS, AS THE HALS HISTORY notes, "her laboratory and muse." One of her favorite things to do was visit "Grandpappy"—a 106-foot-tall longleaf pine, and relax against its expansive trunk. Around 300 years old today, it remains one of the property's main attractions for the 2,000 or so visitors each year. Other popular sites are the Log House, built in 1950 as Dormon's residence and now a museum, Wings Rest Pond, and, perhaps one of the most magical spots she cultivated, the Bay Garden, home to over 100 different plants. It is especially abundant with the vivacious Louisiana iris—one of Dormon's favorite flowers, although Johnson stresses that she didn't have just one. "We often say whichever plant Miss Dormon was standing by was her favorite." As a self-proclaimed "irisiac," she was particularly attracted to its rainbow palette and, as a natural hybrid produced from four species found only in southern Louisiana, its mysterious genetics. "Here was this unique iris growing in our

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ABOVE: *Briarwood's Frog Pond, its bank alive with irises.* **RIGHT:** *The Rest Pond reflecting Grandpappy, Dormon's beloved longleaf pine.*

state for thousands of years and no other place in the world, and no one knew about them except local people quietly planting them in their yards," Johnson says. Dormon never even heard of the plant until 1920, when she happened to spot a field of them on a drive. From that one sighting, it didn't take long to fall in love. "No wild flower adventure can ever quite match my excitement on seeing them for the first time," she later said.

Determined to learn as much as she could about the little-known plant, over the next several years she befriended other aficionados including Dr. John Small, curator of the New York Botanical Gardens, and Mary Swords DeBaillon, who owned the world's largest collection of Louisiana irises. With Briarwood as her testing ground, she planted and studied many varieties. She soon found the species needed lots of food and water, preferring humus-rich soil coupled with plenty of sunshine. With those prerequisites, Briarwood's shady bogs wouldn't seem the ideal location for iris growing, but visitors were surprised at how they well did. She also had friends plant them in their gardens to gauge their growth in different soil and weather conditions. She diligently recorded every variation.

BY THE EARLY 1930S, DORMON WAS CONSIDERED AN IRIS EXPERT. AFTER THE DE SOTO Commission released its report in 1939, she devoted more time to the pursuit, through the late 1940s. By that time, Dormon—then in her 50s and never in the best of health due to a weak heart—had largely retired from public life to devote herself wholeheartedly to her plants. It was the "peak of scientific activity" for Briarwood, states the HALS history.

She took her love of the Louisiana iris beyond mere observation, hybridizing to create her own varieties. Yet she never considered herself more than an amateur. "Most of mine go over the fence, as far as I can throw them!" she once wrote in an article for *Home Gardening*. Despite her modesty, she earned awards from the American Iris Society for several of her creations such as Violet Ray, a vibrant purple with cream-colored rays extending out from the center, and Saucy Minx, a "brilliant rose-red" with ruffled petals. Johnson notes that Dormon's Wheelhorse iris—a magenta flower with a sunburst of yellow—is a grandparent still used by hybridizers. Those varieties and many more continue to bloom in the Bay Garden as a carpet of reds, yellows, golds, lavenders, bi-colors, all shades of blue, and purples "so deep they're black in the bud stage," Johnson says. Dormon sketched and painted many of the species at Briarwood as well as landscapes and scenes of nature and the South. She did illustrations for various horticultural publications, and her work was exhibited by several museums. When she wasn't sketching, she was writing. She corresponded with fellow flower lovers around the world, always clear that she did "not have a 'garden'—just wild woods, with an unusual plant here and there among the briars!"

For the benefit of growers and because she needed the money, she also published her extensive botany notes and observations. *Flowers Native to the Deep South* and *Natives Preferred* were released in the 1950s and '60s, along with *Bird Talk*, which reflected her fascination with birds and is infused with Rachel Carson's warnings against the deadly use of DDT, which would kill them. "Her passion and inspiration encouraged others to love and grow native plants in their landscapes," says Jenny Rose Carey, director of the Ambler Arboretum at Pennsylvania's Temple University, pointing out that at the time, "the trend in horticulture was the exotic plant from a faraway country."

DORMON SAID HER LIFE MUST SEEM "VERY QUIET AND UNEVENTFUL TO OTHERS" BUT for such a life she received a lot of notice, including awards from the Garden Club of America and the American Horticultural Society as well as her alma mater. Louisiana State University granted her an honorary Doctor of Science degree, and a lodge at Chicot State Park is named after her. These honors were particularly significant considering that she was a woman. "It is impossible to quantify the often subtle influence that women like Caroline had on changing the status quo," Carey says.

She passed away in 1971, but always protective of Briarwood—her sister once crashed into a pine and hid the damage to the tree instead of the car—not before ensuring that it would be safe. In the months before her death, she bequeathed the property to the Foundation for the Preservation of the Caroline Dormon Nature Preserve, Inc., a group of 20 volunteer board members, establishing Briarwood as "a learning laboratory for students, botanists, horticulturists, and serious individuals wanting to learn more of the natural world." As sole caretakers she designated Richard Johnson—who as a child impressed Dormon by climbing an oak to collect mistletoe for her—and his wife Jessie. As the HALS history notes, every decision they've made since has been acted on only after asking, "What would Caroline do?" The trails have been slightly widened for maintenance, and of course storms always have an impact, but Briarwood remains pretty much the same as in Dormon's day, which is just as it should be. "She always said that if you did your work correctly, no one would be able to tell you had been there," Johnson says.

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contact points **web** *Briarwood www.cp-tel.net/dormon/ HALS Collection at the Library of Congress http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/*

LEFT: *Briarwood's Writer's Cabin.*