



## Saxon, Lyle Chambers (1891-1946)

by Roberts Batson

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Although Lyle Saxon was New Orleans' most popular writer during the second quarter of the twentieth century, he is remembered less as a writer than as an editor and friend to writers, as well as an architectural preservationist, a French Quarter booster, and beloved public personality.

Saxon was born on September 4, 1891. His early life was strongly shaped by family and by literary influences. It is significant that all three of the child's names were family names. His father Hugh, of course, was a Saxon, his father's mother was a Lyle, and Saxon's mother Katherine was a Chambers.

All three were journalists. His grandmother, Elizabeth Lyle Saxon, was also a poet, author, and prominent early suffragette. In addition, his maternal grandfather, Michael Chambers, owned the first bookstore in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, long an institution in the town.

Saxon's parents' marriage disintegrated shortly after his birth, and apparently he never afterwards had any contact with his father. He grew up in his grandfather's house with his mother and two spinster aunts.

Young Lyle aspired to attend an Eastern college, but his genteel mother could not afford to send him to an Ivy-league college. Instead, he attended Louisiana State University in his hometown, but left college one course short of a degree.

By 1919 Saxon was in New Orleans writing for the city's leading newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*. After a stint as a general reporter he began to write book reviews and fiction for the newspaper, as well as features about the city, its history and unique culture.

Over a four-month period in 1921, he wrote a fictionalized history of New Orleans. In it, a newspaperman, quite like Saxon himself, has an almost mystical love for the city. It is not surprising, therefore, that Saxon once wrote tellingly to a friend, "I--as a man--am also a lover. I shall try to tell you of the woman to whom I offer my love . . . this woman, New Orleans."

Saxon lived in the French Quarter, much to the consternation of friends who begged him not to live "among the thieves and squalor" that the city's oldest section then attracted. He personally restored two important buildings himself and led the city's preservationist movement.

His enthusiasm for the romanticism and mystique of the Quarter was boundless, and he used his newspaper pulpit to preach its charms. His effect was both immediate and long-lasting. Robert Tallant, a literary colleague, wrote that, largely due to Saxon, the French Quarter became "more of an art colony, less an underworld."

Soon Saxon began to attract a brilliant assortment of young writers and artists. Traipsing in and out of his salon on Royal Street, and swigging contraband Prohibition liquor, were William Faulker, William Spratling, Sherwood and Elizabeth Anderson, Edmund Wilson, Dorothy Dix, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck.

Saxon quit the newspaper in 1926. Over the next four years he produced four very popular books, *Father Mississippi*, *Fabulous New Orleans*, *Old Louisiana*, and *Lafitte the Pirate*. He also wrote some well-received short stories and a novel, *Children of Strangers*.

In 1935 he was appointed director of the W.P.A. Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana and he also organized the Negro History Unit of the Writers' Project. Saxon supervised more than a hundred field workers and edited their reports into two highly-regarded guide books, *New Orleans City Guide* (1938) and *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (1941). Later the accumulated research into Louisiana folklore was published as *Gumbo Ya-Ya* (1945).

These works, together with his newspaper writing, cemented Saxon's reputation as New Orleans' most ardent literary lover.

Saxon's personal love life is more difficult to discern. Some authorities suggest that his only great love was his childhood friend, George Favrot, who went to Europe as a World War I soldier and died in Paris in 1918. Other sources maintain that he had a sexual relationship with Joe Gilmore, his long-time black valet.

Biographer James W. Thomas interviewed many of Saxon's closest friends and concluded, "Saxon's homosexual affairs were discreet, never a problem for his heterosexual friends, and not a significant part of his literary life."

Indeed, homosexual characters or subjects do not appear anywhere in his published work. But in his best fiction, Saxon presents protagonists as iconoclasts who break rigid codes of conduct. They defy societal constricts of race in the short story "Cane River" (1926) and the novel *Children of Strangers* (1937), and constricts of sex in "The Centaur Plays Croquet" (1927), also a short story.

Certainly, it was with a knowing wink and a nudge that Saxon was lampooned in *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles* (1926), a spoof concocted by Spratling and Faulkner. The caricature Spratling drew of Saxon has him sprawled on an elaborately embroidered pillow reading Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*. Faulkner's caption below reads "The Mauve Decade in St. Peter Street."

Saxon is his most unguarded in letters he exchanged with his friend artist Weeks Hall, master of Shadows on the Teche, his ancestral family home on Bayou Teche in southwestern Louisiana. Saxon was having characteristic fun as he privately wrote, "As for the miasmas rising from the Teche, I cannot bring myself to think that the effluvia does aught stir indiscreet thoughts, and, alas, perhaps, indiscreet actions as well. I remember in my own case, on certain summer evenings . . . but why speak of our gaudy youth, dear Coz, as we approach Life's Sunset?"

Lyle Saxon's place in history may not be upon the highest of literary pedestals, but a man who led the architectural preservation of the French Quarter and attracted a coterie of talented writers and artists to it; who established the Quarter in the public mind as a place of abiding romance; who encouraged and championed both William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams--two of the greatest writers of the century; who collected and published a priceless trove of Louisiana folklore; and who accomplished all these things with charm and easy grace, arriving at the end of his life's journey a man "with no enemies," is certainly an important figure in American gay culture of the twentieth century.

Saxon died in Baptist Hospital in his beloved adopted city on April 9, 1946 at 9:16 p.m. As he requested, his father was not contacted. He was buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Baton Rouge next to his mother and grandfather.

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### **About the Author**

**Roberts Batson** received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. In addition to professional achievement in theatrical and academic spheres, he has been a longtime gay community activist. The author of over 200 articles on New Orleans history and contemporary culture, he has been awarded Sigma Delta Chi and Vice Versa awards. In 1994 he created an acclaimed New Orleans Gay Heritage Tour, which he continues to conduct, and in 2002 began performing a one-man theatrical show, *Amazing Place, this New Orleans*. Batson is currently working on a book on New Orleans gay history.