



Family home, Madisonville

CHAPTER ONE

Madisonville

When it's cold in Louisiana, folks say, the cold cuts to the bone. Humidity hangs wet over the state, making the cold seem colder, wetter, and worse than, say, in Montana. Wintertime in Madisonville, Louisiana, was bone cold. When the rain on the dirt yards around the houses would freeze over, the kids would skate across the ice, in their shoes. Cradled between the Tchefuncte River and Lake Pontchartrain, Madisonville caught the cold, wet air from every side.

The area around Madisonville was known for its fishing, the river deep and enhanced by the abundant oak and pine trees. The river had plenty of perch and bass, and the lake was a natural source of crabs, oysters, and shrimp. Numerous cypress, willow, and gum trees shaded the river's edge in summer, and the marsh grasses, water hyacinths, and lilies created soothing, colorful landscapes. But winters were hard.

In January 1923, Hortensia Lange was about to give birth to her second child. Her first child, Claudia, had died at eighteen months. A pot of scalded milk turned over on her and she didn't survive the ensuing complications. This second child would be the first of thirteen to come, but only eleven of Hortensia's children would survive. Hortensia was not about to give birth to her baby in Madisonville. She would travel across the lake to New Orleans, where her mother lived. Babies weren't born in hospitals in those days; they were born by midwives, and Hortensia's mother was a registered midwife.

With a bundle of baby clothes she had made herself, Hortensia

boarded the *Steamer Madisonville*. Black people couldn't sit in the upstairs part of the boat, where there was a wood-burning stove and oil lamps; they rode below with the cargo and the vehicles. So Hortensia huddled into a seat, isolating herself from the cold lake air as best she could, wrapped herself in a blanket, and prepared for the three-hour journey across Lake Pontchartrain. It was bone cold.

Leah Lange was born on January 6. She shared a birth date with a woman who would later become one of her most admired people: Joan of Arc. This coincidence of birth dates could almost make one believe unequivocally in horoscopes. The characteristics of courage, leadership, standing up for one's beliefs, and deep Catholic faith are qualities both women share.

Not much was happening in Madisonville, Louisiana, or Madison, as the locals call it, in 1923. Madison was a country town, and people didn't lack for much in the country. They had big vegetable gardens so they had enough to eat. Most families had at least a couple of hogs, maybe a few chickens. And then there was the Tchefuncte River, where anyone with a line and bait, and a bit of patience, could catch a mess of fish.

Although whites and blacks lived side by side, their lives were segregated. The white Catholics attended St. Catherine's Church, named for the wife of a wealthy local merchant, and the black Catholics attended the older St. Francis Xavier, given to them upon the construction of St. Catherine's.¹ Protestants, regardless of color, were considered second class.

Everything in Madisonville revolved around the Tchefuncte River, which was deep enough to serve as an ideal place for the shipping industry. The men in town were shipbuilders, ship repairers, boat captains, boiler tenders. The *Steamer Madisonville* transported travelers from New Orleans' West End to Madisonville three times a week. Most of the town folk congregated on the banks when the steamer docked. It was always an exciting event, enhanced by an ever-present small orchestra accompanied by a man named Nelson Jean who belted out catchy music on his banjo. It could be said that the *Steamer Madisonville* went on to bigger and better things. According to the *St. Tammany Historical Society Gazette*, it was sold around 1930 and used as a sightseeing boat in New York City, carrying passengers to the Statue of Liberty.

Charles Robert Lange was a ship's caulker. At home, after a long

day of working on wooden ships, he worked his huge garden. He would give the best of his vegetables to neighbors or the good sisters of the Holy Family at St. Francis Xavier Catholic School. The rest would be for the family. After a supper of biscuits and cured ham and greens, he would drill his children, all girls, on telling the time, using a clock with Roman numerals. He made them memorize the alphabet forward and backward. When the lights were out and the eerie shriek of screech owls filled the night, he admonished his children to shush and not be afraid. After all, it was nothing but a bird. He prepared his children for life. "Anything can happen," he told them, "and you can achieve anything if you just pray hard enough." And pray they did.

The family Hortensia and Charles Lange were building in the early '20s would eventually number eleven: nine girls and two boys—Cleo, Eleanor, Grace, Sylvia, Yvette, Adoncia, Eula, Charles, Janice, Hayes, and of course, Leah. They were church-going people and Catholic to the core, always giving and sharing with others. Hortensia Raymond Lange despised unkindness. She once became upset when an obese lady who attended St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church stopped going because of the giggling and tittering in the congregation upon her entrance into the sanctuary, and when old Mr. Gandy, hunchbacked and "coal" black, sat in the rectory in the back rather than be belittled in the sanctuary for his dark color and deformity. Hortensia spoke openly about these affronts at home in front of her children. She hated discrimination in a time when the word had not yet been coined. When people criticized others, she hammered into her children her belief there was something good in everybody; you just had to look for it.

None of this was lost on Leah Lange. The generosity of spirit, the detesting of discrimination, the discipline for learning, and the courage to not be afraid all became manifest in the future Leah Lange Chase. Today these qualities funnel through to her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren, continuing the legacy of her parents.

From her domain, the Dooky Chase Restaurant at 2301 Orleans Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana, "Miss Chase," as people fondly call her, stretches her arms far and wide to others. It is only partly because of this quality that she is widely loved and respected. At



Leah's parents, Hortensia and Charles Lange

an award ceremony held in 2000, a man in the audience told Leah, "So many people love you. I wish half as many people loved me." Leah believes she must do something good for someone else every single day of her life. On May 18, 1998, when granting her the Loving Cup Award—the most prestigious citizen's award in New Orleans, given by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* to honor someone who gives without expectation of reward—publisher Ashton Phelps said, "If Leah Chase were the average citizen, Louisiana would be a dream state."

Leah doesn't get back to Madisonville as often as she'd like. One of her sisters lives in the old homestead. Another lives in a home surrounded by towering pines, and her brothers, much younger, live nearby and spend their spare time hunting and fishing. When the family gets together, laughter prevails, stories are told, and tables groan under pots of steaming gumbo, chock-full of veal, shrimp, and *chaurice*.²

Tales about their parents are popular. Their father's corny fishing jokes are notorious: "They were biting so much today. Why, I had to go hide behind a tree to bait my hook! . . . Man said he caught a fish as big as a whale. A whale? I use a whale for bait. . . . How big

was that fish? That fish was so big, when I pulled him out, the lake went down.”

Not all memories are funny. Charles Lange was a disciplinarian and just the memory of his razor strap provokes raised eyebrows and sharp exhalations among the siblings. He never cursed or said ugly things, but when his daughters provoked him, he called them sobbing wenches. Hortensia, however, ruled the roost. Most often, it was disobedience to their mother that resulted in an encounter with their father’s strap. And while Charles was easygoing and prone to ignore offensive comments from people, Hortensia was quick to put unkind people right in their place.

With her long straight hair and confident air, Hortensia strode barefoot about the packed dirt yard. She tended to her large family and to others in need. She sewed baseball uniforms for a whole team that had none, engaging her daughters to sew on the buttons and make the buttonholes. Her grandchildren don’t remember her being especially grandmotherly. They recall her requiring them to be silent when they went fishing with her or be sent back to the house.

She was inventive, creative, and she loved nice things. When the children needed clothes, she took printed flour sacks and made dresses—beautiful dresses. She turned castoff wool coats wrong side out so that the good side was showing and made her children new coats. She was a genius with a needle and thread, but she hated to cook, except for baking bread. She loved to ply the dough, in and out, in and out, let it rise, then bake it in the wood-burning oven until it was toasty brown.

Every Sunday morning the Lange family dressed up and walked a half-mile to church. Hortensia was proud to see her children dressed nicely, and as poor as her family was, she worked hard to make them pretty clothes. Charles teased them, saying, “You worry too much about what you’re putting on. If you had one suit, like I have, you wouldn’t worry about what you put on. You’d just put on your one dress and go to church.”

New dresses were an important part of every holiday. All Saints Day, although somber in its idea, was an exciting day for the family. Hortensia made the girls new dresses and the whole family spent the day at the cemetery, visiting the graves of the deceased and enjoying a picnic. Since the community was segregated, all the



Leah Chase and Ashton Phelps



Leah (middle row, second from left) with her brothers and sisters

black Catholics in town would descend upon the cemetery where their loved ones were buried. A lady who worked for the priest sold ice cream. Kids played; parents visited. The weather was still warm on November 1. It would be a lazy day, unlike the other days of hard work.

Thanksgiving Day was another jubilant holiday. There was food, food, and more food. At noon everyone would sit at the table and have a glass of strawberry wine and a bowl of gumbo. They would then leave the table and socialize, the women often chatting over hot, sudsy dishpans as they washed the dirty dishes and prepared for the next course. At two in the afternoon, everyone returned to the table and they stayed there until evening. A typical Thanksgiving dinner would include fresh pork roast, wild game that Charles had killed, oyster patties, oyster dressing, *petits pois* (garden peas), and cakes and pies. The canned *petits pois* would be the fanciest thing on the table. They weren't homegrown; they were expensive. Thanksgiving was a time for the family, hard-working and busy, to relax together, talk, laugh, and renew their contact with one another—and, of course, eat.

Christmas, on the other hand, was a full, busy week of festivities and required days of preparation. Families visited each other every day of the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, and food and drink were vital to the festive atmosphere. Cakes were prepared and stored, usually in the wire safe that hung on the porch outside the front room. Strawberry wine, a specialty of Charles Lange, was bottled from the thick crocks where it had fermented. Gas lamps lit the house. A gusty fire in a potbellied stove warmed the rooms.

BUTTER CAKE

1 lb. butter
 1 lb. confectioners' sugar
 6 eggs
 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups cake flour, sifted
 2 tsp. vanilla

Preheat oven at 350 degrees. Grease a cake pan.

With a mixer set on high speed, cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add eggs one at a time, mixing well after each egg. Gradually add flour, mixing well and scraping down sides of mixing bowl. After all flour has been added, add vanilla and mix for 1 minute. Pour into greased cake pan and bake for 1 hour or until a toothpick inserted into cake comes out clean.

Church and the importance of prayer were drilled into the Lange children. "If you pray hard enough," Charles Lange taught his children, "you'll get what you need." Charles also believed in good works. He sent his daughters to iron for the nuns and to wash their dishes on Sundays after lunch. They had to polish the tall, heavy, brass candelabras in the church. Should friends or other family members become ill, Hortensia dropped everything to go help, and the girls maintained things at home. That's just the way it was. If Charles and Hortensia Lange knew of anyone who needed a helping hand, they mobilized their whole family. It was a way of life.

Charles' brothers kidded him about the pack of girls he'd produced. What good would they be? But nothing discouraged Charles about his daughters. Everyone, little or big, worked. They did their chores around the house, they did their homework, and naturally, they played.

The children loved to fly kites. Charles would cut thin strips of cypress and build the frames. The children mixed paste from flour and water and used it to stick paper to the light, wood frames. Then they tied razor blades to the tails of their kites. The objective was to move a kite close enough to the other children's kites to cut their strings, causing their kites to crash to the ground. Competition was keen.

Playing with dolls was another normal pastime. The dolls had porcelain heads, arms, and legs, and rag bodies stuffed with straw. What the Lange girls liked to do was clothe the dolls in the dresses they'd made themselves. They played tag, hopscotch, and a game called Pea-Put, which involved using a spinning top their father had made. The children drew a circle in the dirt and divided it in half. One half had a *P* written in it and the other had a *T*. Each child would then spin the top. If it landed on the *P*, the child had to put something into the circle. If it landed on the *T*, she took something out. The ante, so to speak, was usually candy.

When big jobs—such as making mattresses from the stringy Louisiana moss or killing a hog—came along, the girls' job was to baby-sit the younger kids. In strawberry season, getting in the fields and picking the berries at exactly the right time to insure a maximum crop was of prime importance, and the girls' help was needed. The prettiest berries were sold fresh and the others were used to make preserves and sweet strawberry wine. In fact, the children went to school only six months out of the year. The late spring months were for picking strawberries.

The road home from the strawberry fields ran beside a place called Palmetto Flat, a swampy area full of indigenous palmetto palms. It was a spooky area and the children scurried along quickly. The lingering rumor was that the Silk Lady would appear in the swamp. She was a ghost who first made herself known by the smell of watermelon; then the air would suddenly turn warm. Leah never saw the Silk Lady, but one of her sisters was sure that she did. One thing was certain: the girls would not go home and mention the

Silk Lady in front of their parents. Their father would have scoffed and their mother didn't want to hear any talk about ghosts.

When the Lange children weren't working at home, working for the sisters at the church, or picking strawberries, their activities revolved around the school. The nuns were always organizing something, and there was no question of not participating. Like so many families in those days, if the kids got into trouble at school, they got double trouble at home. When Sister Jules or Sister Josephine got upset with one of the Lange girls, she would walk the girl home, tell her parents, and wait until the child got a licking. The Lange girls learned to toe the line.

Leah quickly became a star. Smart for her age, she started school a year earlier than most. She always had the leading role in any school play. She knew the entire mass in Latin and, to this day, resents that she couldn't be an altar boy. Signs were already in the air that Leah Lange was going to be somebody to be reckoned with.