

The End for a kingdom of books

By JOHN POPE

The Basement Book Shop, the tiny store near Tulane University that was host to such literary giants as Edna St. Vincent Millay, W.H. Auden and Gertrude Stein, has been closed and its inventory sold.

Tess Crager, 82, has not been told the fate of the business she opened in 1931 in a yellow frame building that used to be a grocery. In her prime, she ran the shop at 7221 Zimple St. like an absolute monarch: She threw fabled parties there for authors and visiting lecturers, conversed for hours with favored customers, carried on feuds with several writers and insulted people seeking paperbacks or volumes that, she thought, had no literary value.

"You either liked Tess or thought she was rude and impossible," said Janet Yancey, a retired teacher who is one of Crager's closest friends.

Crager had not been an active participant in the bookstore's management for several years, said David Campbell, who ran the store for most of 1981.

But before the bookshop closed for the last time on the last day of last year, she went there nearly every day, just to sit among the books and the framed photographs of literary celebrities at her parties, he said. Without a shop to visit, Crager seldom leaves the Metairie house where she lives quietly with her Siamese cats, Scott and Zelda.

In a 1974 interview, she had said, "My work will be finished when they find me lying on the bookstore floor."

But that prophecy did not come true. Last fall, Deirdre Crager Stanforth, Crager's elder daughter, decided to sell the books and a small publishing company named for Tess Crager's late husband, Campbell said.

"My mother had been losing money for years, but as long as she was there, it was all right," said Gretchen Crager Sharpless, Crager's other daughter, who had shared control of the business with her sister.

At first, "I disagreed with Deirdre," Sharpless said, "but it became a matter of getting someone to baby-sit the shop, and after a while, we figured it just wasn't worth it."

Carey C. Beckham, who runs other New Orleans bookstores, has bought the inventory of several thousand books for a price he refused to disclose. He has boxed the books and is moving them out. Campbell said a buyer is being sought for Robert L. Crager & Co., which specializes in books about New Orleans but has published nothing since the early 1970s.

Even though she reigned over the bookshop for nearly half a century, Crager never owned the building because "my family would not have parted with it," said Cecelia Browning, whose grandparents had operated a grocery there. The monthly rent was \$100 — up from the \$50 fee that had been in effect until nearly a decade ago, Campbell said.

The simple two-room structure, which also featured a lending library, has no basement. The shop got its name because two other women started the business on the street level of a raised home, said Yancey.

They opened the shop in 1928 in the 7700 block of St. Charles Avenue. Three years later, Yancey said, Crager moved the business to Zimple Street — just across Broadway from Tulane University — and bought them out. The grocery shelves became crowded bookshelves, bearing volumes Crager had picked out for her clientele.

"Tess knew their tastes cold and ordered books for them," Campbell said. "She offered extensive personal service for a core of about 200 people."

Among the books he bought, Beckham said, "I don't recognize many of the titles. I can only conclude that she invested in them to help out the publishers."

When Crager opened the Zimple Street shop, she had few local rivals, and chain bookstores were unknown. "She did fill the gap," Beckham said. "If she hadn't been there, I don't know what we would have had."

Because of the dearth of competition and her location in a university area, Crager was sought out by booksellers, who also sent authors to her shop when they were promoting books.

"Every important person came to her, the stinkers and the fascinators," Yancey said.



—Staff file photo/G.E. Arnold

Basement Book Shop near Tulane University once was host to literary giants

Her tastes were broad, and the crowded shelves took on an increasingly chaotic appearance. Books were stacked on the brown wooden floor, in the sales rooms and even in the bathroom. Despite the apparent lack of order, longtime customers insisted that Crager could zero in on a book the way a gull can dive into the sea and snatch up a small fish.

Despite the diversity of her inventory, Crager had nothing but disdain for one type of book: the paperback, which grew in popularity after World War II. "She thought paperbacks were the lowest of the low," said Yancey, who used to be headmistress of the Louise S. McGehee School. "She thought a book was worth a good printing and a good binding."

To help writers launch their books, Crager threw parties for them — parties which had to be on the day of publication and never later. Yancey said, explaining that those who let someone else honor them on publication day risked Crager's lifelong animosity.

At such soirees, one New Orleans writer said, "cocktails were served, and an author could blackmail his friends into buying copies of his books."

Besides selling books, Crager was an agent for such New Orleans authors as Charles L. "Pie" Dufour, John C. Chase, Robert Tallant and Lyle Saxon. In 1947, she and her husband launched a publishing company that started by reprinting Saxon's works and moved onto such original books as "Frenchmen, Desire, Good Children," Chase's history of New Orleans streets, and "Brennan's New Orleans Cookbook" by Stanforth and Hermann B. Deutsch.

Crager's other link to the intellectual world came through her work on the Lyceum Association of New Orleans, which brought speakers to New Orleans and eventually became a Tulane program. After the speeches, Crager brought them to Basement Book Shop to drink, snack and talk with friends who filled the store.

During World War II, Andre Malraux spoke movingly about the plight of his native France. Even though he spoke perfect English, Yancey recalled, he tolerated some of Crager's guests who insisted on trying out their far-from-perfect French on him. Edna St. Vincent Millay dashed in late, her flame-colored hair and a bright cloak flying behind her, and explained that her cab driver had gotten lost on the trip Uptown. Gertrude Stein, who was renowned for her bizarre grammatical style, arrived at the bookstore after delivering a convoluted history of the English language.

Poets W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender showed up, too, as did T.H. White, who wrote "The Once and Future King." When Alexander Woollcott, the corpulent critic and radio personality, put in an appearance, Crager said she fixed fudge for him.

One celebrity who earned her ire was Robert Penn Warren, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and poet. "He

was supposed to speak on the modern novel," Yancey said, "and all he did was read his poetry. Tess was furious at him."

The guests, immortalized in photographs that used to hang on the yellow walls, constituted "a 'Who's Who' in Southern literature and a 'Who's Who' in intellectual life," said Campbell. "It was the place to have a party. I had heard about the Basement Book Shop long before I came to New Orleans in 1971. There was a spirit that my friends from New York had told me about — a very vibrant literary oasis in a desert — that was something I could not recreate."

"The spirit changed. The times changed. When Tess had her decline, the spirit died. The Lyceum stayed strong because there was a closeness of friendship that was born in the search of an intellectual freedom that the South did not have. There was this old cadre, but it has been dying out in the past few years. It's the passing of the old guard, and it's something I hate to see die."

Another casualty of the passing years, Yancey said, was Crager's interest in modern American literature.

"She would have no part of 'Catch-22' or 'Mother Night' or 'Cat's Cradle,'" Yancey said. "She was living in a liter-

ary world that was over. I don't mean to imply that she was a prude, but the idiom of the modern writers was beyond her. She used to say, 'They don't write the type of books they used to write.'"

Nevertheless, Crager stayed on, ordering books for longtime customers and glorying in a few new releases like "All the President's Men," the story of the cracking of the Watergate cover-up, which let her deliver homilies to customers about Richard M. Nixon. She continued to work even after she was mugged twice in the store, although those attacks did prompt her to lock her doors during business hours.

Business declined as customers moved away or died and as mass-market paperbacks lured potential customers away from increasingly costlier hardbacks.

"Gretchen was keeping the shop open for the sake of her mother," Beckham said. "When I went there, I was trying to turn a bookshop into a moderately profitable industry, and I almost succeeded," said Campbell, who ran the store for eight months last year. "Now, I feel dejected. I hate seeing institutions die."

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Tess Crager with stack of books in shop on Zimple Street in 1974