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Address: Judson College, Marion, Alabama, The Alabama Women's Hall of Fame

Induction of Juliette Hampton Morgan, March 3, 2005

Thank you, Trustees of the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame, staff, and students of Judson College, and all the planners and supporters of this wonderful event, for the honor that you are bestowing on Juliette Hampton Morgan, of Montgomery today.

I'm going to tell you a little about what she did, and the times she lived through, and then you'll have the pleasure of hearing about her from her first cousin, Colonel Henry G. Morgan, on behalf of the wonderful Morgan family.

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“It is hard to imagine a soul so dead, a heart so hard, a vision so blinded and provincial as not to be moved with admiration at the quiet dignity, discipline, and dedication with which the Negroes have conducted their boycott.”

Juliette Morgan wrote that to the *Montgomery Advertiser* on December 12, 1955.

Her letter affected Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so deeply that in *Stride Toward Freedom*, his 1958 memoir, he wrote that “about a week after the protest started a white woman who understood and sympathized with the Negroes' efforts wrote a letter to the editor comparing the bus protest with the Gandhian movement in India. Miss Juliette Morgan, sensitive and frail, did not long survive the rejection and condemnation of the white community, but long before she died in the summer of 1957 the name of Mahatma Gandhi was well-known in Montgomery.” Dr. King wanted future generations to remember the name of that white woman who first compared the Boycott with Gandhi's March To The Sea which resulted in India's freedom from the British Empire.

Up until that time whites had belittled the boycott. They were certain it wouldn't last and that it didn't

mean anything. Juliette's letter grasped its significance, Dr. King said, and helped give black people a sense of history."

Some forty years after reading *Stride Toward Freedom*, I visited the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery and found Juliette Morgan's letter. I also found six cartons of her personal effects that her mother had donated in 1977. Mrs. Morgan's scrapbook, *The Epic of Juliette Hampton Morgan*, was especially fascinating. She had carefully—and it seemed to me lovingly—preserved photos, newspaper clippings, letters, and drafts of all Juliette's work. With a little help I was able to locate a few of the Morgans' former neighbors who were willing to share their recollections.

"*Juliette and her mother lived over in Cloverdale and they hated the sight of each other,*" one told me.

"*Juliette was mentally deranged,*" another said. I couldn't believe it. That scrapbook seemed to tell a very different story. Then, just when I thought I'd hit a wall, I was introduced to the daughter of Juliette's lifelong best friend, Louise Johnson, who simply shook her head at those observations.

"*Juliette Morgan was the kindest, wisest person I ever knew,*" she said.

What would a person have to do, I wondered, how would she have had to live her life to arouse such contradictory reactions?

Let me tell you what I learned....

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In 1955 Montgomery was a city under siege. After the Supreme Court's *Brown v Board of Education* decision that segregation in the public schools violated the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, politicians and community leaders accused the Nine Judges, the federal government, the NAACP, and any number of outside-agitators of plotting to destroy the Southern Way of Life.

White Montgomery closed its ranks, resisted, and actively retaliated against outsiders and internal dissenters. After the White Citizens' Council assumed leadership of the campaign to preserve segregation, in

1955, dissension became tantamount to treason.

Who was Juliette Morgan to dare to admire a black demonstration in an environment like that? She was first and foremost a *Southerner* who always chose to live in Montgomery, where she'd been born in 1914. While she took issue with segregation and the tradition of white supremacy, she considered herself a member of Alabama's loyal opposition. She was director of research for the Montgomery Public Library, a position she held from 1952 to 1957. Prior to that she'd worked for the Carnegie Library, and before that she taught English at Lanier High School.

At the dedication of one of his free libraries, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie once commented that "there is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the free public library, this republic of letters where neither rank, office nor wealth receive the slightest consideration," Juliette took his words to heart. She believed that librarians had a responsibility to promote and protect intellectual freedom. All her adult life she defended free speech and advocated protection of minority opinions. She did this through the letters and articles she published in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the *Montgomery Examiner*, the *Tuscaloosa News*, *The Birmingham Herald*, *Birmingham News*, and the *Birmingham World* between 1936 and 1957.

A former student of political science, Juliette held up the example of Nazi Germany where dissent had been silenced in the service of the murderous dictator Adolph Hitler. Her letters from 1936 through 1941 focused on the spread of fascism in Europe, and on her fears that defending white supremacy would encourage American fascists.

Juliette's 1955 boycott letter was in many ways prophetic. "One feels that history is being made in Montgomery these days," she'd written, "perhaps the most important of her career." Her words were received with disbelief and anger by many of her friends, neighbors and colleagues. Who of sound mind, they asked, could believe that black maids, cooks, yardmen and porters refusing to ride on a bus would turn out to be an event more important than all the past glories of Montgomery? Who indeed?

Unlike many activists, Juliette was not driven by anger. It had taken her twenty years to conclude that the bill for three hundred years of white supremacy was finally coming due. She believed that it was her responsibility as an American to object to ignoring, withdrawing, and suspending the Constitutional rights of black citizens in order to preserve an undemocratic caste system like segregation

After 1954 it was dangerous for men to express such opinions and take the chances that Juliette took, and it was unthinkable for a woman, especially an unmarried woman to do so. She criticized segregation in her letters to the editor, she attended integrated meetings, and dared to pull the stop chord on the city buses whenever she witnessed an act of cruelty or disrespect being committed by white drivers at the expense of a black passenger.

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Juliette Morgan's social class, education, and especially her temperament, make her commitment to social justice seem unusual. She was a third generation Alabamian and a seventh generation Southerner. Her paternal great-great grandfather was a Georgia state senator, and her maternal grandfather was a cousin of the legendary confederate General Wade Hampton who became a United States Senator and the governor of South Carolina. Her maternal grandmother was active in both the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Juliette's Boycott letter almost cost her her job at the public library in 1955, and she was warned not to write another. For over a year she was careful about what she did, although she refused to be completely silenced. When the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, her alma mater, was integrated by a black library science graduate student, Autherine Lucy, in 1956 Juliette wanted to write a congratulatory letter but she restrained herself. When Lucy's registration resulted in a riot on the UA campus and she was expelled, Juliette became so upset that she realized there was no way she could keep her promise to be silent. She thought of Psalm 39, "I was dumb with silence, I held my peace even from good; and my sorrow was stirred."

Then, on Friday January 4, 1957, Buford Boone, editor of the *Tuscaloosa News*, addressed a meeting of the Tuscaloosa White Citizens' Council and implored them to stop encouraging violence and do something to help the city adjust peacefully to the integration of its tax-supported state University. Vigilantes were burning crosses all over the city in a campaign to discourage any more blacks from applying to the University. Juliette wrote a letter to Boone to commend him for his courage, and he printed it on the editorial page of the *Tuscaloosa News* a week later:

“There are many Southerners...who know the Southern Way of Life must inevitably change, “ she wrote. “Many of them even are eager for it to change, but they are afraid to express themselves—so afraid to stand alone, to walk out naked. Everyone who speaks as you do, who has the faith to do what he believes is right in scorn of the consequences, does great good in preparing the way for a happier and more equitable future for all Americans.”

Juliette was determined to dispel the myth that *all* white Southerners embraced segregation.

Later that year she was interviewed by a Chattanooga journalist who asked her what it was like to love the South and hate segregation.

“I know there are many people, many Southerners, who feel as I do,” Juliette explained “It’s just that when it comes to signing their names to something that they back down. I can sympathize with them. The cuts from old friends, the ringing telephone with anonymous voices; I know how it feels when the butterflies in your stomach turn to buzzards.”

Within six months of the publication of her letter to Buford Boone Juliette had lost her job, most of her friends, the respect of her neighbors and colleagues, and a cross was burned on her front lawn in Montgomery. She could have saved herself much grief by recanting, but she refused. Her belief that segregation was unacceptable in a democratic society was unshakable. She died unexpectedly in July 1957 at age 42, literally hounded to death by the White Citizen’s Council.

Juliette Morgan has earned her place in the Alabama Women's Hall of fame for her defense of the ideals of American democracy, for her personal courage, and for writing some of the most sensitive and insightful observations ever recorded about the nation's racial troubles. This induction would have moved her deeply because it affirms her place as a valued citizen dissenter in the state and the city that she loved so much and never, even in the worst of times, *ever*, considered leaving.