Madame Blackley could see things that other people couldn’t see. During her time, the Victoria, Texas, clairvoyant was the “Seer of South Texas” and was particularly adept at finding lost and stolen horses and other livestock. Ranchers and cowboys from throughout the region sought her services, and their stories have become legend.

I first heard of Madame Blackley in 1981, when Oscar Roemer of Port Lavaca got to telling me one day about how she had helped his father find a horse. Roemer said it was about 1914, and his dad had never seen the woman before, but that when he walked up on her porch she invited him in by name. “You think someone stole your horse,” she said, “but they didn’t.” She then began to draw some landmarks on a piece of paper to show him where the body of the horse could be found in a pasture on the old Thomas Ranch, and sure enough it was there. “The brand was still readable,” according to Roemer. He told another story of how Madame Blackley had helped locate some gold in a house that had burned, and how she had once worked in a popular old Victoria eatery, the Manhattan Café. She could set a table for people before they had even come in the door, knowing how many would be there before they arrived.

Mrs. Charlie “Alma” Beck grew up in the Diamond Hill area of Victoria, a hill overlooking the flats along the Guadalupe River where Blackley had property. Mrs. Beck said her father had property joining that of Blackley and that she called him “Sonny” even after he was grown. “We called her Aunt Annie,” she recalled.
Blackley was known to everyone on Diamond Hill, an old section of town that had been mostly settled early on by German families, but was then a mixture of blacks and whites, with a black school and churches. Many other black families lived down below the hill in “the flats” that spread out from the Guadalupe River where Blackley had property and where there is a public housing development named for her.

“She didn’t like being called a fortune teller,” Mrs. Beck said, “and didn’t charge for her services, accepting donations instead.” “My mother never believed in fortune tellers,” she recalled, “but when Aunt Annie told her something she believed it.” Her father, Charlie Miller Jr., who operated sprinkler wagons on the streets of Victoria for years, went to Madame Blackley after somebody had stolen his horse from where a city watering trough was located on Market Square, now better known as City Hall Square. “Why silly,” Mrs. Beck quoted Blackley as having told her father, “why didn’t you come to me sooner because you knew I’d know where it was at.” Then she told him “exactly how to get to it, that somebody from Yorktown had taken it.”

Charlie Beck, a Victoria County rancher, remembered his mama telling how her daddy had lost a cow and Blackley told him to go on a certain day to a certain spot in the river where she said the cow was coming for water each day. He did, and the cow did, along with a calf that she had given birth to after straying or being stolen a year or so before.

Blackley could also have a sense of humor at times, like when Mrs. Beck’s sister, Annie Miller, lost a ring and asked her to help find it. “There is no need to find it,” Blackley told her. “You would just lose it again.” “And,” Mrs. Beck recalls, “she didn’t tell her either.”

While many of the stories about Madame Blackley involve her expertise at locating livestock, she had quite a reputation by the time she had arrived in Victoria in 1882 (at the age of 42), according to her obituary. It was said she had known presidents and had even warned Lincoln of his impending assassination. “Anna P. Blackley, 87, colored, credited with supernatural powers by many people and widely known as a fortune teller, died at her home at
703 S. Depot Street in this city Sunday afternoon at 1:45 o’clock after a long illness,”2 The Victoria Advocate reported in her obituary. “Madam3 Blackley as she was generally known, was born in Falmouth, Virginia, and reared in Washington. Her alleged power to foretell events early demonstrated itself and for this reason she was spared the hardships of slavery. She was personally acquainted with Presidents Lincoln and Grant and is said to have warned Lincoln of his impending assassination.”4

It was further noted that she claimed to be a close relative of Frederick Douglass, the anti-slavery orator and journalist who was reared as a slave although his father was a white man. “During the 45 years that Madam Blackley lived in Victoria thousands of people came here from far and near to seek her advice as to love affairs and business transactions,” it was noted in her obituary. “She could have accumulated a large fortune but for her many acts of charity, which represented substantial contributions to religious institutions and the needy. As it was, she left a handsome estate.”5 Her husband, Fleming Blackley, died in 1918, and she was survived by one nephew, Isaiah Arthur of Victoria, and a number of relatives in Washington, D.C., where her body was sent for burial by her dying request. There were funeral services at Palestine Baptist Church in Victoria where she was among the earliest members. Mrs. Ron “Celeste” Brown said a maid in her parents’ home, Alice Epps, recalled an incident that happened during Blackley’s wake when a black cat ran under the coffin. Epps said the mourners “flew out of the windows.”

One of the best physical descriptions of Madame Blackley appears in one of Leon Hale’s columns from the Houston Post, reprinted in his book, A Smile From Katie Hattan and Other Natural Wonders. In Hale’s interview with Leonard Chappell of El Campo, Chappell described visiting Blackley with his father in 1917 to get the clairvoyant’s advice on finding a work horse that was missing from their rice farm at Nada. “She was a big woman,” Chappell told Hale, “six feet tall or better, and had this long face. And she had curly hairs growing to the side of her nose. The hairs were curled up so they made you think of a watch spring.”6 Chappell noted that he had seen such facial hair on the faces of other mulattos.
“She kept her eyes about half closed,” he recalled. “She said to Dad, ‘You’ve lost a horse.’ And then she said, ‘I have a presentiment. I see your horse in a village with white houses. He is grazing in grass up to his knees, and he is in a pasture with a gray tick mare and a pair of line-backed dun mules. You will hear from your horse by Friday.’” Despite that being during the 1917 drought when there wasn’t a lot of grass, the following Friday while seventeen-year-old Chappell was in Garwood with his brother Earl, a man was asking if anybody had lost a big black horse with four white feet and a star on its forehead. Sure enough, it was old “Charlie,” grazing in a pasture along the Colorado River beside a gray tick mare. “And,” Chappell said, “in the pasture with him was a pair of little old line-back dun Spanish rat mules.”

In his autobiography, *Some Part of Myself*, J. Frank Dobie mentions his Uncle Ed Dubose looking for treasure with some specific directions from a Negro fortuneteller in Victoria. But, it was probably a man since the account was in reference to a story that he had detailed more thoroughly in his earlier book on Texas treasure, *Coronado’s Children*. In a chapter titled “The Facts About Fort Ramírez,” referring to the old Spanish ruins on the ranch where he was born in southern Live Oak County, Dobie mentions that his Uncle Ed consulted “a noted mulatto fortune teller in Victoria.” Dobie describes the fortuneteller as being a man who offered to find the fortune for $500 and was taken to the site by Dubose. When it wasn’t found and payment was refused, the man declared that “spirits would move the box” and it would never be found. That fortuneteller might have been a Mr. Kitchen, who was active in Victoria during some of the same years as Madame Blackley.

Born and raised on the Oliver Ranch at Nursery just north of Victoria, George Oliver said his Grandfather George Frank Oliver once bought a fine Brahman bull from the Hudgins Ranch in Wharton County. He had planned to keep the bull up for a week or two before turning him out to pasture. “The bull disappeared,” Oliver said, “and he couldn’t find him anyplace.” He heard the story from his father, Jesse L. Oliver, who recalled that his father finally decided to send him into Victoria to see Madame Blackley.
“Grandfather always sent my father for some reason,” Oliver noted. “He rode horseback into Victoria, tied up his horse and sat on Madame Blackley’s porch until she had finished with someone else. She saw him and told him that she knew why he was there.” “Tell your daddy that bull is in an anaqua mott about a half-mile from the house,” she said. Sure enough, the bull was found just where she said. “He would come out and feed and get water and then go back into the mott,” Oliver noted. “That’s why he was so hard to find.”

There are the occasional stories that relate to subjects other than livestock, like one that is told about a prominent Victoria County rancher’s love and marriage. Supposedly, Madame Blackley had predicted the marriage of Al McFaddin and Ada Pettus. Agnes Jewell, whose mother worked for McFaddin, had heard the story and that Blackley had also predicted McFaddin would come into a fortune and that his wife would become an invalid. Jewell had done some research on Blackley when a historical marker was being obtained for Palestine Baptist Church and recalled that there was another black fortuneteller in Victoria. Not a mulatto like Blackley, his name was Kitchen and he dealt more in death and such things while Blackley concentrated on money and property.

George Oliver remembered another story about a bachelor who sharecropped for his grandfather on a piece of land known as “the island” on the Guadalupe River. The man was found dead and his cabin ransacked. “Grandfather told my father to go into town and talk to Madame Blackley,” he said. “Some money had been stolen and food items taken in the process. Dad rode into Victoria in the dark, and if I’m not mistaken got her out of bed. She asked, ‘What’s the problem?’” His dad explained the situation. “It’s not a problem,” Blackley said. “None of the local people did this.” She went on to say that three Mexicans passing through the area had done it and were camped out beneath a large oak tree. She told him the location, how the culprits were dressed and that they had buried what they had stolen on the south side of the tree. “There was some bread, canned goods and some money,” Oliver said. “It was just like she had said.”
During the dedication of an official Texas State Historical Marker at Palestine Baptist Church, Mrs. Charlottie Dement said she had lived with Madame Blackley for a time in the early 1920s. “She lived on Second Street and had a whole block there across from where the projects are now,” she noted, referring to the Annie Blackley Apartments. Mrs. Dement, who helped unveil the historical marker, remembered how Aunt Annie once helped a man on Pleasant Green Drive to find a couple of lost mules in the Guadalupe River bottom, “down near where the syrup mill was located.” She told him they would be found snagged in the brush because he had them tied together when they ran off, Mrs. Dement recalled. Blackley then chastised the man for tying his mules that way. “She would tell them beforehand what they did wrong,” Dement noted.

It would appear from what was said during the dedication that Blackley had been in Victoria more than the forty-five years noted by *The Advocate* when she died in 1927. The impression given was that she was present on June 27, 1868, when the church was started by twenty-one devoted Christians and a circuit riding preacher beneath an old oak tree believed to be one still standing near the church. When a second church building was constructed in 1873, Blackley supposedly gave a large donation and later a church bell that was hauled from Indianola to Victoria following the storm of 1886 that destroyed the once thriving seaport on Matagorda Bay.

There is a letter from John L. Cunningham of Watsonville, California, in Victoria County historian Sidney Weisiger’s files in the Regional History Center, Victoria College/University of Houston-Victoria Library, describing how Blackley told his dad that money was buried in a barn on the family ranch at the northwest edge of Victoria. She told his father that “a spirit wanted him to get it.”12 Blackley then gave his father a verse from the Bible that he should say, but warned him not to mention the Holy Ghost. His father was afraid and would not do it, so any treasure evidently went with the sale of the ranch to A. L. Thurmond in 1902.

Robert D. King of San Antonio told a story about his grandfather Bob Willemmin asking Blackley about when he was going to die.
“Mr. Bob,” she said, “you won’t be living 30 days from now.” While she might not have been one who dealt in death, King said that his grandfather went home and threw his boots behind the bed. “I won’t need these anymore,” he told his wife, explaining what Blackley had told him. “Grandpa then crawled into bed and never got out,” King said. “He stayed right there and died of pneumonia.”

“You have been writing about the Negro woman, mind reader of Victoria,” Mrs. Ruby Mays of Edna wrote after I had made some mention of Blackley in my column in The Victoria Advocate. “Yes, I remember about her. One time my uncle was missing when we lived at Red Bluff. My brother, James Gilmore, and my husband, Dewey Mays, came to Edna to talk to Mr. Huie White, the sheriff of Jackson County, about his being missing. White sent them to Victoria to talk to the Negro lady.” She says Madame Blackley asked if they had a child missing. “No,” they replied, “a man.” “You go on back home,” she told them, “when you get there he will be sitting in a chair reading a paper.” Mrs. Mays said, sure enough, when they got home her uncle had been found, that a Mr. Brandes had found him in Ganado in a café eating a bowl of chili and brought him home. She said Sheriff White was a believer in Blackley and would sometimes seek her advice when he had a big decision to make.

Wayne Hillyer of Victoria remembered how his dad, D.D. Hillyer, once sought her advice when he had lost a bunch of cattle in the early 1920s from his place near Louise in Wharton County. “On Christmas eve night,” he recalled, “there was lots of sleet and someone drove off 50 head.” That would have been the blizzard of 1924. With the ground covered with sleet and snow, there was no way to tell which way they had gone. Hillyer decided to go to Victoria to see if Madame Blackley could help him and got another man to ride with him. “You can come in,” Blackley told Hillyer when he arrived, “but I don’t want that man in my house. He’s a crook. You wanted to see about your cattle,” she continued. “Someone took them a long ways off and I doubt you will get them back.” She went on to describe the rustler. “To a T,” Hillyer said, “just who papa suspected.” He said she only charged a dollar
for a hearing, an amount sometimes quoted in other accounts as well, while yet others indicate that rather than charging she accepted “donations” for her services.

There were definitely people she would not talk to, claims Mildred Davidek of Boling, recalling a story that involved her Uncle Ben Caraway who was known to be somewhat of a tease. He and some friends rode horseback to Madame Blackley’s house to ask her some questions. On the ride Caraway had made some derogatory remarks about her. When they arrived at her gate, she came to the porch, pointed at him, and said, “He’s not coming in because he just called me an ugly name.” You didn’t want to mess with Madame Blackley unless you were serious about something. Davidek’s grandfather, Dennis Caraway, had two white mules that had wandered away from their pasture. Blackley told him where to look and they were exactly where she said they would be. Caraway once lost a suitcase that was tied with some twine on a train ride from Victoria to Bay City and Madame Blackley not only told him where to find it, but what he had in it.

Somewhere around 1920, Mrs. Garland “Lucy” Rather said her father, W.B. Hamilton of Telferner, received an inheritance from his parents in Iowa and lost $400 in newly purchased government bonds, for which he sought the help of Madame Blackley. She told him “to go right home and look behind a stack of lumber.” “They were there,” Mrs. Rather said.

Velma Warner’s father, Zilmon Boothe Jones, along with his brother John and two friends once came from Choate in Karnes County to see “a fortune teller in Victoria,” evidently Madame Blackley, after he had lost his best saddle horse. They went home and found the horse right where she had told them to look. Here again, Blackley would not talk to any of those with her father because “they had been making fun of her on the way to Victoria, doubting her word.”

“She also told my dad who he was going to marry,” Mrs. Warner said. “My mother’s name was Maude Smith and she already knew that. Daddy did not tell her. My daddy used to say that the fortune teller was the reason there were so many rich
people in Victoria. She could tell them to make the best decisions about business, or trading, what they were to do and it would be the best choice.”

Jerome Hubalek of Fredericksburg recalled a story of his grandparents losing two mules near Salem when moving in a wagon caravan from Lavaca County to Victoria County in 1911. Upon reaching Victoria County, someone told them of Blackley and they rode on horseback to see her. “Upon moving toward the porch,” he said, “she greeted them, saying ‘you are looking for two mules.’ She took paper and pencil and drew a map to direct them.” They found the mules where she said they would be in a pen near Inez, not far from where the family had settled in southeastern Victoria County.

E. L “Scrub” Kelley of Refugio, who put out a little book of local history and lore from columns that he had written for the Refugio Press, described Blackley as a brown-skinned Negro woman whose abilities were nothing short of miraculous. “In none of the visits to her that I heard of did she resort to tea leaves or palm reading or any other gimmicks,” he wrote. “She simply told the visitors what they would ask of her.” As a boy, he remembered hearing many times of ranchers and businessmen who would never close a deal of any kind without first talking it over with Madame Blackley.

In *Ever Since I Remember . . . Refugio Recollections*, Kelley tells a story about his father, who was a freighter hauling goods by wagon and mule team from the nearest railroads that were at Beeville, Goliad, and Victoria, and also from the old port of St. Mary’s on Copano Bay. His father had several teams of mules which, when he was not on the road, he grazed on the town commons north of Refugio. One morning a pair of his mules failed to show up with the rest. After searching and making inquiries for about a week, his father decided to visit Madame Blackley. “Her home was a modest frame house,” he recalled, “with a small front porch enclosed by an old picket fence with a swinging gate.” As soon as his father entered the yard, Blackley came out and said, “Yeah, you come over here to get me to tell you who stole your
mules. Ain’t nobody stole them; they off in a man’s pasture and he don’t know who they belongs to, so you go on home and in about two weeks a red-faced man gonna bring your mules back.”15 “Sure enough,” Kelley said, “in a couple of weeks a Mr. Williams from Blanconia drove up leading the mules.”16

He recalled another time when his brother-in-law, Rufus H. Winsor, and a couple of others visited Blackley in an effort to locate some treasure that was supposedly buried at a mott of trees in eastern Refugio County where mysterious lights appeared on dark nights. The trio rode horseback to Victoria and had no sooner tied up in front of Blackley’s home when she appeared on the porch shaking with laughter. “You silly boys come up here to get me to tell you where some money’s buried,” she said. “You gonna get some money all right, but you gonna get it the same way you been getting it—six bits or a dollar a day working cattle.”

They might not have realized it at the time, but she had just proven what she wanted people to believe about Madame Blackley. The seer of South Texas was a clairvoyant, not a fortuneteller.

**Endnotes**

3. The newspaper used the title Madam, where I prefer the French title of courtesy Madame.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
An original painting of La Llorona by the author, Gloria Duarte