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## **Society dons 1930s garb for Classic race as 'Seabiscuit' tribute**

**By NITA MCCANN *The Natchez Democrat***

NATCHEZ -- When it comes to fashion and fun, the Natchez Women's Book Society may beat the rest of the crowd at the Natchez Classic Race by a mile.

At 8 a.m. today at least 30 of the book club's members will load onto a bus to attend the annual race at the Fair Grounds Race Course in New Orleans. But these won't be your usual race fans.

Instead, members have decided to dress in period costumes from the 1930s -- pearls, pleated skirts and, of course, wide-brimmed hats and kid gloves -- in honor of one of their favorite reads, Laura Hillenbrand's "Seabiscuit."

While attending the race dressed to the nines is the day's main event, the bus trip down and back won't be wasted, either. In fact, the club's members plan to spend most of their time sampling sandwiches and treats such as New Orleans bread pudding with whiskey sauce.

Between courses, Entertainment Chairwoman Jack Kelly will lead the group in song, including "Camptown Races," while the rhythm section accompanies them on tambourines and washboards.

If it sounds like fun, perhaps it should be no surprise. "We are," member Judy Stahlman said in a lowered voice, "an outrageous bunch."

The society, which meets at 7 p.m. the fourth Monday of each month at Cover to Cover Books on Main Street, started about six years ago.

That's when a small group of Natchez businesswomen decided, over coffee, that this city needed a place where women could share with others the books they loved.

Members take turns choosing which book will be read, exposing them to wide variety of reads, from nonfiction to humor writing to popular fiction.

Many of the group's members say they wouldn't miss the group's monthly meetings for the world.

"We've really grown to know each other," Kelly said. "It's like a catharsis of real life. You go into that little room, and you know you'll go home with your sides hurting a little bit."

But the book's the main thing with this group, which most recently read "Charlie Wilson's War" as its latest selection.

"Seabiscuit," though, remains one of the group's favorite books.

Today's homage to "Seabiscuit" has gotten the group unexpected publicity. This week, a New Orleans Times-Picayune columnist wrote about the group's Natchez Classic excursion.

And author Hillenbrand, having read the column, called the writer to see how she could get in touch with the group to give its members her thanks.

It may not be the last publicity the society gets. It has sent an application to the "Today" show to be considered as one of the book clubs the show goes around the country to visit.

"I've told them that, this being Natchez, we have to dress in antebellum outfits if they come here," said member Casey Hughes.