A Park For The Acadians

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GRAND PRE, Nova Scotia—Most Americans, when young, read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “Evangeline.” It told of the suffering of the Acadians in Nova Scotia. They suffered because they were normally docile French in a land of frequent French-English wars.

Here on a northern shore of Nova Scotia, where the Avon River dumps into Minas Basin and eventually into the Bay of Fundy, the French-conscious Canadian government has established Grand Pre National Historic Park.

The park is a beautiful site and it effectively restores the dignity of the Acadians who in 1755 were expelled by the British and scattered over several areas of the then British colonies.

The park includes an Acadian church—used as a museum with exhibits that portray vividly the industrious nature of the Acadians. There is an impressive bust of Longfellow on the long walkway to the church and it rests with honor among willows, horse chestnuts, pines, poplars and other trees standing erect in a deep green grassland.

There even is Evangeline’s well, a tribute to Longfellow’s poem—fiction that had more relation to the Acadians’ real life than much of the recorded history of those stalwart people. There also is a full bronze statue of Evangeline.

The gardens and the flowers, in season, are striking and in the rear of the church there is a lush orchard of about 50 apple trees—the park’s way of giving evidence of the hard-working nature and the agricultural skill of the Acadians.

The park is a place of quiet and likely would be a place of great interest to many Americans, particularly those from places where the British “dumped” the unrelenting Acadians in 1755. These places of exile included, most of all, Louisiana, then a French colony. Altogether, 14,000 Acadians were deported over an eight-year period. They also went to Boston, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, North Carolina (Virginia refused to accept any), South Carolina and Georgia.

The American colonies were sparing with hospitality and the Acadians were penniless and bewildered. Only in Louisiana did they flourish. Reinforced by other Acadians from San Domingo, Guinea, New England and France, the Acadian colony on the Mississippi grew and it still is a distinct element of both Louisiana and Mississippi. They now are known as Cajuns (a corruption of Acadians) and total more than 55,000 in Louisiana alone.

This aspect of their rebirth far from what are now Canada’s eastern provinces doesn’t get much attention here, but the history of their troubles is told fully, starting with the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht—a pact that forced France to give Britain all of Nova Scotia except Cape Breton Island, plus Prince Edward Island, parts of Quebec, even the state of Maine.

This was one of many settlements of many French-English struggles but it was the one that brought the Acadians their troubles (Acadia was the name given the areas forfeited by France long before strife engulfed the unfortunate French settlers).

The Acadians had been here since 1605 and they had steered a middle course, trying not to arouse either the English or the Indians. Their downfall was long in coming but it intensified when they refused to take an oath of absolute allegiance to the English crown. They demanded that they not be forced to bear arms in support of England. Even as they were persecuted from 1713 (the year of Utrecht) until expulsion 42 years later, they farmed industriously and are given credit for starting the apple orchards that are so important in Nova Scotia’s agricultural economy today.

Now, with the history of the Acadians preserved and restored since 1908, their place in Canadian and American life is secure. The vast number of Louisiana and Mississippi names on the park’s visitor registry is evidence that there are many in the United States who go beyond reading Longfellow’s “Evangeline” to honor a simple but brave people.