Abbeville Today Happy Blend of Old and New

By CLAIRE PUNKEY

ABBEVILLE, La. In 1844, a far-sighted individual put Abbeville on the map of Louisiana. In 1954 an equally far-sighted person is keeping it there.

The former was a Catholic priest, Father Antoine Desire Megret. The latter is Roy Theriot, mayor of Abbeville.

It is 150 miles along Bayou Lafayette's curving course onto the Old Spanish Trail and down into this corner of Southwest Louisiana. Donaldsonville at the mouth of the Lafourche and this city on Vermillion river sometimes called Vermilion Bayou — form a link between two areas of the state's Acadian heritage.

BIRTH OF A CITY

There are as many Landry and LeBlances here as there are in Donaldsonville.

Some of the Acadians expelled from Nova Scotia settled on the Mississippi river bank, others on the Vermillion shore to which in 1844 came Father Megret to build the city of Abbeville.

Wishing to establish a church parish outside of what is now Lafayette, he sought a site at nearby Perry's Bridge, but moved on when only swampland was offered by property owners.

Here, he laid out a village similar to that of his birthplace, Abbeville, France. He centered small farm plots around three squares and built a chapel which exists today. It is generally assumed that the city was named for the priest's natal city.

AGRICULTURE AND OIL

Some opinions are held that the origin is strictly the French name for "Priest Town.

In 1850 by special legislative act Abbeville was incorporated.

The Vermilion parish seat of government is housed in one of the most beautiful courthouses in Louisiana with its colonial architecture.

A thriving agricultural and oil center, Abbeville, with a population of about 11,000, is considered the French - Acadian heritage center of America, where possibly more French is spoken than in any other part of the nation.

A city lined with trees and shrubs and known as "The Iris Capital of America," it has its own official song and flag.

ABBEVILLE'S FLAG

Art Pelivan of New Orleans in 1939 composed "Abbeville, Our Abbeville," and dedicated it to Mayor Theriot.

The city flag was designed this past July by Dr. S. J. LaBorde of Abbeville. It came into being when Louisiana's only all-girl drum and bugle corps, the Mount Carmel Eaglettes of Abbeville, wanted such a flag for its Color Guard.

The flag publicly appeared for the first time Sept. 5, when Mayor Theriot presented it to the Eaglettes. It is of a design that time and events will not change.

The mayor of Abbeville is a proud man for whom the date of June 7 has significance. On that date in 1838 he was graduated from Tulane law school, married Helen Roberts in 1947, was issued his commission as mayor by Gov. Kenner in 1954 and again by Gov. Long in 1958.

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

Theriot is the hub around which the Louisiana Dairy Festival revolves. Drawing thousands into Abbeville each October as one of the nation's outstanding celebrations, the festival was inaugurated in 1949 when the late W. E. Anderson was Louisiana's commissioner of agriculture.

Mayor Theriot was this year's recipient of the Louisiana Municipal Association's "Distinguished Service Award." In March, 1955, he was one of two Louisiana mayors singled out by the LMA; runner-up to Mayor deLesspea S. Morrison of New Orleans.

The Abbeville High School band, directed by Anthony Fontana of Bayou Lafourche, represented Louisiana in President Eisenhower's inaugural parade two years ago.

Abbeville, celebrated for its French cuisine, furs, cattle, agriculture, fish and wild game, oil and minerals, is a repository of the culture of Louisiana and of the Deep South.