Acadians Mark 200th Year in Louisiana

By PIE DUFUR

Ten years ago, the 200th anniversary of the expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia was observed appropriately in Louisiana, but especially in the Acadian country.

This year—the ceremonies get under way today in Lafayette—the 200th anniversary of the settlement of the first Acadians in Louisiana will be celebrated.

Legends in the Acadian country hold that shortly after the expulsion by the British of the Acadians that a handful of the latter found their way to Louisiana in the very same year of 1755. That this was impossible, unless these Acadians used jet planes nearly two centuries before they were developed, goes without saying. The difficulties—political, financial, transportation—were such that it was many years before the first Acadians came to Louisiana. In fact, nine years after the expulsion.

The first recorded arrival of Acadians was in 1764, when, on April 4, four families numbering 20 persons arrived in New Orleans by ship from New York. Who they were, and where specifically they settled is a matter of speculation.

The possibility is strong, however, that they settled along Bayou Teche, in the neighborhood of St. Martinville, for the first recorded birth and baptism of an Acadian child in Louisiana appears in the Church of St. Martin records on May 11, 1765. The English of this entry, discovered by Alcee Fortier almost 75 years ago, is as follows:

"In the year 1765, the 11th of May, 1, Capucin missionary priest and apostolic pastor of New Acadia, undersigned, have baptised with the regular ceremonies of the church, Marguerite Anne, born the day before, of the legitimate marriage between Olivier Thibaudaut and Magdelaine Broussard, her father and mother. The Godfather is Rene Trahan and the Godmother Marie Thibaudaut.

... F. Jean Francois."

And so on May 10, 1965, will fall the 200th anniversary of the birth of the first Acadian at least the first known one-child born in Louisiana. This will doubtless be appropriately observed in St. Martinville two weeks hence.

Only a handful of Acadians it appears, reached Louisiana in 1764, but in 1765, the first large wave of Acadians reached New Orleans from Saint Domingue. Between Jan. 1 and May 13, no fewer than 650 Acadians reached New Orleans and these were split into two groups, about half going to the Poste de Opelousas and the other half to the Poste de Attakapas, the old name for St. Martinville.

One may speculate—but doubtless, in vain—whether the parents of Marguerite Anne Thibaudaut were among the 20 persons who reached New Orleans on April 4, 1764 or whether they were among the 650 Acadians who arrived during the first 4 1/2 months of 1765. If they were in the first group, it is possible—but it can’t be proved—that Olivier Thibaudaut and Marguerite Broussard were the principals in the first Acadian settlement in Louisiana. On the other hand, if they were in the big wave of Acadians who got to Louisiana early in 1765, they were, of necessity, married when they arrived.

In the following year, more than 400 Acadians arrived in two groups. In Feb., 1766, 216 came to Louisiana and settled along the Mississippi around Baton Rouge and south of it in St. James Parish. Two hundred more came in Sept., 1766. By the year 1780, there were approximately 1,800 Acadians in Louisiana, settled in three main groups:

1. Along the Mississippi River around Baton Rouge and south of it to beyond Lutcher.
2. In the Attakapas and Opelousas regions, which included settlements on Bayou Teche, Bayou Vermillion and lesser streams.
3. Along Bayou Lafourche.

From where had these Acadians come? Some from the English colonies along the Atlantic seaboard, where they had been scattered after the dispersal by the British; some from Canada, where they had wandered; some from the French islands of the Caribbean, especially Saint Domingue, where they had sought a new life among French-speaking peoples.

The largest of all the waves of Acadian immigration to Louisiana came in 1785, when about 3,000 were brought from France at the expense of the Spanish Crown. This, incidentally, was the largest trans-Atlantic movement of immigrants to the New World during the colonial period. The story of this greatest of waves of Acadians is brilliantly told in ‘Acadian Odyssey,’ by Oscar W. Winzerling, published in 1955 by the LSU Press.

According to Alcee Fortier’s researches of three-quarters of a century ago, the largest families of Acadian descent in Louisiana are Thibaudaut, Broussard, Landry, LeBlanc and Bourgeois.

Acadians point with pride that they are descendants of the first French colonists in the New World, as Dean Thomas J. Arceneaux of the college of agricul...