The Acadians of Louisiana

The history of the Acadians is a tragic saga which cannot be detailed here. Suffice it to say that the Acadians developed as an ethnic group from 1600 to 1755 off the east coast of Canada, known as the maritime provinces, among which the principal is now known as Nova Scotia. The Acadians lived in Acadia in a near classless society, based on a quasi feudal system in which the land was replaced by the head of the family, and its justification for being was defined, if that is the proper word, by the Catholic Church. The Acadians lived in peace, maintained their neutrality in the conflicts between France and England and between French Canada and the English American Colonies, and were known as “neutral” or “freemen.” In 1755, the British forces in America, in order to take possession of the Acadian territory which France had ceded to England by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, captured and evacuated all the Acadians they could capture, burned their homes and crops to starve those who might escape, and by offering a bounty to their soldiers for “Indian scalps” murdered those who resisted. The vessels carrying the Acadians brought them to the English Colonies on the Atlantic seaboard where they were unloaded as wards or prisoners of the English king. Some were turned back by the colonies and transported to England from where, after a period of imprisonment, they made their way back to the northern coast of France. These they remained, foreigners in their native land, until resettled in Louisiana by the Spanish. Of those who landed on the seashore, some made their way to French Canada, some, relatively few, remained in the colonies, some few returned to Acadia, and most made their way to New France as Louisianans with whom they intermarried.

The Acadians arrived in Louisiana tired, poor, and poverty-stricken in their native clothing, speaking a French badly known in Louisiana, to be met by a Spanish governor whose treasury was all but bare. Besides their great need and sorrow, they brought with them their attached familism. It is little wonder that Governor O'Reilly found it necessary to issue a public statement justifying his permitting the Acadians to unload.

As the Acadians landed along the rivers and bayous, they were given directions to reach Opelousas country and the Atakapa Indian country where unclaimed lands lay in abundance. The Acadians settled and occupied today the lower portion of South Louisiana below the 32nd parallel.

The Acadians of Louisiana have not only preserved their own peculiar music which is still preserved in its purity in many areas. The Acadians have developed a distinct style of dancing to express their music. The traditional Acadian instrument is the accordion, the violin, and the banjo. The Acadian dance, also called “the reel” or “reel,” is danced in pairs, with the dance figures being repeated by the dancers on each side. The dance steps are a continuous output of the old ballroom dances, which are still very popular among the older generation. The music is heard in many dance halls in South Louisiana where dance gatherings called “reels” are regularly staged on Saturdays, Sundays, or Wednesdays. These dance halls are a central gathering place for the older generation, which is still very much in evidence in many areas, but which are becoming less popular with the younger generation.

The Acadian architecture in its purity, is also unique, and is characterized by a steep-pitched roof covering the enclosed portion as well as the traditional galleries, with its kitchen partially or wholly detached from the living and sleeping quarters. The Acadian had large families and the attic space under the steep roofs was utilized for the boys’ sleeping quarters and when so used was called the garret. Entry to this attic or garret was usually by an exposed staircase on one end of the porch. Most dwellings were surrounded by barns and sheds for the work animals and cattle, and by cages and coops for the fowl. The Acadian dwelling is a comfortable, practical and unpretentious structure. Of course, with the accumulation of wealth, some more imposing structures were built utilizing other styles of architecture but maintaining the functional aspects of the basic Acadian style.

With the exception of a few who became large planters, the Acadian farmer engaged in subsistence farming, raising rice and corn for their bread, hay, cattle, chickens, geese, ducks, geese, turkeys, and for their meats and vegetables, beans, peas, turnips, cabbages, carrots, and onions, for the balance of their diet. He raised hogs and mice and oxen for his work animals. The Acadian farmer, to this day, purchases very little of his necessities other than his pickup truck, his television set, his kitchen utensils, his farming tools and his shoes and clothing.

The Acadian’s politics are as close to him as his music, his dance, and his religion. He takes an active and personal interest, albeit to a man, in all local, state, and national elections and can say, with some justification, that he was personally responsible for his candidate’s election. While there are all shades of political views among the Acadians, it is generally said that Acadian Southwest Louisiana is liberal in contrast to English-speaking North Louisiana.

We here at Angel’s wish to acknowledge that this material was prepared as a speech given to many civic clubs throughout the state in 1965 by Mr. Paul C. Tate of Memmert, Louisiana in connection with the 150th Anniversary celebration of the arrival of the Acadians in Louisiana.

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