Redemption
By William Thibodeaux

At exactly seven minutes past 2 o'clock on the afternoon of April 2, 1897, Lafayette Parish Sheriff Isaac Broussard adjusted the hangman's noose around the necks of the two brothers. The old lawman made certain the eight-coil knot was directly behind the right ear.

In the remaining few moments before their long-drop demise, the two condemned murderers must have reflected on how they had reached this juncture in their lives. Violence seemed to besiege some of the old communities of southwest Louisiana during that era. Many of the communities that once dotted the landscape of the vast prairies of Cajun country are now lost in time.

There are some 300 lost communities statewide in Louisiana, according to Mike Leblanc, an anthropologist with Lafayette Parish government. In the late 1800s until well into the 1930s Marais Bouleurs and Pointe Noir were two of the most notorious lost communities, which effectively made Acadia Parish one of the most dangerous places to live.

The residents of the two communities were clannish and suspicious—they didn't trust outsiders. The inhabitants were notoriously known for their love of guns, knives and fighting. The Marais Bouleurs, as they were called, were easily recognized, according to UL professor Barry Ancialet. They usually dressed in long black coats, with tall black hats on their heads and red handkerchiefs tied around their necks. They would often hang their hats and coats on knives, which they stuck in the walls and support posts upon entering buildings. The community of Pointe Noir was equally as bad, if not worse.

During that era, southwest Louisiana was still very much a wild frontier. Octave and Auguste Thibodeaux were a pair of unsavory characters from Pointe Noir. They made their living as cattle rustlers.

On Saturday, Nov. 16, 1894, the two brothers got the notion to break the railroad switch lock that led into Mallet Siding, which was located in St. Landry Parish between Opelousas and Eunice. Octave cocked the switch points and for good measure, inserted blocks of wood behind the switch points to make certain they would not return to their normal position.

Unfortunately, the first train to come by the siding at Mallet was a passenger train. The ensuing derailment killed a 26-year-old fireman and seriously injured other trainmen and several passengers on the eastbound train.

The Thibodeaux brothers were soon captured, and on Friday, March 28, 1895, after deliberating for less than three hours, the jury found the outlaws guilty. Octave and Auguste found themselves sequestered from society in the Acadia Parish jail behind steel bars and iron doors.

Meanwhile a double trapdoor gallows had been constructed and stood ready for the Thibodeaux' long drop to eternity. Not everyone felt the same about the brothers. Friends and neighbors began a letter-writing campaign to Gov. Murphy Foster in hopes of stopping the execution.

According to local historian Gercie Daigle, a former resident of Pointe Noir, Octave's friends and neighbors had been grateful for him supplying them with beef, because without it, many would have gone hungry. They perceived the outlaws to be serving a great and noble cause. Some folks regarded Octave sort of like a Robin Hood. Remember the American epic outlaw heroes Frank and Jesse James, the Cole Younger gang and Billy the Kid? The one thing they had in common, besides being outlaws, was the fact that newspaperman like John Edwards of Kansas and other journalists wrote glamorous articles about them in yellow-backed dime novels. Some say Octave was very much like Billy the Kid of the Wild West.

On Dec. 1, 1895, nine months after their court date, Octave managed to escape from jail. According to The Crowley Signal, Octave stole a horse and made his way to Leesburg, now named Cameron. Acadia Parish Sheriff Lyons and a deputy tracked Octave to the Gulf coast. Like Billy the Kid when Sheriff Pat Garrett urged him to go to Mexico, Octave probably thought about going South too. However, for unknown reasons he headed back to Acadia and St. Landry Parish.

Clemile Jaunice, a friend and relative of the outlaw, allowed the fugitive to hide out in his barn. At 8 a.m. Feb. 8, 1896, the day before Octave was to leave for the Atchafalaya River with plans of going to Mexico, he noticed a large posse of lawmen surrounding the Jaunice home. Octave went out back into an open field taking his Winchester rifle with him. The lawmen were hesitant to approach Octave. They stayed out of rifle range. After a long standoff, Octave surrendered without firing a shot.

Back during the Thibodeaux brothers' court case of March 1895, Octave was found guilty of murder in the first degree and sentenced to be executed. Fortunately for him, it was an election year, so his sentence was commuted to life in prison. Auguste, on the other hand, was charged with manslaughter and sentenced to 14 years in the state penitentiary. On Oct. 25, 1898, at the age of 35, Octave Thibodeaux died of pneumonia in Angola. Auguste Thibodeaux served out his time and then moved his family to a small farming community near Nome, Texas. He continued his life of crime in the cattle rustling business until 1926 when Auguste was shot and killed by a Texas Ranger.

The gallows that had been built for the Thibodeaux brothers was dismantled and kept in Crowley after it was learned that Octave's sentence was commuted to life in prison. A year later on April 2, 1897, the same gallows was loaned to Lafayette Parish for the execution of two Frenchmen, Ernest and Alexis Blanc. The two brothers had savagely tortured and killed Martin Begnaud, the proprietor of a general store in Scott, by plunging a three-sided file 52 times into his body after robbing him of thousands of dollars.

Incidentally, they were the same two outlaws standing on the gallows at the beginning of this article.