Moody Atchafalaya Basin Has
Many Strange, Lyrical Names

By ALTON BROUSSARD

Bayou Chene — Louisiana's polyglot history left a generous residue of strange, interesting and often lyrical names to its streams and communities, but the moody Atchafalaya Basin seems to have inherited more than its share.

The interesting names, however, were bestowed on the numerous bayous, rivers, and lakes and only one was given to a community, because there was only one community. Human residents of the big swamp area did not seem to want to live in communities and the terrain was not conducive to towns.

Bayou Chene community was the single exception.

One Exception

This community had little to do with the interesting names given to the numerous bayous in the swamp and one can surmise that the Atchafalaya streams got their names from various sources, the Indians, the French, settlers, and to incidents.

The common term for the basin streams, "bayous," was adopted by early settlers and explorers from the Choctaw Indian word "Bayoua." As an exception, the awesome Atchafalaya, said to be the deepest river in the world, demands to be called a river, separately for distinction.

Perhaps one of the best known of the Atchafalaya streams is Bayou Chene, which got its name from early French travelers who named it after the beautiful live oaks and the black gum trees that once dotted the banks. The oak trees are gone, victims of rapacious lumbermen who felled the trees after they completed cutting out the equally majestic and highly desirable cypress trees.

Bayou Chene is a continuation of the Atchafalaya River that changed when it flowed into Lake Monongah, which is now called Lake Martin. The river turns down into Bayou Chene. There are streams along with some others, once more, converging to the south to become the treacherous Atchafalaya River on its route to Morgan City and the gulf.

Another important stream is Bloody Bayou, which, according to Gladys Cauloon Daze, former resident of Bayou Chene community and author of "The Bayou Chene Story," got its name from a tragic incident.

A stranger showed up one night in the combination store and post office, operated on a bayou bank by Lewis C. Daze, according to Mrs. Case. He did not provide any information about himself, not even his name.

The stranger got drunk, picked a quarrel, the story goes, and a slant-armed fight developed. The stranger was stabbed and staggered into the bayou, where he died. His bleeding wounds turned the bayou water blood red, and thereafter the stream became known as Bloody Bayou.

Four Hundred Dollar Bayou got its name from a Civil War story about a Union gunboat and a Lewis plantation owner and his barrel of gold. The legend has it that a Captain Ream, who owned a plantation on Bayou L'Etembarra, was trying to escape a Yankee gunboat with a barrel containing his hoarded wealth, supposedly about $400.

Author Tells Story

Mrs. Case related that when Captain King was warned that he was boiled up at each end of the bayou by the Yankees, he dumped his gold board overboard, expecting to retrieve it later. The story goes that the unfortunate captain could never locate his $400, if, indeed, that was the amount involved.

The name Whiskey Bay has intrigued many motorists on Interstate Highway 190 east of Lafayette as they drive over the bay bridge. Codman Parker, in his book "Those Strange Louisiana Names," wrote that Whiskey Bay got its name from the Choctaw Indians, who called its Oca Bay, meaning "ones growing along the bay above." The name Whiskey is apparently a mispronunciation of the Indian word Oca. Old maps show both spellings.

Indians Name Teche

Romantic Bayou Teche is also said to have been named by the Indians who gave it their name for snake or serpent, because the bayou's water was green.

Bayou Croc Chene is what Mrs. Case, a crooked Bayou Chene, Mrs. Case, wrote that the stream was so crooked, pieces of driftwood would pile up on each other. There was a huge barrier of bars and debris so effective that one could walk across the bayou and water traffic was compelled to detour.

The bayou provided a short route to Duson and New Iberia on the St. Martin Parish police jury contracted to have the logjam dynamited and channel cleared.

Many of the basin streams were named by the individual or families who settled on or near them. From the Choctaw, there are Bayou Gosoddin, Bayou Beaucoup, Bayou Suzon, Bayou Jean Louis, Bayou Long, Bayou Gen'evie, Bayou Milhomme, Bayou Jean, Bayou Joe, Bayou Boute, Bayou Carline and Bayou Pat.

Other streams were named after birds or animals: Bayou Little Dog, Bayou Leopard, Bayou Figueon, Bayou Grosbeek, and Bayou Horse.

Like so many Louisiana place names, the Atchafalaya Basin bayous reflect the history and settlers of the area. If the basin names are more intriguing and more interesting, perhaps it is because the history and people of the basin were more intriguing and interesting.