Bastille Day Fever Will Reign

The echoes of France's national anthem might sound natural on July 14 in Paris or Marseille, but it is somewhat strange to hear it at a Bastille Day celebration in a southwestern Louisiana town. For more than 60 years Kaplan, a rice-growing agricultural community located on La Highway 14, west of New Iberia and about 30 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, has staged events to observe France's independence day. And, of course, the Louisiana Acadian farmer, being as practical as he is spirited, finds that the weekend observance allows him to get back to his rice fields to derive the benefits of an extra work day. It is especially important this year when a bumper crop is anticipated.

First Wave

The first wave of Acadians from Louisiana settled in New Orleans and up the Mississippi River. Eventually the Acadians settlement moved westward to Opelousas, Lafayette and St. Martinville. At St. Martinville, the newcomers met an earlier settlement of French Royalists, Acadians who had fled the French Revolution and founded their own "la Perle Paris." In 1906, the Acadians southwestward brought in contact with an earlier Spanish settlement at New Iberia. In time the area where Kaplan stands was settled by Acadians pushing westward for fresh agricultural opportunity. Kaplan can be said to be a thriving community and a monument to the men who pioneered in establishing and developing the town and surrounding area.

As Acadian communities go, Kaplan is comparatively young, having been chartered as a town as late as 1862. It was founded by the Irvin Irrigation Company and named for the company's president, Abrom Kaplan, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who had proposed Alexander pushcart overland from the eastern seaboard to Southwest Louisiana where land, because most of it was considered useless marshland, was available for grabs.

Abrom Kaplan was a man with vision, and he bought the land, drained and developed it and then proceeded to build an empire. To encourage settlement he donated home sites to those who decided to pioneer and homestead. Acadians came to Kaplan only after years of struggle, but their wealth was lost in a matter of days during the economic crash of 1929.

Another man whose vision and love of tradition helped develop the town was Eugene Eleazar, who emigrated to America from his native France in 1863. Eventually he settled in the town of Kaplan. In 1929 he was elected mayor. Eleazar brought to Louisiana an idea born of love and beauty for his motherland—the Republic of France. This idea was

GREATY POLE CONTEST—It's slip and slide for the participants who dare to try and climb a high grease-covered pole to reach the $50 bill at the top. Here it helps to tackle the job with bare feet and a minimum of clothes.

FAIS DO DO MUSICIANS—A typical French-Acadian musical ensemble plays Acadian folk music for the annual fais do do or community street dance, held as a highlight of the two-day festival honoring the fall of the Bastille in 18th Century France.