Richard History of Cameron’s Cheniers Traced

By Geneva Griffith
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Cameron — The Cheniers of Cameron Parish literally emerged from the seat of history to begin a centuries-long saga touched with richness and color, an area historian told descendants of pioneer families here.

Bernice Stewart of Lake Arthur, keynote speaker for a meeting of Robert E. Lee Chapter 305, United Daughters of the Confederacy, traced the history of this low-lying coastal parish from glacial age to the present.

“What is now Cameron Parish was once covered by the Gulf of Mexico,” she said.

Prior to 1870, the region that is now Cameron Parish had been part of various political divisions. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the territory lying between the Calcasieu and Sabine rivers was considered a neutral strip, since Mexico claimed that the land east of the Mermentau River has been part of five different parishes: St. Martin in 1809, Lafayette in 1828, Vermilion in 1834 and finally — Cameron in 1870.

The earliest inhabitants of Cameron were the Atakapas Indians, although it is believed Spanish explorers under Cabeza De Vaca, as well as survivors of DeSoto’s group, touched briefly at coastal points on their way from the mouth of the Mississippi River to Spanish colonies in Mexico.

The pirate brothers Jean and Pierre Lafitte frequented the rivers and bayous of Cameron. A brick vault, uncovered in 1930 in Grand Chenier, may have been built to hold part of Lafitte’s treasure, and a huge live oak with a square-cut hole in its trunk which once stood on Morris Island may have served as a guide to buried treasure.

Tradition tells that the first white settlers were members of a family named Phillips. They lived in a lean-to on the western end of Grand Chenier.

These Cheniers — long, wide, gently-elevated ridges dotted with live oaks — existed 1,200 years before the first inhabitants arrived here, she said.

The Calcasieu River bordered its domain to the east and France said its land reached the Sabine River farther west.

When the United States purchased the territory in 1803, the question remained: What is now Cameron Parish was once covered by the Gulf of Mexico,” she said.

During periods when the polar areas of the world were covered by great glaciers, the sea level dropped hundreds of feet, exposing immense areas of land, including the lower Cameron Cheniers.”

The family perished in a hurricane, but an Indian who lived with them survived by lashing himself to an oak tree. He later made his way north through the marsh to tell his story.

Congress reserved the live oak forests on the cheniers as Naval Reserves, and used the wood to build naval boats. Later, veterans were paid off with land grants from the reserves, and in the 1830’s, migrants from the Eastern seaboard began to arrive. Most were of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon lineage. Later arrivals were mostly French.

The early settlers stressed education, and there were private schools long before a public school system was established. One outstanding teacher was John Wetherill, a native of Pennsylvania.

Wetherill’s ability as a teacher was so widely recognized that prosperous families in Lake Charles, Lake Arthur and Mermentau boarded their children in Grand Chenier so they could study under him. He later became Cameron Parish’s first superintendent of schools.

Another outstanding teacher was James Monroe Welch (earlier called Walsh), who served both as superintendent of schools and as representative to the Louisiana legislature.

Methodists established the first churches in Cameron, aided by local residents and in the 1830’s, slipped through regularly.

Many young men from Cameron served in the Confederate army. Two were descendants of the early educators.

Robert Wetherill, one of the sons of John and Emmeline Wetherill, served in Lt. John Pemberton’s company at Vicksburg, Miss., and James Monroe Welch served in D.F. Griffin’s battalion at Sabine Pass, Texas.

Rich history of Cameron’s Cheniers Traced

Chenier Oak

Live oaks dot the Cheniers of Cameron Parish, reminders of a rich, colorful history. This moss-draped oak is near the Mermentau River, in the area where an Indian lashed himself to an oak tree to survive a hurricane in which Cameron’s first family of settlers perished. (American Press Photo)