Cameron's History Can Be Traced Back to 1870

Cameron - Cameron, Louisiana's largest parish, traces its history as a separate political unit back to 1870 but the unwritten history of its cheniers and rivers goes back much further into the now "muddy" past. Vast swamps, sluggish rivers, and long parallel ridges called cheniers are the three important geographical features of the parish, according to "Cameron Parish Resources and Facilities."

The word "chenier" is derived from the French word "chenier," meaning oak. To the French, "chenier" literally means "oak grove." The cheniers are the remains of old Gulf beaches. Earliest inhabitants of the Southwest Louisiana chenier country are believed to have been Indian of the Attakapas tribe. The area was the home of a relatively large Indian population at one time. Comparatively large concentrations of Indians were found around the shores of Grand Lake. Evidence of these Indians has been found in burial mounds and refuse heaps. Burial mounds are also found on Little Cheron. Artifacts such as potsherds and arrowheads have been found on all the cheniers in the parish.

The two chief rivers of the parish, the Calcasieu and the Vermilion, bear names derived from the names of two Attakapas chiefs. Calcasieu comes from "katsi yok" (Crying Eagle) and Vermilion from "Vermi." The government later awarded the lands to men who fought in the War of 1812 and later Indian campaigns. However, these veterans were reluctant to settle on the far-away cheniers, and most of them sold their grants to land agents. These agents sold the land to the people, mostly of Scotch-Irish descent, who were to become the parish's first settlers during the second quarter of the 19th century.

First settlers who were mostly from the upper eastern states were followed by persons of Louisiana French descent who arrived later.

EARLY SETTLERS - The first permanent settlers are generally believed to have been the family of a man named Phillips who built a home near the western end of Grand Lake. The family presumably drowned during a hurricane about 1824.

During the Civil War minor battles were fought at Leesburg and Sabine Pass. Also affecting commerce and communications to the coastal area were the Federal gunboats that patrolled the Sabine, Calcasieu, and Vermilion Rivers.

Bradley-Ramsey Was First on Calcasieu

The Bradley-Ramsey Lumber Co. was one of the first big plants equipped in the long-leaf yellow pine belt.

The company was also the first large saw mill on the Calcasieu River and a pioneer in introducing the celebrated Calcasieu long-leaf yellow pine to the notice of the industry.

It employed more citizens and paid out more wages than any other firm in the area.

Due to the fact that the mill was bought by the much larger Long-Sell Co., there was much local concern as to whether the mill would be moved closer to the lumber supply.

The only ties binding the large concern were only business in nature, so a complete re-location was very possible.

The company not only decided to stay but the management also decided to expand the present facilities and make over-all improvements.

Before the change the daily output was 130,000 feet of lumber and 50,000 feet lath a day.

Olmstead Was Carriage Builder Here

Up until 1880, all money spent on any type of vehicle or vehicle repair went out of Lake Charles.

When P. E. Olmstead established his business at 640 Front St., he became the first local carriage builder. Although Olmstead could not turn out carriages equal in richness and lavish finish to those of the northern factories, he could compete quite well with them as far as durability and quality were concerned.

Olmstead was also connected with a planning mill operated by Bradley and Hurrah at the end of Common Street. The mill was well equipped and was the place where Olmstead had most of his materials readied for use.

After changes were completed and additions made, the output had risen to 200,000 feet daily and the planer-output to 300,000 feet.

The mill was logged from 75,000 acres of the very best virgin timber and had almost the entirety of the lumber belt to choose from. The acreage used could yield over 2,000 feet per acre. Much of the land would yield 1,500 and even up to 20,000 feet per acre.

The timber was brought down over 40 miles of Louisiana and Pacific Railroad, then into the river and to the mill by company tug.

The Long-Bell Lumber Co. and its subsidiaries represented a combined capital of $15 million in 1906 and was the world's greatest lumber producer, according to the 1906 city yearbook.

S. W. Woodring was the manager of the large Lake Charles plant facility.

Beauty, Style, Quality and Service Still Win Enduring Admiration

TYPICAL MILL - Many of the sawmills in Allen Parish resembled this one. Following the depletion of the forests, the majority of these mills closed down. Most of these mills were in operation after 1912.

Most early homes on the oak-topped ridges were built with a central hall and one or more wide porches. These homes were constructed on the high, well drained south sides of the cheniers facing the cool breezes from the Gulf. For protection at night against mosquitoes, residents used huge draperies of cheesecloth hung around their beds. Oak was the principal fuel on the cheniers except in the sparsely timbered Creole area where cotton seed was used as a fuel substitute for oak.

Cameron became a separate political unit on March 16, 1870, when it was created from the Cameron Parish which was once included in both the Opelousas and Attakapas districts which were two ill-defined political divisions that existed prior to 1832.