Capital Of Acadiana

By DAVID L. PERKINS, A.I.A.

"Allons a Lafayette!" Strange words to anyone but a Louisianian — but to these descendants of a French-Spanish culture, "Let's go to Lafayette" means a trip to the heart of Acadian country, and a sampling of that famous Acadian hospitality. Despite Lafayette's growing oil industry, and economic success, the French — speaking people of our city remain basically unchanged. In the French language, "jolie" means "beautiful", "chapeau" means "hat". The Frenchman had a restaurant called "l'oncle dit chapeau", (the uncle said hat). Acadian history goes back a long way. The fierce cannibalistic Atakapas Indians once inhabited this area, terrorizing French and Spanish adventurers. Neighboring tribes of Ope-locka, Choctaw, and Alabama Indians nearly annihilated the Atakapas in a huge battle, and have few descendants here today as a result.

Acadian Refugees

A plantation settlement (called "Petite Manchac") by English smugglers who traded their goods (for pelts) sprang up soon afterwards on the banks of Bayou Vermilion. Founded largely by a pioneer family by the name of Mouton, the settlement expanded as Acadian refugees from Nova Scotia came from the east. The Mouton family was divided into two sections: the family of Jean, who always wore a hat, known as the "Chapeau (Hat)" Moutons, and the family of Marin, who always wore a homespun cap, known as the "Capuchon (Cap)" Moutons. The first written record of the settlement is an 1825 report of missionary Pere Barricot, who wrote that he often stopped at "the large plantation of Jean Mouton", further identified as "l'once dit chapeau" (the uncle known by his hat).

Soon afterward, "Petite Manchac" became known as Pin Hook. As the legend goes, an old Frenchman had a restaurant at this spot, "Believed to be the old Vermillionville Inn" now being renovated which was known for its delicious fried chicken. When neighbors' chicken invaded his yard, he is said to have fastened a kernel of corn to a bent pin attached to a piece of string: any chickens pecking at the corn became the specialty of the day after he had haunted them in Yukish!

Moved North

Later the settlers of Pin Hook moved slightly northward, and renamed their community Vermillionville. Laid out as the seat of Lafayette Parish in 1834, Jean Mouton donated land for the courthouse and church. It did not acquire its present name, Lafayette, until 1884.

Just before the Civil War, cattle rustling by foreigners became a common occurrence. Easy — going by nature, Acadians soon saw the crime rate skyrocket, and marauding bands moved in by the hundreds. To defend themselves, a band of 700 Acadian vigilantes organized in 1859. In an open war against some 1800 invaders, the Lafayette citizens unveiled "Betsy", a brass cannon which proved to be the undoing of the bands. Peace was soon restored.

Progress Continues

The first railroad in the area came to Lafayette in 1889. In 1901, Southwestern Louisiana Institute first opened, and the busy little town was on its way. From a population of 777 in 1870 to an estimated over 70,000 today, our city continues to make progress in cultural, industrial, educational and architectural affairs.

Lafayette's Mardi Gras is an annual occasion which excites wide participation. First observed as a Mardi Gras ball in 1889, the formal celebration became a yearly event in 1927. It became a full-scale replica of New Orleans' famous Mardi Gras, with floats, balls, parades, street masking, and some of Lafayette's own innovations.

Our city serves as a center for trade in southwest Louisiana. It is surrounded by a score of small towns rich in natural resources such as oil, rice, cotton, sugar cane, cattle, sweet potatoes, furs, fish and crawfish. A beautiful city rich in tradition, Lafayette retains its Acadian charm. There is indeed good reason to say "Venets a Lafayette!"

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