CATAHOULALA LEGEND SAYS

Act Of God Created Lake

By ALTON BROUSSARD

Legend has it that about two centuries ago, before the arrival of the Acadian exiles, a peaceful Indian village in what is now St. Martin Parish completely disappeared when the earth opened up and swallowed the entire camp. The warriors of the village, who had been attending a powwow near Opelousas when the quake occurred, returned to find their village gone and water rapidly filling the gaping hole.

The bewildered survivors, thinking the catastrophe an act of God, thereafter worshipped Catahoula, "lake of sacrifice." Indians from miles around would come to the mysterious lake and throw valuables into the water to appease their obviously angry god. Some even say nubile Indian maidens were sometimes sacrificed.

The savages believed that if they bathed in the lake the water would wash away their sins. The unfortunate Indians who could not swim and who drowned were believed to have been evil and were required to pay the supreme sacrifice. Their memories were thereafter vilified.

Tide Reported

Lending some credence to the legend, James Akers, curator of the historical museum of the St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church, related that the lake, which was not known to exist when the first white men entered the area, seemed to be a bottomless pit with a subterranean connection to the Gulf of Mexico. Area residents, even in recent times, have reported a rise and fall of the lake water resembling a tide, although the lake had no outlets until recent spillway construction changed its topography.

Fishermen have also pointed out that when Catahoula apparently was isolated from all other streams and lakes, some of the finest salt water crabs in the world were fished from its steep banks. Crabs thrive in salty or brackish water.

With its almost straight down bayous, five feet above the water, lakes, which tend to be mostly shallow depressions.

The lake and its environment, which is studded with handsome and majestic live oaks, is reported by Mrs. James E. Guirard, Catahoula resident and community leader of St. Martin Parish, to have a sylvan beauty where the narrow and long lake narrows still further at its southern end and forms into numerous finger-like bayous.

SOUTHERN END of Catahoula Lake is accessible only by boat but many private homes border the lake elsewhere. This is the lake view from the rear of the home of Mr. and Mrs. Russel Theriot of Catahoula community. Their daughter, Miss Priscilla Theriot, is enjoying the scene. (Advertiser Staff Photo)

PECULIAR SHAPE of Catahoula Lake is another of its unusual features. Once isolated, it now has connections with several bodies of water. At its north end it joins the Bayou Berard drainage canal and one of its southern "fingers" and Bayou Mersier on its east side flows into a canal on the west side of the West Atchafalaya Floodway levee, connecting it with Lake Dauterive. (Detail taken from a U. S. Geological Survey Map.)

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mapped Louisiana in 1816 he cleared of obstacles before craft could cruise the area.

Mrs. Guirard envisions only boat cruises in the "dreamland" to avoid spoiling the primitive beauty and natural wildlife.

Alton Eastin, St. Martin police jury president, said the public body will probably visit the former film location in the latter part of August. Eastin remembers visiting the area when the famous movie was being made and he was impressed with its beauty. However, many of the jurors have never seen it because of its inaccessibility.

If the jury seems inclined to investigate further, Eastin said he will appoint appropriate committees to consider acquiring rights to the land, cleaning the streams, and, most important, building an access road and bridges to permit motorists to drive to a boat ramp where sightseeing cruises would begin.

**Basin Is Formed**

Although the legends surrounding the formation of the lake are impressive, geological data does not support the dramatic story. W. P. Paine, geologist on the faculty of the University of Southwestern Louisiana, said the unique lake is probably a remnant of an almost 2,000-year-old phenomenon which resulted in the formation of the Atchafalaya Basin.

Sometime prior to 100 A.D., the Mississippi River flowed in what is now Bayou Teche and what is now the Atchafalaya Basin was a low land area. As the years rolled by the vexatious Mississippi swished its huge tail and occupied the lower course of the Yazoo River to the east of the basin. Still later, about 1400 A.D., the Mississippi River was in its present channel, more or less.

During the centuries when the Mississippi was making its selection of several river beds to occupy, the low lands of the Atchafalaya Basin began to fill with water from the various streams and a huge lake was formed. When the famous cartographer, William Darby,