Changing, booming Ascension

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French, Spanish, Germans, Africans, Cajuns, Iberians. These were the hardy souls who hacked a civilization out of wilderness that has become the fastest-growing economic area in Louisiana — Ascension Parish.

Those same ethnic groups remain, and they have been joined by others. The history of Ascension is as old as the story of Louisiana. Much of it begins on the West Bank of the Mississippi River.

Glenn Falgoust, a historian of the parish, believes a trading post was established between 1700 and 1710 at a site approximately where Donaldsonville is today. If true, this would make Donaldsonville, not Chatfield, which was founded in 1714, the oldest settlement in Louisiana.

At least the oldest settlement occupied by Europeans. Already here were the Bayougoulas, the Chetimaches (or Houmas), the French Acadians, and Ascension Parish was home to (a man named) Charost in 1720. It was the site of the Sunshine Bridge.

Introduction

The French Acadians were the first to really seriously settle Ascension as we know it today, also Berville Parish.

"They knew how to live off the land," he said. "They hunted, fished, trapped and farmed.

In 1735, the French people from St. Louis who established the French Academy in Donaldsonville.

By 1779 La Salle was the Spanish-held Canary Islands arrived in the parish and established the settlement of Valenquez, about three miles south of Donaldsonville.

The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 gave the parish and established the settlement of Valenquez, about three miles south of Donaldsonville.

The oldest permanent settlement on the East Bank is the town of Sorrento. South of Gonzales, the area was first settled in the mid-1800s by Desire LeBlanc Sr., Jerome LeBlanc Jr. and Jules Traubeau Sr., which created the mayor and author of "The History of Sorrento." She said Sorrento is comprised of areas once known as Conway and Landry.

The city is now the heart of the rapidly growing and dynamic parish of Ascension, its growth and expansion watched over for the past 16 years by Mayor Johnny Berthold.

Following Ormet into Ascension were BAPF and VAOC. "That's when it started changing from a farming to an industrial-based community," Martinez said.

"Before that, there was sugar cane, strawberries and cows. Then Ormet started the industrial revolution in Ascension Parish," Martinez said. The boom is still on.

Grand Opening for Ascension Holy Cross Middle School

The Lemann Store, built in 1877, is a landmark building in Donaldsonville. Today, part of the building is used as a museum.

Melancon said Edenborn bestowed the name of Sorrento upon the area because he liked the then-popular song, "Come Back to Sorrento." The story that Edenborn had gone to Sorrento, Italy, on his honeymoon, thereby named the town, is not true, Melancon said.

Gonzales, now the boomtown of the parish, was a late bloomer. Established in 1887 by Joseph Gonzales, most of the early residents were either farmers or trappers.

On April 12, 1922, a meeting was held at the Wooden's Hall and officers for the newly incorporated Village of Gonzales was selected. Joseph Gonzales was named mayor. On April 5, Gov. John M. Parker signed a proclamation giving corporate life to Gonzales.

On March 4, 1922, Gov. Earl Long proclaimed the Village of Gonzales as the "Town of Gonzales."

In August 1977, Gov. Edwin Edwards turned the town into the "City of Gonzales."

Mayor Melancon said the town was given its Italian name by the current mayor and author of "The History of Sorrento." She said Sorrento is comprised of areas once known as Conway and Landry. The town was given its Italian name by the German-born entrepreneur and inventor William Edenborn.

Edenborn, who made a fortune with his hand-cranked barb wire machine — referred to as the machine that fenced the West — brought the railroad to the area, building it on the trunks of felled cypress trees as it cut through the McCoy Swamp for 15 miles.