Acadiana Leisure

Bayous: Historical streams that shape our state

Webster defines a bayou as a particular type of secondary river or lake. To billions of people, the name evokes more than the concept of a mere body of water. To those who have seen one and to countless millions who have only heard the word, it expresses a state of mind, a unique way of life in Louisiana that differs from any other state.

Bayou life has been romanticized in history and song. The serenity of its currents, the beauty of its waters reflecting moss-hung trees, the produce of its rich black earth, the bounty of its fish and wildlife create an aura that lifts it a notch above other streams. The Louisiana bayou has been crowned and anointed with a stamp of special distinction.

Sylvan streams

Despite its romance, a Louisiana bayou is nevertheless a waterway, many and varied. There are those streams that criss-cross the state. Some are a little more than narrow lakes, swamps or other streams, while other bayou display characteristics of rivers.

Louisiana bayous wind their way past a myriad of attractions for visitors. For the historical buff, many a fabulous antebellum mansion can be seen along a bayou bank. For the folklorist, much of Louisiana's colorful Acadian and Creole people can be found along bayou communities, with their unique speech, music and traditions that hark back to 18th Century France and Spain. For those who favor outdoor life, the bayou offers a bonanza of fishing and hunting opportunities.

If the bayous of Louisiana offer something for everyone, it offers even more to nature lovers. It has been written that bayous were "the great architects of Louisiana." Certainly they have helped shape the face and the history of this state that proudly bears the title "Bayou State."

To Louisiana's early Indians, bayou provided sites for villages, fishing grounds and rudimentary roads. To Spanish armies, they served as highways and a place to rest during their explorations. To the early French they were places for settlement and paths of commerce. To the British and Americans they functioned as boundaries. To Acadian exiles, who came from Canada, they were a final home and haven— and a link between kindred communities.

Own personality

Each Louisiana bayou has a name and personality of its own. Each differs in shape, direction, history, and geographical features because of the people who inhabit its banks, drink its waters, draw sustenance from its wildlife, and enjoy the beauty of its flora and fauna.

Probably the most romantic, if not most famous, is Bayou Teche. Approximately 120 miles long, the Teche begins as a tributary of a small, wooded bayou, Bayou Courtableau, near Port Barre. From this genesis it winds its way southward to join the Atchafalaya River near Morgan City. "Teche" is an old Indian word meaning "snake," and the name is justified by its serpentine curvature.

Bayou Teche snakes past a score of colorful French Acadian communities with exotic names of Gallic flavor—Leonville, Arnaudville, Breaux Bridge, St. Martinville, Jeanerette and Chenier. Certain of its French-speaking communities bear names derived from other ethnic settlers— Franklin and St. Martinville.

From Donaldsonville, in the north, Lafauche passes more than a few towns with Acadian names. Donaldsonville leads to Poinciana, the "short of bread" village, then to Napoleonville, named after the French emperor's kin who settled in that area.

Below Napoleonville is Labadieville, and then Thibodaux, once the major trading post south of New Orleans. Above Thibodaux are magnificent antebellum mansions that once were homes of wealth sugar planters.

Acadian history reflected in the older buildings and quaint rustic cypress cabins. Acadian heritage is still detected in the Louisiana-French patois. "Acadiane de vivre" in the 18th century and throughout Acadiana is robustly displayed in the native love of good food, drink and amusement. The spirit and tolerance of well-played fun is evidenced by the community folk dances (fais-do-do) and the functions for sport and humor.

Good Earth

Terrebonne Parish and its bayou are as Acadian in settlement as those of Teche and Lafourche. The Americans established sugar plantations only on Bayou Terrebonne, Black and Little Black, and Acadian influence is strong here. Life can be found along all bayous of Terrebonne, in "Good Earth" parish.

Not all the romance is reserved to Bayou Teche. A good deal takes what unique waterway how New Orleans—Bayou Barataria. This one has the oceanic legent of America, the one pirate. Jean Lafitte. The Lafitte Coast is the most southerly of New Orleans, Bayou Barataria was once Lafitte's headquarters, home of his pirate crew and debase for unsuspecting foreign ships.

Jean Lafitte is just a legend in Bayou Barataria, but this historic waterway still exists.

Bayou Barataria leads to Barataria Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, hence to famous Grand Isle, magnet for deep-sea anglers who venture out to try their luck at one of the world's most exciting spots—fishing at the oil rigs.

New Orleans has its own bayou, the Bayou St. John, named after the patron saint of the French. On its banks Sieur de Bienville landed and founded New Orleans two centuries and a half ago.

From this bayou he led his men to the riverfront and New Orleans began to exist as a city in what is known today as the French Quarter. On the banks of this same stream are some of the rarest examples of Louisiana Colonial mansions, including one of New Orleans' oldest— the Spanish Customhouse.

Other Bayous

There are other bayous to be found throughout the state. Some are smaller, less celebrated than Bayous Teche, Lafourche, Barataria and St. John. They, too, have their own names and personalities. Some names are worth mentioning for local flavor, others give clues to a bayou's natural or geographical context—or in some manner a hint of its personality.

Bayou Bonne Idee or Good Idea Bayou probably was given an early French settler with his presence and function— maybe its enchanting beauty. Loggy Bayou brings to mind a log-jammed, brush-choked waterway.

Louisiana's waterways offer beauty and recreation...