HISTORY OF ACADIA PARISH

Long before white men came to what is now Acadia Parish, the Indians harvested the prairies which they had won as a result of the Atakapas defeat. During the régime of the Spanish government this land was a part of St. Landry Parish. Many of the early Acadians received large grants of land, cattle, provisions and farming implements as gifts as a method of inducing the people to settle this area.

(stock raising became the principal industry. The owner of the land did not have to worry about providing food for the stock for they roamed the prairie. Corn and cotton were introduced slowly to the farmers. There were millions of crayfish scattered through the country side with their chimneys presenting a picture of loneliness.

The few houses scattered in the vicinity of the trails and streams were crudely erected. Some were built of mud mixed with moss. This mixture was placed on a frame for the house and chimney too. The chimneys were plain. The food was simple. The early Acadians needed little in the way of trade as they did not care for money. Their only wish was to be left alone and live as their ancestors had lived.

As time passed more people came and the need for the creation of a new parish was evident. Acadia Parish, once a part of St. Landry Parish, was born on October 2, 1886, after a hotly contested battle with the parent parish, St. Landry.

The towns of Washington and Opelousas supported the idea of a divisor. It was the years of inconvenience to the residents of the Southern part of St. Landry Parish which at that time was very large, that settled this move. (All legal business had to be transacted at Opelousas.) In those days of horseback riding, it was very inconvenient and expensive to travel to Opelousas. Sometimes a man would have to serve as a juror or witness in a session of court, necessitating a long and expensive trip home. Thus exposing his family to dangers from cattle rustlers or Indians. He had to make the trip at the end of the year to pay his taxes, too.

About this time, Morgan’s Louisiana and Texas Railroad men plotted a route through this wide area where there was no railroad all the way through the country, and people traveled by horseback on land, while canoes and pirogues were used on travel on water. The need for better methods of communication and for roads became evident with the influx of new settlers. With a branch line extending from Washington to Opelousas, Washington was losing its prestige as a port. The people of Washington and Opelousas, the parish center of civic and religious affairs for the scattered people, made every effort to create trade. This was one of the chief sections of the state and the leaders knew that the growth and development of the parish depended on the leader ship and the others.

Naturally, the voters wanted more political power, too. They felt the town of Washington could not be a center where their interests were represented as well as under the old system.

In 1886, the Rayne Signal published an article supporting a new parish, and its supporters declared that the people of the parish had been under the domination of the people concerning dividing St. Landry Parish.

The people of Opelousas and Washington appeared in Rayne to protest against the division. It was a public meeting attended by many people, and the State’s Attorney General appeared in Rayne to act as judge to settle the great issue.

This visit gave fresh impetus to the movement and the local leaders called a meeting of the citizens of the area. Everyone was allowed to voice his opinion. The chief argument against division was that if the choice was made against Washington it would be a move to help the Republican party which would become predominant in St. Landry.

Finally, however, a committee was appointed to frame the bill which was to be presented to the state legislature. Senator C. C. Duson of St. Landry Parish spoke with quiet and earnest feelings of his belief in Acadia Parish and the acuteness of the situation. He approved the division and supported the move by drawing the contract.

ACADIA PARISH

The bill proposing the creation of the parish of Acadia passed the house June 11th, and the senate June 28th, and received the approval of the Governor June 30th, 1886. Finally, the late Governor Samuel S. McNeely, issued the Proclamation calling for the election of the new parish.

The eventful day arrived. Hundreds of voters were at the polls before dawn. Opelousas gave the proposition and affirmative vote: Rayne, two against five hundred for it. Crowley no polls: Washington did as it promised and came through with a strong vote in favor of the division. When the votes were counted, the figures showed a vote of 2,116 for it, with 1,521 against it. Thus Acadia Parish was born on October 2, 1886. It was the end of tedious and expensive trips to Opelousa to transact legal business. The new parish was christened Acadia; the name having been suggested by the late Father Anthonis. A Jesuit priest of Rayne.

The word "Acadia" was originally an Indian word meaning a place, said by one source, and a fish by another (the Indian word for fish was Agnolle or Agnomee).

Another question arose: Where would the courthouse be? It seemed as if it was going to divide the new parish into three parts. Will Hockaday of Plauché Hayes offered the fabulous sum of ten thousand dollars and donations of land for public buildings if Prairie Hayes was named as the parish seat. Of course, Rayne was in the fight, as it was conceded to be the trade mart of that time. Crowley was tossed into the ring by an offer which the Signal published on February 19, 1887, from the Lafayette Headquarters for the Southwest Louisiana Land Development Co., signed by the late Alphonse Levy, that if Crowley were selected as the parish seat, the Company would donate, through Mr. Levy, offering of five thousand dollars and give the land for the erection of public buildings with the understanding that he would have the first call. The law was passed and the site was designated for a courthouse, won the hard-fought election. It was a reality that Crowley would be the parish seat.

The site was driven into the earth and the building of the courthouse commenced. The political Tucy of Acadia Parish met for the first time on April 12, 1887. The most important item discussed at the meeting was the election of the first courthouse to be located in Crowley, plus five thousand dollar cash payment -- both donated by the Southwest Louisiana Land Development Co. The first building was to be a frame structure costing six hundred dollars and deemed adequate for the needs of the new parish at that time. But the jury met in a special session to reconsider the matter. They annulled their first contract and agreed to erect a brick structure costing ten thousand dollars. The five thousand gift was used as a down payment. The first courthouse of Acadia Parish was completed in 1889.

(The population of Acadia Parish in 1970 was 52,109.

ACADIA PARISH is largely a farming area. Listed below is the approximate income derived from the major agricultural crops.

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COTTON: 1970 acres of cotton planted with a cash value of

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PEACH: 500,000

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SWEET POTATOES: 1,500,000

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BEEF COWS: 1,000

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For the 1970-71 school year.

EDUCATION SYSTEM: There are two schools with 14,501 students enrolled for the 1970-71 school year.