Acadia Parish

Rails and rice made it grow

Even though Acadia Parish is named for the ancestral home of the Cajuns, les Américains and les Allemands, were among the first to open its prairies — at first to raise cattle, then to make it a center of the rice industry.
HISTORY OF ACADIANA

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ABOUT THE WRITER

Jim Bradshaw created his first neighborhood newspaper when he was 10 years old, just about the time when tales told to him by his grandfather and father began to build his fascination for the history and heritage of the place we call Acadiana. He has pursued his twin loves of journalism and history since then and has become a recognized expert on who we are and how we got to be what we are.

He has won journalism awards for spot news reporting, feature writing, and investigative reporting. His popular columns have brought national and regional awards, including the prestigious Hal Boyle Award. His history awards include the Prix de Louisiane, given by CODQFL, for his writing about the Cajun history and culture, and the Jefferson Davis Historical Award, given by the United Daughters of the Confederacy for his research and writing on the Civil War in Acadiana.

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ABOUT THE COVER

The cover photo, Hans Herington, a descendant of one of our first families, supervises loading of the year’s crop into a truck. Bayne capitalized on frogs to jump into international commerce, and celebrates that commerce each year with a Frog Festival! Bayne Point got its name from its early church history, remembered by a dorner of a work of art, now being restored as a museum.

All four of the cover photos were taken by P.C. Piazza. (Cover and section design by Steve Kozarovich)

HISTORY OF ACADIANA

Arrowpoints and place names are reminders of Attakapas

Only scattered arrowpoints and a handful of place names are left to testify to the Attakapas, a tribe of the Acadian occupation of what is today Acadian Parish.

Arrowpoints can be found here and there at the places where the Attakapas once lived. Place names which have survived include the names of the streams that once flowed past Attakapas villages: Mermentou, corrupted from Nementou; Piazequete Brûlée (plague-meine meaning “persecution” in the Indian language); Bayou Nezpique, named for an Indian with a tattooed nose; Bayou Queue de Tortue, believed to have been named for Chief Celestin La Torste, the chief of the Attakapas nation.

Most historians think that the Attakapas ranged across coastal Louisiana from the Sabine River to the Atchafalaya Basin. They were said to be a fierce tribe, with a bad habit of cannibalism. Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz, who spent 16 years in Louisiana, from 1718 to 1734, states that they are no other canibals to be met with besides the Attakapas; and since the French had among them, they have raised in them so great an horror of that abominable practice of devouring creatures of their own species that they are now glad to have it out of the way and, accordingly, for a long time past have we heard of no such barbarey.

Linguistic William A. Read pointed out in his seminal study of Louisiana-French in 1931 that the designation “tattooed nose” (Nezpique) for the Acadian Parish waterway “simply emphasizes the fact that the Indians in its vicinity practised the art of tattooing.”

He quotes a 1687 description by Henri Joutel, who lived among the Natchez Indians for a time: “The Indians are generally handsome, but disfigure themselves by making scores or streaks on their faces, from the top of the forehead down the nose to the tip of the chin; which is done by pricking the skin with needles or other sharp instruments, till it bleeds, whereby they seem to lose fine powder of charcoal, and that sinks in and mixes with the blood within the skin. They also make, after the same manner, the figures of living creatures, of leaves and flowers on the shoulders and thighs, and other parts of their bodies, and paint themselves, as has been said before, with black or red, and sometimes both together.”

The early settlers of what would become Acadian Parish also found little barbarity among the Attakapas who were there in the middle 1700s and early 1800s. Old land records show regular and peaceable commerce among the Attakapas and the newcomers to the Acadian prairielands.

Descriptions of lands sales by the Indians in old records place three Attakapas villages in what is now Acadian Parish. One on Bayou Piazequete Brûlée, about two miles west of the Branch community, another on Bayou Queue de Tortue, about 3 1/2 miles south of Martin, and a third on Bayou Wilkof, about four miles northeast of Bayne.

Three other Attakapas villages were situated just outside the parish limits. Two were on the Mermentou River and one on Bayou Nezpique.

The Attakapas village on Bayou Piazequete Brûlée was on land bought in 1784 by Antoine Blanc from Nementou, chief of the Attakapas. Blanc bought land on the bayou one league wide and 40 arpents deep (about 2,820 acres). The deed was signed by Nementou and 12 of his warriors who lived in the village at the time. This deed was approved by Alexandre Chevalier Bedonnet, then commandant of the Opelousas and Attakapas districts, and was witnessed by William Hays and Louis Latilain.

A huge flag waving atop First Bank of Crowley symbolizes the early American settlement in Acadian Parish. German immigrants were the first to begin large-scale cultivation of rice. In the cover photo, Hans Herington, a descendant of one of our first families, supervises loading of the year’s crop into a truck. Bayne capitalized on frogs to jump into international commerce, and celebrates that commerce each year with a Frog Festival. Bayne Point got its name from its early church history, remembered by a dorner of a work of art, now being restored as a museum.

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Acadia was once part of Imperial St. Landry

Early parish landowners settled along the riverbanks

The Louisiana territory was held by France until 1763, when it was ceded to Spain. During the French regime, two trading posts were established in what is now Acadia. The Poste des Opelousas became modern-day Opelousas, and the Poste des Attakapas became today’s St. Martinville. The trading posts were named for the two Indian nations that lived in the area.

French and Canadian traders, known as coureurs de bois, visited the posts to trade for furs, tallow, bear grease, indigo, horses, and other goods. Settlements grew up around the trading posts and, when the Spanish took over Louisiana, they became government centers.

Today’s Acadia Parish was part of a huge territory governed from the Poste des Opelousas, which was later to be called St. Landry Parish. In later years, it became known as “Imperial St. Landry,” because it was the size of a small kingdom. The original district included what is now St. Landry, Evangeline, Jefferson Davis, Allen, Calcasieu, and Cameron parishes. But it took until the 1930s to get the place settled. In 1777, there was a total population of only 756 in all of this huge district. This included 100 white men, 139 white women, 211 boys, 123 girls, 120 male Negroes, and 98 female Negroes. The black population included 11 gens de couleur libre (free persons of color).

Early Acadia Parish holdings were divided into long, narrow strips, fronting on a river or bayou. Each grant began at the bank of the stream and extended back from it, usually for a depth of 40 arpents, an arpent being about 192 feet. Later as the prairies of the parish were developed, largely after the Louisiana Purchase, the French “riverbank” system was abandoned, and the American “checkerboard” pattern of land division took its place. This system was based on townships, sections, and quarter sections. Most of Acadia’s open prairies were unclaimed and unsettled until well after 1803, the year of the Louisiana Purchase.

The riverbank system came about because waterways were the principal arteries of commerce in those days, and also because the good, well-drained land was usually to be found on the natural ridges that border these waterways. The earliest land grants in what would become Acadia Parish were along Bayou Plaquemine Brulé, Bayou Wicoff, Bayou Mallet, and, to a lesser degree, on the Mermetta River, Bayou des Canses, Bayou Nezpiqué, and Bayou

Queque de Torture. There were a few other new settlers on smaller streams.

Not all of the Acadia Parish landowners lived on their lands. A good number of them lived at Opelousas or St. Martinville and maintained resources, cattle ranches, on their Acadia Parish holdings. Some others were simply land speculators who made early claims and later profited.


Although the parish is named for the Cajun homeland, only about 20 percent of the parish’s early landowners were Cajuns. Early Cajun family names include Arceneaux, Bourque, Braxas, Bernard, Chaisson, Cormier, Granger, Guilbeau, Guiraud, Lambert, LeBras, Leguer, Lejeune, Martin, Mouton, Richard, Sonnier, and Trahan. Other nationalities represented among the early landowners were French, German, Irish, Spanish, Italian, Swiss, and English. Five landowners were gens de couleur libre.

Most of Acadia’s early settlers were cattlemen, many of whom sold nearly all of their cattle. Many estate inventories list “an unknown quantity of harnessed cattle.” Cattle were branded and allowed to roam at large on the prairies until it was time to round them up and herd them to market. These frontier farmers, even the wealthier ones, owned few luxury items. Musical instruments, clocks, jewelry, and mirrors appear in few of the inventories taken of the early estates. Bottles and demijohns were prized possessions.

Most households had at least one spinning wheel. Other common household items were feather mattresses, pillows, paillasse (a mattress stuffed with dried corn stalks), armchairs, chairs, tables, bedsteads, crockery, pots and pans, bed linens, chairs, salting tubs, candle molds, soap pots, and iron. Virtually all estate inventories listed hogsheads or futis (a type of musket), or some other firearm.

Conspicuous by their absence from the estate inventories of Acadia’s early settlers are boats of any kind. Few listed even a pirogue, skiff, or any other kind of small boat. Even if the early grants were fronted on waterways, oxcarts were common items. A few inventories list a calèche, a two-wheeled vehicle drawn by one horse. There were a few four-wheeled carriages.

There were some advantages to prairies living, probably chief among them that the land needed no clearing. As early historian C.C. Robin put it in “Voyage to Louisiana”: “The prairie land … afforded the farmer the advantage of the land and the spade. The landowner may easily house himself. It takes only a few days to build a cabin. It takes only a few mornings’ work to produce this prairie land into production sufficiently to support a family.

Wild game was abundant on the prairies. Robin reported the prairies well-stocked with game, and especially during the winter they are covered with ducks and geese, so the inhabitant has his choice of birds as if they were in his own poultry yard.” More than three centuries of a century after Robin’s visit, the editor of The Opelousas Courier (Nov. 6, 1886) offered editorial comment on the game: “Wild geese, sandhill cranes and robins are flying over … jack-snipe are worth 75 cents a dozen, large ducks 12 1/2 to 15 cents each … ducks are so abundant in the marsh that mallards sold at 10 cents and teal at 4 cents. This is cheaper and better than buying pork.”

The prairie dwellers needed shade. For this he planted several varieties of common trees: oak, catalpa, and chinaberry. The chinaberry was the most popular shade tree because of its rapid growth. Introduced from Asia by way of Haiti, the chinaberry formed an umbrella of shade for both people and animals during the summer months. In spring, the chinaberry put out clusters of lilac-colored flowers, and was called ilas paralls, lilac parall, by the Acadians. After the blooms fall, the seeds form perfectly round, green berries, somewhat smaller than marbles. These made fine ammunition for small boys to use in their popguns made of elderberry or the reeds of reseau grass. The chinaberry seeds were also used for beads and bracelets.

The flaky seed of the pod could be boiled off or allowed to rot away, exposing the attractively shaped hard centers, which could then be dyed and strung into necklaces and bracelets.
Acadia born in ashes of St. Landry courthouse

Legislature was asked first to name new parish after Nicholls

Acadia Parish was originally part of St. Landry Parish. It was established as a separate parish partly as a result of a fire that destroyed the St. Landry Parish courthouse on March 22, 1886.

The need to build a new courthouse touched off two fights. In old St. Landry Parish, the people of the town of Washington began a campaign to build the new courthouse. And to the west, the people of Rayne also began a push to become a courthouse community but of a separate new parish.

Some 15 years earlier, an attempt had been made to carve a new parish from St. Landry. A bill for the creation of a St. Joseph Parish out of southern St. Landry was introduced Jan. 20, 1871, by State Rep. A.L. Durio of St. Landry. The new St. Joseph Parish would begin on a line about three miles south of Opelousas and in the English (parishes) most of them no longer on the map such as Gros Chevreuil, Bellevue, Petis Bois, Prairie des Flandres, Grand Coteaux, and Plaquemine Brèche, as well as "sparse and detached communities westward to the Mermentau (and) to the Peaug (sic) Rivers." At the time, the total population of St. Landry was 24,646: 13,135 white and 11,511 black.

The plan was voted down, and the question of dividing St. Landry didn’t come back up until the courthouse fire. But a week after the courthouse burned, on March 29, the town of Washington sent a delegation headed by State Sen. M.D. Kavoski and Joseph Rayne “to get the sentiment of the people of the parish.”

Said the Rayne Signal on April 3, 1886: "The general sentiment of the people of this section is that a division of the parish would result in great good to all interests. We have no doubt of it. The slight increase in taxes which might result from such a course would be more than offset by the increase in value of real estate. The sums of money spent by the people at the parish seat during their numerous trips throughout the year amount to quite a tax."

"Any man of common sense can understand that all the interests of Opelousas are opposed to a division of the parish," the Signal continued. "If they now seem anxious to assist us, it must be because they fear a combination between us and the people of Washington. Why do they fear such a combination? Why is it that these gentlemen so suddenly manifest an interest in our behalf? It is because we are nearer the accomplishment of our purpose than we ever have been, or are ever likely to be again."

The Opelousas Courier of the same day offered the view from the other side of the coin. Washington, it said, had sent a delegation to Rayne with a proposition: If Rayne would support Washington in its bid for the courthouse, Washington would help Rayne to form a new parish. The Courier predicted that Opelousas would keep the courthouse, but that a new parish would be formed.

A mass meeting of the Rayne citizenry was held on April 3, and the speakers, including businessmen, English (parishes) for themselves and the town of Opelousas an earnest support of our demands."

On May 19, 1886, St. Landry Parish J.C. Lyons of Plaquemine Brèche introduced a bill in the Louisiana House of Representatives to create the parish of Nicholls. It was referred to the committee on parishal affairs and came back to the full House with the title changed to read: "An act to create the parish of Acadiana."

The name change had to do with issues from Opelousas and the politics of the time. Samuel B. McElroy was Louisiana governor. His opponent in the upcoming election was former Gov. Francis T. Nicholls. Gov. McElroy and Sheriff Duson were allies, and Duson used his influence to see to it that his friend’s opponent didn’t get a parish named for him just at election time. Father Joseph Anthonioz, the first pastor of the Catholic church at Rayne, is generally credited with suggesting the name Acadiana.

When the counting was done, there were 2,516 votes for creation of the new parish, 1,521 against. Acadia, the 59th Louisiana parish, was created by a majority of 995 votes.

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Republican. But the momentum was now on the side of those who wanted to create a new parish.

On July 12, 1886, two weeks after the enabling legislation was signed, Sheriff Duson and his brother, W.W. Duson, were among a group of businesspeople who incorporated the Southwestern Louisiana Land Co. "established for the purpose of developing the agricultural resources of Southwestern Louisiana; the promotion of immigration thereto and the purchase and sale of lands as real estate so as to provide homesteads or farms to persons immigrating thereto..."

Stockholders besides the Dusons were District Judge G.W. Hudspeath, Joseph Bloch, an Opelousas merchant, Alphonse Levy, an Opelousas banker and merchant, Julius Meyers, partner in Levy’s mercantile firm; and Henry L. Garland, a prominent St. Landry attorney. Levy was made president of the land company. C.C. Duson was made vice president.

The people of Rayne campaigned hard during the months before the Oct. 6 election, holding rallies at Church Point, Pointe-aux-Loups, Rayne, Mermentau, and elsewhere, and eventually gaining the support of the Opelousas Courier, which said, "the lines of the new parish have been remodeled so as to remove... apprehended dangers... We feel that our citizens should ratify the protocol by voting for the new parish. To do otherwise would seem like bad faith on our part."

At Pointe-aux-Loups, reported the Rayne Signal, the meeting had been "presided over by that patriarch, Mrs. W.L. Brus qui, and landmark of Democracy, Mr. Antoine B. Cart, who with gray hair streaming in the wind, held the beautiful banner of Democracy in his hand, so proudly won by his people in their constant efforts to forward the cause of Democracy."

About a month before the election, on Sept. 1, 1886, W.W. Duson bought the Rayne Signal and hired Herman Bodemuller, who had been publisher of the St. Landry Democrat in Opelousas, to put out the newspaper for him. If the Rayne newspaper had been in support of the parish division before, it was doubly so now. Said the paper: "We hear a good deal of talk about the dear old mother. But to be a good mother, she should be generous enough to set her daughter up in the world and give her a good sendoff. Such that daughter expects and hopes for. To the promises of true men, to the honor of gentle men, to the reason of thinking men and to all parties the majority of southwestern St. Landry appeals for a division of the parish. Let it not be postponed for it will create a dissension which will not be hali ed."

A week after the Rayne Signal changed hands, a second newspaper, the Acadia Sentinel, began publication in Rayne. It was owned by George K. Bradford, Duson’s competitor in the real estate business. He also favored creation of the new parish.

Voting precincts and election commissioners for the Oct. 6 election were published in the Rayne Signal of Sept. 25. Six of the precincts were located within the boundaries of the proposed new parish: at Church Point, Plaquemine Brèche, Rayne, Pointe-aux-Loups, Mermentau, and Prud’homme City. Two borderline precincts were at Faquette and Mallet.

When the counting was done, there were 2,516 votes for creation of the new parish, 1,521 against. Acadia, the 59th Louisiana parish, was created by a majority of 995 votes. The Opelousas vote was 507 for, 110 against. Washington voted 227 for creation, 29 against. Church Point voters didn’t like the idea. Only 28 voters there wanted the new parish, 228 were against it. In Rayne the vote was 658 votes for, 1 vote against. (We don’t know who the Scrooge was.)

The vote was promulgated and Gov. McElroy proclaimed the parish officially created on Oct. 11, 1886.

St. Landry lost about one-fourth of its population. The population of the new Acadia Parish was between 10,000 and 12,000. The St. Landry Parish population in the 1880 census had been 40,004.

The 1890 census counted 40,230 people in St. Landry Parish and 13,331 in Acadiana Parish.
Duson brothers were pioneer builders in parish

C.C. (Curley) Duson and his younger brother, William W. Duson, would be likely to be remembered in Acadia Parish even if they hadn’t been colorful characters. After all, they founded four towns: Crowley, Iota, Eunice, and Mamou, and had a fifth, Duson, named for them.

Curley was born in 1846. He would become one of the most influential politicians of his time, and would be recalled as the “Father of Acadia Parish.” William was born in 1853. He achieved equal stature as a businessman. Their lives reflected the influence of their father, Cornelius Duson, who fled Canada early in life rather than kowtow to the British. But there was more than that to their story.

Curley was born at Webb’s Cove, near Mermentau, on Aug. 31, 1846. He was the eldest of the five children of Cornelius Duson and Sarah Ann Merchand. Webb Duson was the fourth child, born near Breaux Bridge in St. Martin Parish on Oct. 5, 1854. The brothers had three sisters, Mary Ann, Elizabeth, and Laura.

W.W. Duson was a businessman who didn’t mind taking big risks for big rewards. He made his stake in real estate. He made his money selling real estate. He made his legend drilling for oil. Curley Duson participated in most of his brother’s ventures. But he was a more romantic reputation, of the old-time, gun-to-totin’ lawman who always got his man.

He was elected to the Louisiana Legislature before he was done, and would be named a U.S. Marshal by President Teddy Roosevelt. But he made his name during his 14 years as Sheriff of St. Landry Parish, in the days when it was still one of the roughest sections of the country. The parish stretched from the Atchafalaya River to the Calcasieu River during his term.

Curley got his nickname because he was bald. He laughed at himself, but took his badge seriously. He began chasing crooks and killers before St. Landry Parish had separated into two parishes. He was a 21-year-old deputy to Sheriff James G. Hayes, with whom he’d served in the Civil War. Hayes was killed, and his brother, Egbert O. Hayes, became sheriff and named Curley chief deputy.

From the start, Curley believed that his business was to hunt criminals and send them to the penitentiary or to the gallows. William Henry Perrin, writing in 1891 in “Southwest Louisiana Historical and Biographical,” reports one of the early incidents:

"With two other deputies, (Duson) tracked the Gaultry brothers, noted criminals who had long defied the law, to Catahoula Parish. There a fight ensued, in which eight shots were fired — six from the deputies, terminating in the death of both Gaultry brothers."

Curley Duson ran against his boss in 1872, but lost. He ran again in 1874, this time unseating the incumbent, and also beating a third candidate, J.O. Chachere. Perrin tells us:

“One of the first things he accom-

plished was the breaking up of organ-
ized bands of outlaws who for years had scourged the country. He followed criminals to the border of Mexico, into five miles of the Indian Territory (Oklahoma), and as far north as Ili-
nois. He had three despair fights in his attempts to capture fugitives from justice. His efforts to catch the bullets for the buffalo were the only chance of escape … lay in his removal from their path."

In 1901, when the Spindletop gush-
er in east Texas was touching off oil fever, a group of southwest Louisiana businessmen formed the Crowley Oil and Mining Company, with W.W. Duson as president. They began drilling on the same day as the Haywood brothers began the well near Jennings that would establish Louisiana’s first oilfield.

In April 1901, W.W. Duson had successfully negotiated with Judge J.G. Parkerson of Lafayette to buy a 640-
acre tract in Acadia parish adjacent to the one where the Haywood well would be drilled. Duson’s derrick was completed and pipeline was on hand by early June. The Haywoods were also drilling to dust just next door. Crowley gathered when they watched the drilling began. The Crowley group broke ground first. The Jennings group got started an hour later. The race was on.

Drilling pipe broke in the Jennings well, so a new site was selected. The same thing happened to the Crowley well. The Haywood well gushed oil. Duson drillers were still finding dust.

The Crowley group kept drilling, but its bad luck kept on. It wasn’t until a year later, on Sept. 11, 1902, that Crowley Oil and Mineral finally got its gusher. It was less than 100 feet from the Haywood well.

That first strike brought better luck. Within the year, Crowley Mineral and Oil brought in a second well and started on a third, by the end of 1904, it was generating millions of dollars.

The good news was that a similar well in that field produced a million barrels of oil that year. The bad news was that oil sold for only 13 cents a barrel.

Curley Duson died on Oct. 19, 1910, in a New Orleans hospital, and is buried in the old Crowley Cemetery.

Cornelius Duson ran from the law to Louisiana

Cornelius Duson, as he was known in Louisiana, was the father of C.C. (Curley) Duson and W.W. Duson, who were pioneer developers in Acadia Parish. Cornelius was named Dusonius McNaughton when he was born on June 8, 1819, at Point Lewis, across the St. Lawrence River from Quebec. He changed his name when he dashed to Louisiana, and thereby hangs this tale.

Dusonius was the youngest of six sons of William McNaughton and Catherine Lambert. In 1837, when the French rebelled against the British government of Canada, all of the family except then-7-year-old Cornelius remained loyal to the British. "Our young hero," writes biographer William Henry Perrin, "had a bosom friend and companion, one S. Lambert, whom he had learned to love from childhood. Through Lambert's influence, he was induced to join the French revolutionists." Cornelius was called before a family council and his father and five brothers begged him not to disgrace the family by joining an attempt to overthrow the government. They warned that he could be killed in the insurrection, or, if the French lost, hanged as a traitor afterward.

"But Cornelius ... had his course mapped out, and his convictions were too strong to be changed," Perrin said. "He told his family that if the French cause was lost they would never hear from him "til the grass grew green over grave.""

The English captured Lambert and seven other rebels and jailed them in Ottawa, but Cornelius wasn't caught. According to the Perrin account, "he then went to Ottawa, met the jailer, and attempted to get him drunk and stuff jail keys." But the jailer stayed sober.

"After they returned from a dram shop to the jail, (the jailer) suspected evil designs in his new acquaintance and ordered him away," Perrin recounts. But "Duson had thrown ... his cap on a heap of wood in the jail ... and, when ordered away, ostensi-

iously reaching for his cap, picked up a stick, knocked the jailer down, secured the keys ... and helped his companions to make their escape."

The rebels made their way to Kington, a settlement on the Cana-
dian side of Lake Ontario, where Duson's cousin ran a ferry. Duson and his companions stole the boat and ferried themselves. British soldiers chased them, killing some of them and shooting Cornwall through the thigh. He hid in the woods for three days. When he was well enough to travel, and eventually got to Boston. There he learned that the British were offering a reward for his capture. He dropped McNaughton from his name and kept running from the law.

He made his way to the vicinity of Lake Arthur on the Mermentau River and befriended John Webb, who came to America as a young man.

Duson was an expert diver. He and John Webb located the sunken hull of an old pirate schooner in Bayou Queen of Tortore, a few miles from where it joins the Mermentau River. Duson wood and won the heart of Webb's 1.5-year-old daughter, Sarah Ann, and married her on May 6, 1854. He became a sapper-and-tiller, as was his father-in-

law, and moved to St. Martin Parish, where he died in 1857.

He often related the story of his youthful experiences to the family, Perrin said, "and how, among other things, his brother and McCook moved to (Lobert's) sister because of the loyalty of the Loyalist family to the French cause. But ... the mystery of the name he bore, he breathed not a word."

He told his wife that he wished that after his death his sons would re-
mind the family ties and keep his daughter. He died a doctor to warn him when death was near — apparently so that he could reveal his true family name. But Cornelius died suddenly, away from his family, and the secret died with him.

His two sons visited Canada in 1884 to try to find their family. First, they visited Lobert's sister, the one time sweetheart of their uncle. But she said she'd never heard the name Duson. Then they found Lobert himself, but he was sure he'd never heard the name, either.

Finally, when C. C. Duson began to relate the tale his father told him, Perrin says, "the feeble old man almost burst into tears and with an effort rose to his feet and said, 'No, no! I see it now. You are Con's children. Your name is not Duson, but McNaughton. Let me lead you to your people.'"

Lobert told the brothers that they were the grandchildren of William McNaughton, who had come to Cana-
dia from Scotland — that they were Scotsmen not Frenchmen. He said his family had long before secured a pardon for Cornelius. It was not until later that the sons learned that their father had a friend in St. Martin Parish who visited Quebec regularly, and who had secretly kept Cornelius informed about the family. They found that Cornelius had known about the pardon and that he knew that his family was searching for him. "He told me, "with terri-
ble determination he kept his vow, and his people never did hear of him 'til they grew green with the grass over his grave.'"

Duson, lived to be 101 years old. They are both buried in the old Crowley Cemetery.
Crowley was the dream city of W.W. Duson

Southwestern Louisiana Land Co. brought settlers to new town

On Sept. 11, 1886, a bridge was opened across Bayou Plaquemine Braille, west of Bayne.

The bridge, identified in the Bayou County Guide of that year as the "Duson Bridge," was 225 feet long and was 37 feet high from the bottom of the bayou. It cost $1,000 to build, using more than 20,000 feet of lumber and 3,000 pounds of red iron. But its significance lay outside of the engineering and construction.

The new bridge, the newspaper said, "would greatly facilitate travel between Bayne and a large section of country on the other side of the bayou." The bridge, which later became known as Long Bridge, was the first step toward the founding of the new town of Crowley.

It was no accident that the bridge was named Duson Bridge because it and the city that would follow after it were the work of WW Duson. He was an organizer of the Southwestern Louisiana Land Co. chartered on July 12, 1886, with the dual purpose of buying up Acadia Parish land and bringing settlers to it.

Levi V. Freeman designed and drafted the plan for the town. He had been St. Landry Parish surveyor for some years and was now surveyor for the new Acadia Parish. The first plan for Crowley made it exactly one mile square, bounded by Eastern, Northern, and Western avenues, and on the south by the Southern Pacific Railroad track.

South Crowley, the section south of the railroad tracks, was laid out in 1897. In 1902, the corporate limits were extended further south, to Bayou Braille, and another quarter of a mile was added to the western side of town.

Parkerson Avenue, running north and south through the center of the town, was named for the general manager of the Louisiana Western Railroad, Hachinson Avenue, which bisects the town from east to west, was named for the general manager of the Southern Pacific Railroad. There would be a court circle at the intersection of these two main thoroughfares, because even when it was just lines on paper, Crowley's planners had ideas that it would be the county seat. When the land was cleared, workmen would cut down a tall pine tree, strip it of its branches, and place it in the center of town. The sign tacked to it read "Court House."

More than 100 men worked with machetes to clear the land of the grass and brush on the property that would become Crowley. In some places the grass was as tall or taller than the men who were clearing it. When the land was cleared, Freeman and his workmen surveyed the land and marked off where the streets would be. Eight men pulled the grader that leveled the streets, which were 50 feet wide and avenues would be 115 feet wide. The streets, to run east and west, would be numbered. The avenues, running north and south, were designated by letters of the alphabet.

Each block of the new town was divided into 16 lots, each lot numbered on the plat with a corresponding sign on the land itself. Once the town was platted and the land cleared, WW Duson's Real Estate building was drugged by an ox team across the prairie to the new town from Bayne. That building was the first wooden structure on the town site. It had been built in Bayne in 1885.

About seven miles west of the town site, there was a railroad depot at Crowley's Switch, named for the section foreman who supervised the laying of the Southern Pacific Railroad track from Lafayette to the Sabine River. Crowley was now railroaded for that section of the railroad. Duson persuaded him to put his depot building onto a flatcar and move it to the new town. Crowley's Switch became Crowleyville, and then it became simply Crowley. At the time it was nothing but a wide, empty plain, broken only by workmen's tents, the depot, and the Duson real estate building.

The railroad laid a section of side track at the town site so that supplies could be brought in freight cars. All of the lumber, nails, rope and other materials needed to build the town came in on the railroad. Jack Frankel was in charge of bringing in food and supplies for the workmen. He operated a commissary out of a box car until his store was finished. It opened for business on the corner of Parkerson Avenue and Second Street on Jan. 4, 1887, with the doors and windows not yet installed.

The Opelousas Courier reported on Feb. 5, 1887, that 75 men were at work at the Crowley building houses and planting some 4,000 trees. A Crowleyville post office was established at Frankel's store on Feb. 26, 1887. Frankel was appointed the first postmaster. The name of the post office was changed to Crowley on May 14, 1887.

The Crowley House Hotel was started at the same time as Frankel's mercantile building, at the northeast corner of Parkerson Avenue and First Street. The workmen who had cleared the land and started the town were living in a large tent camp between the railroad and First Street. Winter was approaching, and the hotel became a necessity.

The two-story building had a kitchen and dining room on the first floor and dormitory rooms on the second floor. Later, the rooms were partitioned off into private rooms.

By late 1887, the schoolhouse, Crowley House Hotel, a storehouse, a livery stable, and the Southern Pacific Railroad depot were nearing completion. Now it was time to bring in the settlers.

The Southwestern Louisiana Land Co. planned to auction off the town lots on Feb. 11, 12, and 13, 1887, and advertised the auction in newspapers across the country. The auction took place on the corner of Parkerson Avenue and First Street, and the land company furnished a barbecue on the "Railroad Park" property. About 500 people took advantage of special excursion trains and low rates to visit the new town.

C.C. Duson was the auctioneer. A total of 619 lots were sold on those three days. By the end of Crowley's first year, it numbered people from Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois, Maryland, Kansas, Ohio, Michigan, Texas, the Dakota Territory, Kentucky, Alabama, and Mississippi. The town had a school, a church, three hotels, a lumber yard, eight stores, a newspaper office, a printing office, a meat market, a brickyard, and W.D. Duson's newspaper office, which had moved from Bayne.

The first issue of the Crowley Signal was dated March 10, 1887.

Dr. J.P. January was elected Crowley's first mayor, by acclamation, at a public meeting on Jan. 6, 1888.

On Aug. 25, 1888, Duson printed the "Immigration Edition" of the Crowley Signal, and sent out 10,000 copies to be circulated in the North and Midwest. It worked. Soon, practically every train brought in another handful of homeseekers.

The front page of this eight-page paper included a historical sketch of Acadia Parish, a description of its geography, and a big map showing 10 post offices: Bayne, Crowley, Mamoument, Evangeline, Palmetto Braille, Church Point, Prudhomme City, Fabacher, Pointe-aux-Loups, and Milleville.

Above, flags and banners hung on Parkerson Avenue in Crowley for the 1913 Independence Day parade. (Photo courtesy of Randy Herpin)

Right, wagons filled with sacked rice wait to unload at the American Mill in Crowley. (Photo from Freeman Collection/USL archives)

Crowley's first rice mill was the Pickett Mill, chartered March 1, 1893. The engine for this first mill was used at a pumping station during irrigation season, then moved to the mill at harvest time.

The first Catholic chapel at Crowley was a frame building built in 1892. At the time, the Crowley church was a mission of St. Joseph's Church at Pointe-aux-Loups.

Crowley's first church was the Methodist Episcopal Church South. Methodist services were held in Crowley as early as the spring of 1887, and the congregation was formally organized on May 30 of that year and met in the tiny school house there. Construction of the Methodist church was begun Oct. 8, 1888, on land donated by WW Duson.

Catholics of the Crowley area, like those of most of the other communities in Acadia Parish, were first served by Jesuits from Grand Coteau. The

607 The Boulevard, Rayne, LA
Owners: Kevin & Julie Prejean
(318) 334-8494
Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, Steaks, Seafood and a blend of Creole and Cajun "Mama's Type Cooking"
Rayne, Prairie Hayes, ‘Parkersonville’ wanted Acadia Parish courthouse

At the time of the election to form Acadia Parish, it appeared to be a forgone conclusion that Rayne would be the new parish seat. But a funny thing happened along the way.

Ten days after the election, Eugene Hockaday, a farmer at Prairie Hayes, offered $10,000 and land to build the courthouse on his property. He threw a big picnic on Oct. 22 to show off his land and gain support for his idea. The Rayne Signal editorialized that Hockaday’s proposal was ridiculous and that, since Rayne had been most responsible for the parish formation, Rayne should be the parish seat.

Nonetheless, Hockaday’s proposal did bring about the formation of a committee to study where the courthouse should be.

The Rayne Signal continued to editorialize. On Oct. 30, 1886, it said: “Rayne is eminently suitable for the parish seat, its accessibility, its establishment as a trade center are facts that cannot be controverted. It is a town which is backed by a trade which is permanent as is the natural outlet for that trade. This trade is independent of the location of the courthouse, in truth, it will hold the trade if the courthouse is located somewhere else. The other places which may be put in competition with Rayne are wholly unsuitable, because they are inaccessible, and bare prairies, which would depend upon Rayne as their nearest railroad depot.”

Nonetheless, the Hockaday proposal to put the courthouse at Prairie Hayes did get some support, much of it based upon the fact that it would be more centrally located in the parish.

Gov. John McKinley first set Jan. 25, 1887, as the date for an election to determine the parish seat, but changed the date to March 1, 1887, to allow more time for voter registration. It would also allow the construction of a new town to contend for the courthouse, something nobody had seemed to have thought about – except the Duson brothers.

The Abbeville Meridional reported in December 1886, “It was whispered in our ear a few days ago that while the citizens of Rayne and Prairie Hayes are discussing the question as to which place would be the most eligible point to build a courthouse for the new parish of Acadia, some parties in Opouless are privately discussing the propriety and arranging a scheme of having it located six miles west of the former named place, and called the new town Parkersonville.”

The new town was first given the name Parkersonville in honor of J.G. Parkerson, general manager of the Louisiana Western Railroad. Parkerson later declined the honor, and the developers picked the name of another railroad man, Patrick Crowley.

There was a fight to see who would get to build this Acadia Parish Courthouse. (Photo courtesy of USL archives.)

On March 1, there were 1,777 votes cast on the courthouse issue. Crowley got 686 of them. Rayne got 560 votes. Prairie Hayes got 519.

There aren’t any contemporary sources of information on Rayne’s reaction to the loss of the courthouse. According to local tradition, however, some Rayne residents, including Mervine Kahn (then the town’s leading retailer), blamed Rayne leaders, not Crowley’s promoters. Kahn and others said that at the most crucial point in the debate, Rayne’s civic leaders could not agree on a location for the court building, one faction wanted it on the north side of town, another faction wanted it on the south.

Crowley.

The Opouless Courier reported on Dec. 23, 1886. “Sheriff Dunson is back from New Orleans where he has been advertising the embryo town of Crowley on the Louisiana Western Railroad between Rayne and Mermentau.”

Then, while others argued, the Dusons began building. It made some of the people in Rayne nervous, but the Acadia Sentinel editorialized Jan. 8, 1887 that there was nothing to worry about. “It is true,” said the newspaper, “that if Crowley were a town or even a station, with an active, wealthy and energetic crowd of men backing it, it might become a rival. But the town exists on paper and a town is not built in a day or year either, especially in Louisiana, and it will be some years before the friends of this intended town will be justified in such ambition. At present, therefore, we see no danger in Crowley and, like every good citizen, we welcome the signs of progress on the west.

But Crowley was growing faster than the Sentinel editor thought. The New Orleans Democrat reported on Jan. 16, 1887, that Crowley now boasted "improvements which are numerous and of a most substantial character." The New Orleans newspaper also reported, "It is understood that Crowley will be made the parish seat of Acadia." By February 1887 even the Rayne editors were beginning to take Crowley seriously, as were backers of the Prairie Hayes site.

At a public meeting there on Feb. 8, a committee of local citizens endorsed Eugene Hockaday’s proposal to donate 80 acres of land and money to build the courthouse, as well as to provide streets and drainage and donate land for any churches that would wish to come to the courthouse community. Prairie Hayes backers pointed out that it was at the geographical center of the new parish. Rayne backers bolstered their argument by taking a count and finding 14 parish seats in Louisiana that were not in geographical centers. The Southwestern Louisiana Land Co. said it would put up $5,000 to build a courthouse at Crowley, in addition to donating the land at the center of the new town.

A week before the election the editor in Rayne advised his readers to continue politicking for their town and to place "good, sober, strong men at every poll; men who won't get drunk, or won't sell out, and who will stick to the polls until the returns are made."
Acadia communities inundated by Flood of 1940

On Aug. 5, 1940, the U.S. Weather Bureau reported a disturbance in the Gulf of Mexico off Louisiana's coast, stopping and starting, changing course, and finally moving inland near the mouth of the Sabine River. But even though it had moved inland, it would not go away.

On Wednesday, Aug. 7, the heavens opened and torrential rains fell on southwest Louisiana for four days without stopping. Twenty inches of rain fell on Crowley in 24 hours. Thirty inches fell over the four days. And there was no place for most of it to go. It had already been a wet year. The streams were full and the ground was soaked even before the tropical rainfall. Most of Crowley would be under water for six days.

The flood waters would cover an area that included Branch, Roberts Cove, Bayne, Crowley, Estherwood, Midland, Mermentau, Morse, Gueydan, and Lake Arthur. Parts of Lafayette along the Vermillion River were also under water.

The water began rising before daylight on Friday morning, and kept rising even after the rains stopped on Saturday, Aug. 10. By Sunday, the high water mark reached 8 feet in some areas of Crowley. The town's 9,523 people were marooned. There was no electricity, no telephone service, no means of escape. The roads were covered and the railroad bridge over the Mermentau River had washed out — not even the mail could get through.

More than 80 percent of Crowley's homes held water at depths that varied from a few inches in the north part of town to 8 feet along what had been a drainage ditch in the central part of town, but that had now turned into a lake. In many homes all of the furniture and clothing were destroyed. Six days of standing water made cleaning and salvaging virtually impossible. In some areas of town, swift currents washed houses off their foundations.

All of the downtown businesses had up to 4 feet of water in them. Nearly all of them opened their second stories for employees and their families to use as refuges.

The National Guard and the Coast Guard came in to Acadiana Parish to evacuate people and to keep order. Several thousand people were evacuated to the east by train. Those whose houses were under water and had nowhere to go, were sent to refugee camps in Lafayette and Baton Rouge. About 6,000 Acadiana Parish residents were cared for in the centers. But most people stayed to take care of their property and to begin the cleanup once the water went down.

Trains came in from the east bringing food and medical supplies and left loaded with refugees. Local grocery stores distributed canned goods as long as they had the goods to distribute. With the labels soaked off of the cans, meals sometimes turned into a series of surprises. Wash tubs became shopping carts, used to float the groceries home.

People came from Eunice, Alexandria, New Iberia, Lake Charles, Jennings, Welsh, and around Acadiana, bringing boats and food. Many automobiles had been taken to the railroad right-of-way, the highest point in Crowley, when the waters began to rise. Those that did not get there were covered with water, and pushed aside to make room for boat traffic. When the water began to recede, horses and wagons were used in the town.

Dr. E.S. Peterman made house calls on horseback, giving typhoid shots to everyone he could. Miraculously, there were no human deaths attributed to the flood. But more than 50,000 animals drowned or starved to death in Acadiana Parish.

Tons of lime were brought in to Crowley to spread throughout the city to keep down the terrible odor of dead and decaying plants and animals now exposed to the hot August sun. Garden hoses and shovels were used to clean homes and buildings of the mud and silt that covered the floors and walls. Wood floors buckled as they dried.

Coureurs de bois were early traders in South Louisiana

Joseph LéKintrec and his partner Joseph Blainpain were the Frenchmen who opened southwest Louisiana to trade and may have been the first coureurs de bois at the Opelousas post.

Indeed, the first recorded church ritual at Opelousas was the baptism on May 16, 1756, of Jacques André Desbois and Jean Desbois, sons of Claude Desbois and Marguerite LéKintrec, daughter of Joseph LéKintrec. This was performed at the home of Jacques Guillaume Courtois, a leading military figure in the early years of the Opelousas post. The priest noted in the record that the baptisms were done at the home of Sieur Courtois by special permission of the Bishop of Quebec "because of distance and difficulty of roads."

It was in December 1738, in New Orleans that LéKintrec and Joseph Blainpain formed a partnership to trade with the Opelousas and Atakapas Indians. A few members of the Opelousas tribe had gone to New Orleans in 1735. They told the Superior Council of French Louisiana that they would settle down in a village if the French would send fur traders to the region.

LeKintrec and Blainpain apparently formed their partnership to trade with those Indians. They came to the Opelousas country in 1740, and set up a trading post where Bayou Boeuf and Bayou Courtois meet to form Bayou Courtablé. A third partner, Gerald Percy, became involved in a short time, when he agreed to provide French imports to the partnership in exchange for all of their furs. The traders also agreed to sell Percy whatever tallow and bear grease they might come by. At 8 cents a pound for tallow and bear grease at 30 cents a jar. (Tallow was mixed with oil from myrtle leaves to make candles. Bear grease was used, among other things, as a cooking oil.)

The trading apparently went well at first. In January 1740, Blainpain hired helping, agreeing to pay a man named Dupont and his wife 200 livres to work six years among the Atakapas. In March 1740, LéKintrec signed a contract for himself and Blainpain with François Gauvreau, the royal storekeeper at New Orleans, agreeing to supply Gauvreau with raw deerskins for export to France.

Blainpain and LeKintrec strengthened their partnership in a document signed "Louis Noubrious" (sic) in April 1740.

But, somewhere along the line, things appear to have begun to sour. We hear no more of Blainpain until January 1743, when the Superior Council (the high court of the Orleans territory) ordered him to pay 500 deerskins against a note he had signed. This would be the first in a long series of court decisions against him. The record for the next few years tells the story of his being sued, sued again, and sued some more — and apparently seldom paying his bills.

On Feb. 1, 1744, the Superior Council ordered Blainpain to deposit 85 quarts of grain in payment for an Indian slave he'd bought. He claimed not to have received the judgment until April, when he wrote from the Indian territory that he was sending a pirogue loaded with corn to pay for the slave. He offered to pay cash, as soon as he was paid by another man who owed him money, but the creditor took the corn.

Blainpain's partnership with LeKintrec expired on Jan. 1, 1744, and Blainpain formed another with Andre Fabry de la Bruyère, Secretary of the Marine at New Orleans. There was quick trouble. These new partners split up almost immediately.

On Oct. 31, 1742, J. Banco Piemons sued Blainpain for 500 deerskins for failing to deliver the goods on time. Piemons apparently kept trading with Blainpain, because in August 1743, the Superior Council ordered Blainpain to pay Piemons 2,300 livres and 175 deerskins.

It appears that whatever could go wrong for Blainpain did go wrong. For example, a Sieur Chaperon paid Blainpain 250 livres for an ass. He also bought six maries to mate with the ass. But the ass did not "notice them." As usual, Blainpain lost the suit.

In 1745, he was hired to search for the captain and crew of La Saperie, a French ship that had been lost along the Louisiana shore. He didn't find it.

Blainpain's trading partnership with Andre Fabry was dissolved on June 16, 1745. In a court document, Blainpain renounced any title to trade in the Atakapas country and gave to Andre Fabry 100 deer
1895: Acadia Parish ‘was in a shroud of white’

Unlikely as it may seem, a snowfall more than a century ago makes the Acadia Parish city of Rayne the state record holder for the most snow ever to fall anywhere in Louisiana. The town got 24 inches of the stuff from Feb. 13 through Feb. 15, 1895.

It was bitter cold throughout Louisiana when the storm came through. This is the report from the Monthly Weather Review put out by the National Crop and Weather Service for February 1895.

February 1895 will go down in the history of Louisiana climatology as a record breaker for cold and snow. ... The cold may be said to have been continuous throughout the entire month, there being only five days when the temperature averaged normal ... for the day. The coldest weather occurred on the morning of the 7th and 8th, more particularly on the latter date in the southern half of the state, and no such cold was ever known before in February in Louisiana, and but once for any other winter month, i.e., January 1886.

Within a week after this extreme cold the ground was covered with a mantle of snow to a depth of from a few inches at the Mississippi jetties to as much as two feet in southwest Louisiana. The cold, as is still the case, was a rarity in this climate, and such a mixture is like an angel's visit - few and far between.

The Crowley Signal of Feb. 16, 1895, had a long account of what happened when the snows came to Acadia Parish:
The 1916 snowfall wasn't nearly as big as the one that dumped 24 inches on Rayne. (Photo courtesy of Randy Herpin)

Yesterday the Times penpushers were treated to a very neat, palatable and certainly excellent glass of winter ice cream. It was made of featherlike snowflakes packed in a goblet, moistened with some pure milk, with a little sugar added and flavored with vanilla. A very thoughtful and obliging young lady was the donor, which may have had something to do with its deliciousness, but the pure, driven snow is a rarity in this clime, and such a mixture is like an angel's visit - few and far between.

And the Daily Advocate in Baton Rouge reported on Feb. 10:

The snowfall in the Mississippi during the last two days of very cold weather made navigation most difficult. Ice remained firm and solid along the banks of the stream all day and the ferry and other boats did but little business.

But it was in Acadia that the weather was the most remarkable. The official form submitted to the national weather bureau by the weather observer in Lafayette for February 1895 carries the following note:

The snow was inclining to get mud, but a snow ball down the back of the neck usually sufficed to cool them off.

Mossers, Juds and Louers on discovering the fine prospects for sleighing Thursday morning, set to work and built a neat cutter and named it "The Sunny South." They hitched on a pair of Mr. Jud's fine trotters and were soon speeding through the streets of Crowley in regular Nebraska style. They drove the finest rig in town.

There were similar stories all across the state. This is from New Orleans' Daily Picayune of Feb. 15, 1895:

The Weekly Sentinel in Thibodaux reported on Feb. 16:

Beginning Wednesday night, Feb. 13, snow began to fall around midnight and by noon the next day had accumulated to a depth of 12 inches. The boys made the best of the opportunity presented to them, and the dog was passed in such a variety of snow-balling as had never been practiced in Thibodaux. It was fun to them, but the unlucky pedestrian who was compelled to go on the streets could not appreciate it.

And the Opelousas Courier of Feb. 16 carried this account:

On Wednesday night, shortly after 9 o'clock, it began snowing, and when the good people of Opelousas opened their eyes on Thursday morning the whole face of nature was covered with a white mantle two or three inches thick. The snow fell all day without the least intermission giving the town quite an Arctic appearance.

On Feb. 23, Thibodaux's Weekly Sentinel reported:

The snow that fell in this place on February 14 finally disappeared on February 21. This is, no doubt, the longest period that anyone living here has ever witnessed snow remaining on the earth. The general depth was 13 to 16 inches, but at Houma, Texas, the claim is that 24 inches were had.
Rayne moved when rails passed Pouvveville

The town moved north in 1880

Before Rayne was Rayne it was Pouvveville, named after a merchant named Jules Pouvveville who had a store there. Before it was Pouvveville, it was Queve Tortue. It was named Rayne after B.W. Rayne, who worked for the railroad.

A post office was established at Pouvveville on Aug. 5, 1858, with Octave P. Bonin as first postmaster. When the railroad moved west in 1880, it bypassed Pouvveville by a mile or two to the north. When Pouvveville was left stranded, the settlers decided that if the railroad would not come to them, they would move the town to the railroad. The Catholic church was dragged by ox-team to a site nearer the railroad, followed by three stores operated by J.D. Bernard, M. Armas, and Francois Crouchet. Houses would soon follow. The village of Rayne was established by May 21, 1881, when the post office was given that name, and the town was incorporated in 1883.

Jules Pouvveville set up his store at Queve Tortue sometime before 1854, the year in which he sold two houses and the store to Jean Remy Vion, and as late as 1871, the Opehouen Courier is still referring to the settlement as Queve Tortue. It is uncertain when it became known as Pouvveville, or if that name was known outside of the immediate area of the Pouvveville store.

Father Joseph Anthonioz and other Jesuit priests were visiting the area in the 1870s. Father Anthonioz baptized Valerien Dupuis, son of Alexandre Dupuis and Ordalie Blanchard, there on Jan. 18, 1872. In 1875, Father Anthonioz bought 162 acres from the U.S. government, and a church building went up on it in 1877. There was a school at the place a year later.

Mervine Kahn came to Rayne in 1884 and bought a general store then operated by A.S. Chappuis. By 1888, Kahn was considered the leader of its merchandising business. The editor of the Opelousas Courier visited “the thriving little city” and reported in the March 21, 1885 issue that he had heard of its rapid growth, but “was not prepared for the wonderful development that he had seen.”

He said: “Now it is an incorporated town whose limits cover a mile and a half square, with commodious business houses fronting on each side of the Louisiana Western Railroad and neat residences spreading in every direction, facing well-graded streets and forming the pleasant home of about 600 as hospitable, energetic, and thrifty inhabitants as occupy any country.”

While there, he met people from Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Connecticut, and Mississippi.

Some six months later, Rayne had its own newspaper, the first to be published in the Acadia Parish area. The Rayne Signal began publication on March 13, 1886. The proprietors were T.W. Fisher and George Addison, grandson of the George Addison who was the first printer and publisher in St. Landry Parish. W.W. Duson bought the newspaper on Sept. 1, 1886. A second paper, the Acadiane Sportsman, began publication on Sept. 14, 1886, with George K. Bradford as editor and publisher.

The first rice mill in Acadia Parish was built in Rayne in 1887. It was first called the Rayne Rice Mill and Manufacturing Co. The building was described as “a very substantial one” in the Crowley Signal of Aug. 25, 1888. “The machinery is all first class and is driven by an engine of one hundred horse power,” the newspaper said.

The capacity of the mill is calculated to be one hundred barrels per day of clean rice.” A.S. Chappuis was the first president of the mill.

In 1890, Emile Daboval bought an interest in the mill and the name was changed to Acadia Rice Milling Co. Daboval had been in the rice milling business in New Orleans.

Rayne got a second railroad line in 1907, when the Opehouenais Gulf Railroad came through. The coming of the railroad spurred a burst of growth and civic pride. That year, Rayne listed its assets in the Christmas edition of the Crowley newspaper. They included: two railroads, a cotton oil mill, four cotton gins, two rice mills, two machine shops, one grist mill, two lumber yards, a brick plant, two churches, three schools, two banks, a works and light plant, a military company, and a fire company.

In 1890, the Crowley newspaper reported that 9,000 pounds of frog skins, taken from 64,854 frogs, had been shipped from Crowley.

Frogs leaped onto Louisiana dinner tables long ago

Historical documents place bull-frogs, or ouaouaronos, on the Louisiana dinner table as early as the 1700s. The early French settlers were not only familiar with the delicacies of frog legs, but they were also desperate to eke out a living in hard surroundings. Along with crawfish, alligators, crabs, and turtles, frogs became a part of the Acadian cuisine, and spread onto their neighbors’ tables.

Frogs also became a money-maker. Donut Pucheau, a native Frenchman who settled in Rayne in 1887, was the first to start shipping live frogs to restaurants in New Orleans and back to his native France. Soon after, another Frenchman named Jacques Weil and his brothers, Edmond and Guntram, began what developed into a huge frog shipping business that made Rayne the Frog Capital of the World. Jacques became the senior partner in the firm of Jacques Weil, Boudreaux, and Legre. The firm at one time shipped out as much as 10,000 pounds of frog legs in a week, as well as poultry, eggs and produce for New Orleans and other markets.

The frog shipping season began in late February and reached a peak in April. During the first spring-like nights, hunters would stalk the coulees and shallow waterways of the parish with lighted lanterns and burlap sacks. The light blinded the frog and immobilized it, so that the hunter had only to pick it up and plop it into the sack. The night’s catch was kept in a cool place until there were enough frogs to take to the market at Rayne.

Frog legs were reason for the frog business. But the hides brought a few bucks, too. As the frogs were butchered and skinned, the hides were put into barrels and covered with salt. They were sent to tanneries to be made into purses and other leather goods.

In the summer of 1906, the Crowley newspaper reported that 9,000 pounds of frog skins, taken from 64,854 frogs, had been shipped from Crowley.

The cemetery at St. Joseph’s Church in Rayne is said to be one of few in the United States facing north and south. All others face east to west. (Photo by P.C. Piazza)
The Fire Fiend: Rayne business section destroyed

Big fires struck practically every community in the early days of Acadia, when wooden buildings were crowded together in growing communities with little fire protection. The one in Rayne happened in February 1895.

This is the way it was reported in the Crowley newspaper on Feb. 9.

THE FIRE FIEND

A DOZEN BUILDINGS LICKED UP BY THE FLAMES
LOST ESTIMATED AT $30,000
RAYNE THE SCENE OF THE CONFLAGRATION
A VISITATION OF PROVIDENCE
SAVES THE TOWN FROM TOTAL DESTRUCTION

The business portion of the town of Rayne was visited by the fire fiend on Thursday morning when a space of two short hours left a dozen buildings in ashes, while the entire business part of the town narrowly escaped total destruction from the fiery elements.

The total loss to property and goods will aggregate possibly $30,000, partially covered by insurance in some instances. A number of the losses are complete and fall upon individuals who can ill afford to stand them.

It was possibly 10 o'clock when our erstwhile quiet neighbor was thrown into a state of excitement by the announcement of fire. There was a prompt response upon the part of the citizens and every possible effort was made to subdue the flames in their incipiency. The fire had gained considerable headway, however, before aid arrived and it needed only the stiff gale that was blowing to fan it into a flame that in its fierceness threatened destruction to the entire town.

Starting at the extreme northwestern business portion the flames were swiftly swept southward, laying bare a square and a half of business buildings almost within the hour. The citizens did all within their power to allay the progress of the fire but they were ill prepared to fight the flames, through lack of proper facilities. They were without ladders and almost without water. The fire had only fairly started when the news was telephoned to Crowley and a relief party of probably a hundred was organized and carried to Rayne on a special train placed at its disposal by the Southern Pacific.

The relief came too late, and by the time of the Raynettes' arrival the business portion of the town was destroyed, the flames sweeping southward with lightning swiftness, rapidly and licking everything that lay in their course. First after the house building came the warehouse of David Levy and then the large two story business building, both of which were crowded with a large stock of merchandise that was saved together with the food for the flames and added to their intensity. Fearful of the results that might follow the explosion of oil, powder and other combustibles which the store building and warehouse contained the fire was given full vent by the citizens directing their attention to the removal of goods from other buildings which stood in the course of the flames.

The store building and warehouse occupied by David Levy was owned by Mrs. F.M. Levy of Abbeville. Aiding was the harness shop and justice's office of E.O. Bruner, the building being owned by Ferdinand Gambel & Co., of New Orleans. Mr. Bruner saved the stock in his building with the exception of the safe and a lot of machinery repairs. The next to go on this side of the street was the building owned by Mr. Deroan which was also burned.

The building on the left and the corner building, the property of Judge R.T. Clark and occupied by G. Deroan as a grocery and restaurant, was lost.

E. Smith owned the building adjoining on the west and which he occupied as a residence. The greater portion of his stock and household goods were saved but his home was burned to the ground as was also his barn. Spreading farther west a building owned by Ferdinand Gambel & Co. and occupied by David Levy for furniture and store was saved.

The home of Elias Deput, standing not more than twenty feet distance from the latter building was saved from total destruction by the hardest work, but only after it was damaged by fire and water.

Thus the progress of the flames in this direction was arrested, but two buildings on the opposite side of the street from Bruner's harness shop and Deroan's store were also destroyed. The fire spread across the street during the burning of David Levy's store, igniting the livery barn of E.O. Bruner, burning it to the ground, together with a lot of corn and hay. All the stock, harness and buggies were saved. The building was owned by Dr. R.R. Lyons. Flames from the livery barn soon ignited the building on the corner of the street to the south of it, which was owned by H.D. McBride of Church Point, and occupied by Paul Rebert as a saloon. Further progress of the fiery elements were here cut off by the almost superhuman efforts of those who gallantly fought the flames, and the fire was within a short while brought under control.

THE AMOUNT OF THE LOSS

There were a dozen buildings burned and two others damaged, entailing a total loss of fully $20,000, which was only partially covered by insurance. E.F. Besse valued the building occupied by Mr. Walker at $250 and the building occupied by Ed. Smith at $1,450, with $800 insurance in the Milwaukee Mechanics Insurance Co. placed by the Thos. Foley agency. The contractors, Frank Blanc and J.W. Stephens, will lose $250, the contract price, while A.C. Poulet will probably sustain loss on account of lumber.

E. Smith places his loss at probably $300, while the Ranger plant was valued at about $450.

Volunteers from Crowley rushed to help when fire raged through Rayne. (Photo from Freemen Collection/US Archives.

David Levy stated that his stock of goods would be about $18,000, and that nothing was saved beyond his books and papers. He was insured with the Lewis & Lacombe agency, Opelousas, A.A. Woods & Co. and C.C. Chandell agencies, of New Orleans, but declined to state the amount of insurance. Mrs. Levy carried $1,000 insurance on the buildings, placed in two companies.

Ferdinand Gambel & Co. lost about $1,400 on their two buildings, which were probably covered by insurance.

E.O. Bruner places his loss on food at $400 and on stock at $200, with no insurance. Dr. Lyons carried no insurance on the building occupied by Mr. Bruner, losing possibly $700.

Please see FIRE, Page 15

THE CITY OF RAYNE

Welcomes You...

Come and visit The City of Rayne, The Frog Capital of The World, and chances are you'll want to stay. It's a quiet community with the character of a big city. Rayne offers art, culture, history, not to mention nice folks & food. You'll get the sense of nostalgia as you wander the streets in awe of the murals.

Rayne is home to the Frog Festival, it's The City of Murals & one of Louisiana's cleanest cities. When you stop in for a visit you'll agree, it's a nice community.

And as the sign reads as you leave town. "Friends are forever, do come back." We think you'll want to do just that.

For more information call Rayne City Hall 318-334-3121.
Acadia Parish

Rice and railroads turned the Prairies green

In Acadia Parish, a perfect climate, open prairie lands, and the waterways weaving across them formed the perfect combination when Anglo, Acadian and German farmers began to cultivate on high land the rice that once had been grown only in bogs and swamps.

Railways opened the prairies after the Civil War, providing a new way to get the crop to market and opening new opportunities for communities that would spring up or grow bigger alongside the tracks.

Buyers look over a freshly threshed rice field in Acadia Parish about 1901.