Bayou Teche Banks Echo
History of Bygone Eras

Plantation Homes Symbols of Past

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(Times-Picayune Staff Correspondent)

NEW IBERIA, La. — The banks of Bayou Teche are still echoing with merry sounds that accompanied Louisiana’s spectacular sugar cane festival in this regal city a week ago.

As these sounds mingle with the murmur of the stream, there comes the realization that the historic waterway has, through generations, continued to echo its past and its people.

By careful listening it is possible to catch an echo, for instance, of early Acadian wanderers arriving to find a home along the Teche.

Then there is an echo of antebellum plantation homes in a setting of almost timeless tranquility.

There are echoes of actor Joseph Jefferson who lived on a nearby private island and traveled and painted on the bayou.

Echoes of war between northern and southern states rise above the murmur to recall days of conquest and occupancy.

INDIAN LIFE

There are echoes of Indian life, settlement by Canary Islanders, Spanish and French, of early days in community living, and later echoes of expanding industrial development.

Today, with the harvest season at hand, waving sugarcane murmur in duet with the bayou to sing strongly of the vital role the Teche plays in the modern agricultural picture.

The Acadians were banished from Nova Scotia in 1755, and eventually some 4,000 of them reached the Louisiana lands along Bayou Teche, Lafourche and Vermilion.

Henry Wardsworth Longfellow immortalized the Teche arrival in his poem “Evangeline.” Today an aged oak reaches toward the bayou as if to reminisce about the priques that paused by it to unload those who would find a home in what is St. Martinville.

There, a half-dozen miles from New Iberia, the echo of the Acadians’ arrival is a strong one, and on the grounds of the Church of St. Martin of Tours is a statue of Evangeline, the gift of Dolors Darby Porter, who played that role in a motion picture.

Was Emmeline Labiche the counterpart of Evangeline for the poet? Some say yes, Others say no. But a grave inscription reads: “Evangeline — Emmeline Labiche.”

Many lovely homes of a past era stand echoingly along the Bayou. One, Oaklawn Manor, was built in 1837 by Judge Alexander Porter near Franklin. His ancestry is memorialized in the name given to the bayou site of the house, Irish Bend.

Dating farther back into Teche history to 1795 is Darby House near Baldwin. Near Jeanerette is a brick house, built in 1842 by Charles Greveenberg, a royalist refugee from France.

Enterprise plantation was built along the bayou in the 1840’s by Simeon Patout.

LINKED WITH WAR

Bayside, Dulcito and the Shadows, all bayou-side homes, are linked with the War Between the States as well as with the period preceding it.

Built around 1840, Bayside was the scene of a North-South incident when owner Francis D. Richardson burned his pontoon bridge and set it loose on Bayou Teche in an unsuccessful attempt to halt advancing Federal boats.

Dulcito, built before 1800, was a field hospital in the war of a century ago. So was the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany in New Iberia, its red brick of today then only six years old.

New Iberia had no clashes because it was indefensible when Federal troops swept in from the bayou in 1863. The Shadows, its grounds sloping down to the bayou-side here, became Federal Headquarters for Gen. Nathaniel Banks.

This city had been the center of beef curing with Avery Island salt for Confederate troops, and when it fell to Banks the food supply was cut off.

The Teche was a favorite place to the actor who was world-renowned. Skilled as an artist as well as an actor, Joseph Jefferson loved it.

On what is now Jefferson Island he built an American style home of cypress in 1870 where he entertained such greats as Edwin Booth and President Grover Cleveland. In 1898, while drilling for water, he struck salt on his property.

These are some of the echoes that can be constantly heard along the banks of the bayou by those who know how to listen to the language of a stream that has wound its way through the countryside for a long long time.

Every sound is captured and treasured, and from the wealth of history that the stream remembers comes the mist of romance that has made its reality legendary.