Judge Paul Stephens’ discourses on Coushatta

Paul Stephens was born December 17, 1900, at Coushatta in Red River parish. He graduated from Coushatta High school and attended Louisiana State University. He studied law in the office of his uncle, John Franklin Stephens; was admitted to the bar November 13, 1924; went on the bench September 19, 1924; served as the only Judge in the 10th Judicial District for 18 years. During his last term, which he served without opposition, another section was added to the District and was filled by Judge Julian Bailes. After 24 years on the bench, Judge Stephens retired October 1, 1966. A writer of poetry, he has also published two books, “History of our Stephens Family and Related Lines!” and “History of our Harper Family and Related Lines,” both of which are on file in the Red River Library.

Lisso’s Town
Stothart Street
Bernstein Hotel
And nothing to eat.

This is the way the pundits described Coushatta when I was a little boy.

The Town lay mostly along the river front, having been built there because the river, at that time, furnished the only outlet to the world. Front Street was perhaps three-quarters of a mile long with Lisso’s warehouse and store on the southern end and present Carroll Street about the middle. I was born about 250 yards north of the Bridge. Our house was on the west side of Front Street and faced it. Back of it to the river some hundred yards or more was Coushatta, then a strip of Old Stella Plantation, then the River. Until 1908 the confluence of Coushatta Bayou and Red River formed a deeper than usual boat landing that helped to make Coushatta the site for supplies from the boat traffic on the River to many who had settled in neighboring parishes to the east. On December 17th, 1943 I wrote the following poem which describes pretty much what happened:

I cannot remember the day I was born
A December day on a cold frosty morn
I scarcely remember the place or the spot
It caved in the River when I was a tot.

Red River flowed near the back of our home
The soil all around was a rich sandy loam
The street out in front once led to the Town
But the River came up and gulped it all down.

The people who lived out in this part of Town
Had to move very quickly and tear homes down
All will remember the summer they fled
And scattered them so - unless they are dead

The Thorntons and Howells - the Bosleys and Teers
Left in a hurry - so great were their fears.
The Wilkinsons, Lisso’s and Stephens’ too
All moved in a jiffy - to just name a few.

We all can remember old 1908
When flood swept our section and molded our fate
What’s that do you ask - how old do I be?
Why today is my birthday - I’m just forty-three.
Generally the Town and country side around it was settled by people of quality. There were no automobiles here until 1912. Mr. John Marston had the first and Dr. W. L. Davis and Dr. W. T. Wilkinson the second. The roads were wagon roads, with deep sand and plenty of dust in the summer and full of mud holes in the winter. Jimmy Florane had the first radio about the year 1922.

Coushatta has been a Town of many fires. The wooden stores built adjoining each other burned all together on occasions too numerous to mention. The bucket brigade didn't have a chance, but the granddaddy of them all fires occurred one hot June afternoon in 1818. A colored man whose name I think was Bibb was burning some trash on the River bank just south of Lisso's warehouse. Suddenly a gust of wind blew some of the burning material into some dead leaves in a China tree adjoining the warehouse. Before they could put it out the strong southern wind had blown it onto the warehouse and the Big Fire had begun.

It is impossible to recall all of the major buildings that burned that day, but at the time I can recall Lisso's warehouse. Lisso's store, a big building, Mrs. Jane Paxton's home, Mrs. Lou Merrell's home, the Coushatta Citizen office, J. P. Clarkson home, W. P. Carter home, Sam Laws meat market, Benton Howard home, Dr. Edgerton's drugstore, J. J. Stanfill store, homes of Keete Lockett and T. S. Thomas and the Moss home, the Catholic church as I remember and several others.

The railroad came to Coushatta about 1898 and of course that spelled the doom of the steamboat. I can remember as a little boy going to Shreveport with my mother to visit my grandmother. I particularly remember one rainy morning before daylight, leaving our home on the River with all of our paraphernalia in a Mr. Jim Huckabay's covered wagon, that we called a bus, to go to the depot to catch the train. I have a vivid recollection of this iron monster belching and roaring into the depot, with the great bell ringing and literally shaking the earth, that small wonder that teams of horses and little boys were scared out of their wits.

I remember the calaboose that was located on the sand bar in front of the "Brick Store" and the dedication of the new brick postoffice in 1917 by the brilliant Ed Carter. I remember the old horse-drawn hearse and the wooden caskets of yesteryear.

I remember the schoen; the Bosleys; Clyde Cockerham and his father, Allen Cockerham; the Oglethorpes and Masingills; Jim Adcock; Ernest Stothart, Will, Cliff and Joe Stothart, all brothers; Oscar Kumpf; Ben Wolfson; John, Bill, Waddy and Tom Wilkinson, all brothers; Kat Carter; Sam, Paul and Ed Lisso; Peyton, Joel and Lawson Carter; Joe Lelondecker; the Wilsons; the Armisteads; the Edgertons; the McLemores; the Boylston; Tom and Lesh Nettes; Aticus Howard; the Holleys; John, Teat and Joe Brown; the Paxtons; the Meltons; the Fletchers; John and Fan Teer; the Zoder, the Cagles; the T. S. Thomas family; Keet Lockett, Hale Wamsley and his family; the Singleton and Corleys; Dr. W. L. Davis, Drew Davis; the Manhangas— and many others too numerous to mention.

I remember the foot bridge that crossed Bayou Nicolas. I especially remember my first schooling under Mrs. P. A. Lee in the frame buildings that were located where the present elementary school is. Everybody got to school as best he could in those days and bought their own books and equipment. I remember the Fletcher children coming to school in a motor boat from their home six or more miles up the River, and the Corleys coming in a surrey. Everybody brought their lunch. How different now.

To the everlasting credit of my teachers, I made it through school. How they were able to teach a boy whose conscious mind was chasing a rainbow in some faraway place, I will never know, but by some miraculous process, they impressed it on the subconscious mind. Nevertheless I liked mathematics and geography and that helped some.

While the people were of high quality, I can't say he same for the buildings or the roads of my Town as I grew up. My memory carries me back to the dust that settled everywhere about the time of the cotton ginning season. Perhaps the whistle of Bob Giddens' gin reminded me that school would soon start.

In conclusion, I remember November 11th, 1918. I was working at a refinery in Crichton, since school was out on account of an epidemic of influenza. The old L&N I caught every morning to go to work had several miles of river to traverse down around Angola, so after my date with my girl, I would walk by the depot here to ask the agent if the train would be on time the next morning — fog very often delayed it. I don't remember what he told me about the train, but I do remember he told me the Armistice had been signed and World War I was over. I went to the gin and found Mr. Barcomb Curry firing up the boilers, and as soon as he got up enough steam, he started his whistle blowing and soon the whole Town was celebrating early that first Armistice Day morning.

After the great fire of 1918, most of those whose businesses had been destroyed decided to rebuild over near the railroad as that was the new source of supplies. The last to come was L. P. Stephens & Company and the Bank of Coushatta moved into their new building in January 1923.

I remember with a great deal of sentiment the Coushatta of my youth and the children with whom I played, but there is no doubt that the Town has progressed with the times and is an even better place in which to live.