Le Bon Nom

By Dr. Donald A. Gill

Place name study may be approached from a serious, scholarly point of view or from a just-for-fun point of view. In this regular column, I would like to share some of my findings on Louisiana place names—just for fun.

The branch of linguistic science which deals with names and their origins is called onomastics, a word which originates from the Greek language. Onomazein “to name” derives from the Greek base onoma “name.” The field of onomastics is subdivided into at least three branches—place names, personal names, and names of various objects.

Throughout history, mankind has apparently felt the need for the security of naming things with which he has been associated. As a result, the nouns in all languages have come into being. And because of man’s interest in naming, the study of onomastics sheds a great deal of information about mankind in the areas of folklore, language, psychology, history, and geography.

Since people have usually taken great pains in selecting names to apply to places, I have chosen to call this column Le Bon Nom, a name which I think is appropriate to the French culture and language of Acadiana.

In this and subsequent columns, I shall be meandering throughout Acadiana and sharing some of my findings about name origins and histories.

Lafayette Parish was named in honor of a French military and political leader, the Marquis de Lafayette, whose actual name was Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier. General Lafayette commanded American troops during the Revolutionary War against Great Britain.

Lafayette, the seat of parish government and the largest city in the parish, was also named in honor of General Lafayette. The original name of the city was Vermilionville, chosen because the tiny village was established on the banks of the Vermilion River.

Vermilion River, the chief waterway of Lafayette Parish, was named for the reddish or vermilion color of the bluff lands along the river, especially along the southern section of the river in Vermilion Parish.

Anselm Coulee received its name from the Christian name of a man. It is believed to have been named for either Anselm Martin or Anselm Thibodeaux, both of whom were very early residents of Lafayette Parish.

Bayou Carencro, according to legend, was named in honor of an event which supposedly occurred near the bayou. It is said that a large monster died in the area of the present town of Carencro and that carrion crows or buzzards fed on the corpse for weeks. Thus, “carrion crow” became “Carencro.”

Bayou Ile des Cannes was given the French name meaning “Island of the Canes” because of the tall cane or reeds growing along it.

Bayou Queue de Tortue has a cloak of mystery covering the origin of its name. Translated from the French, the name means “tail of the turtle.” According to one source, farmers in Vermilion Parish think that the bayou received its name because its waters recede during dry spells much as the tail of a turtle does when danger is present. If this explanation is correct, the namer Suite à la page 10
apparently used simile in his name selection.

An alternative origin, however, is that the bayou was named for Celestine le Tortue, an Indian who succeeded Lacassine in 1799. Celestine le Tortue owned land along the bayou, and it may have been named for him.

Billeaud, a railroad stop on the Southern Pacific Railway, was named for Martial Billeaud, owner of a large sugar plantation and refinery near the town of Broussard.

Broussard, a small town near Lafayette, was named for Valin Broussard, one of the first settlers of the area.

If any readers have special requests for name-origin explanations, they may address their requests to Donald A. Gill in care of La Gazette des Acadiens.