McIlhenny historian writes Teche history

Meaning of name still mystery

BY CHÉRE COEN
Special to The Advocate

Author and historian Shane K. Bernard grew up in Acadia-na near the banks of Bayou Teche, but it took a trip to Disney World to inspire him to write a history of the waterway. His new book, "Teche: A History of Louisiana's Most Famous Bayou," hits bookshelves Tuesday.

"I then went through a period of reading all the Mark Twain I should have read in college," Bernard said. "When I read 'Life on the Mississippi,' it occurred to me that life on the Teche had to be similar, especially like life on the lower Mississippi.""To me, Thomas Jefferson's 'Reception of the Spanish ern from the Mexican province of Texas,' Bernard explained, so Bernard's book focuses instead on the glory days of the Teche, Bernard believes the waterway may be filled with war relics. Flood control and levees have been enacted in historically significant spots, he said.

"This is a good example of why we need environmental studies of the bayou," he said. Mark A. Rees, a University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor and archaeologist, had done research on the prehistoric Teche, Bernard explained, so Bernard's book focuses instead on the prehistoric Teche.

BERNARD'S BOOK

One of the first white settlers of the region known as the Attakapas, Masse arrived in the Teche area in 1719 and was known to free his slaves. Other early settlers included Gabriel Fuselier de la Claire, Louis Pellerin and Bernard Dauterive and later Acadians who received Spanish land grants along Bayou Teche upon arriving in South Louisiana.

In 1779, Spanish military officer Francisco Boulinguy, founder of New Iberia, commissioned landowner Jean-Baptiste Gre-vemberg and royal surveyor Francois Gonsoulin to explore the Teche from New Iberia to the bayou's mouth, and the duo kept a diary.

"I translated the diary into English," Bernard said. "It turned out to be a real gold mine." Despite all his research, Bernard was not able to discover one of the bayou's most perplexing questions: how it got its name. The Chitimacha called the waterway "Snake Bayou," which has perpetuated the belief that teche means snake in the Chitimacha language. Bernard, however, doesn't see the correlation since the Chitimacha word for snake doesn't sound like teche. "I don't think that's true," he said of the snake theory. "It's possible that that story's true but the name is not evidenced."

He does offer other ideas, one being the similarity of Techas, an early spelling for Texas derived from the Caddo word meaning "friend," to what the French would translate to Teche.

"Noting the similarity of Techas (and its alternate spellings) to Teche (and its alternate spellings), I propose the Spanish explorers named Bayou Teche for the Mexican province of Texas," Bernard writes in the book.

Bottom line, Bernard insists, is that the name is anyone's guess unless better, historical documents are found.

"I'm completelyagnostic in where the word Teche comes from," he said. The Teche Project will host a book launch Wednesday from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Teche Center for the Arts in Breaux Bridge, and Bernard also will sign books at 10 a.m. Saturday at the Longfellow-Evangeline State Park in St. Martinville.

District was André Masse, Ber-

nard said, a pioneer who dealt with both French and Span-}

ish governments since both claimed the territory as their own. A historian in 1910 found documents related to Masse in Mexico City, but Bernard had trouble locating them. In a stroke of luck, he found copies of the historian's papers where he once taught, at the University of California, Berkeley.

"There was a folder there (at Berkeley) marked 'French trespasser in Spanish territory,' " Bernard said.

He translated the documents into English and found that Masse arrived in the Teche region around 1746, establishing a cattle ranch on the bayou and later moving toward present-day Baldwin. Masse befriended Native Americans and was known to free his slaves.

TECHE

Continued from page 1B

"I translated the diary into English," Bernard said. "It turned out to be a real gold mine." Despite all his research, Bernard was not able to discover one of the bayou's most perplexing questions: how it got its name. The Chitimacha called the waterway "Snake Bayou," which has perpetuated the belief that teche means snake in the Chitimacha language. Bernard, however, doesn't see the correlation since the Chitimacha word for snake doesn't sound like teche.

"I don't think that's true," he said of the snake theory. "It's possible that that story's true but the name is not evidenced."

He does offer other ideas, one being the similarity of Techas, an early spelling for Texas derived from the Caddo word meaning "friend," to what the French would translate to Teche.

"Noting the similarity of Techas (and its alternate spellings) to Teche (and its alternate spellings), I propose the Spanish explorers named Bayou Teche for the Mexican province of Texas," Bernard writes in the book.

Bottom line, Bernard insists, is that the name is anyone's guess unless better, historical documents are found.

"I'm completelyagnostic in where the word Teche comes from," he said. The Teche Project will host a book launch Wednesday from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Teche Center for the Arts in Breaux Bridge, and Bernard also will sign books at 10 a.m. Saturday at the Longfellow-Evangeline State Park in St. Martinville.

The Teche Project will host a