Mermentau Was Early Place Of Refuge

Little is known of the early history of Mermentau. The general area at one time was said to be a place of refuge for smugglers, outlaws, slave runners and pirates. Early in the 19th century the river area was described as “a lawless region” by James Leander Cathcart, a government agent who traveled in southwest Louisiana in search of suitable lumber for the construction of navy vessels.

The settlement developed at an undetermined time on the east side of the river at a point where travelers crossed the stream. One of the earliest known settlers was John Webb, a native of England, who came in 1827. In 1828 John Webb married Nancy Mayer (Mier), widow of Samuel Rippy (Riper). John Webb lived in an area which came to be known as Webb’s Cove, located near the juncture of the river and Bayou Queude Tortue. Cornelius Duson McNaughton, a political refugee from Canada, joined Webb there about 1837. McNaughton, who dropped his family name and was known as Cornelius Duson, was an expert diver. He and John Webb located the sunken hull of an old pirate schooner in Bayou Queude Tortue, a few miles from the bayou’s confluence with the Mermentau River.

After the Calcasieu district was separated from St. Landry in 1840, Mermentau became the western outpost of St. Landry Parish. Information on early population of the area is virtually non-existent. Sometime between 1842 and 1852 a voting precinct was established at Mermentau. A listing of St. Landry Parish precinct published in the Opelousas Gazette on May 28, 1842 does not show Mermentau; some 10 years later the first issue of the Opelousas Courier, published December 11, 1852, lists the house of John Wright at Mermentau as a polling place. At an election held in 1855, 101 voters cast ballots at the Mermentau poll. The precinct, however, is believed to have taken in a large part of what is now the southwestern portion of Acadia Parish. Other than Pointe-aux-Loups, the nearest voting precinct was located at Queue Tortue (Rayne).

Jean Castex, a native of France, came to Mermentau about 1856; in 1859 he opened a mercantile business; later became one of Acadia Parish’s leading merchants. He was also a cotton and rice farmer, and was probably the first Acadia Parish farmer to own his own cotton gin, which was erected in 1860.

Timber from the Mermentau area provided much of the building material and fencing used by the prairie settlers; the lumber was hauled by oxcart to points as far away as Opelousas. On May 8, 1872 the Opelousas Courier reported: “For the last two weeks the streets of our town have been almost daily crowded with carts and wagons loaded with pieux, boards and shingles, coming from Pointe-aux-Loups and Mermento. Never has there been such a crowd in one time, and so successively we counted eleven ox-wagons in one expedition in one day this week. Eight feet pieux are worth $12 per 100; six feet pieux, $6, and shingles $6 per 1,000.”

Many of the houses used by prairie dwellers were completely built at the sawmills of Mermentau, then hauled by wagons and teams of oxen across the prairie, sometimes for many miles. These ready-built homes were certainly the first prefabricated houses to be used in southwest Louisiana. When such a house was bought, the owner called his neighbors together and organized a

See REFUGE, Pg. 8A
hauling bee, or halerie. With a dozen yoke of oxen and three wagons and willing hands, the structure was soon on its way. The loading was accomplished by taking the beds off two of the wagons; in place of the regular coupling poles, long logs, perhaps 30 feet long, were used. The house was jacked up, then the poles run under it. The log poles were then chained up to the two front pair of wheels, thus supporting the house. Across the open prairie the haulers could make 12 to 15 miles per day.