Old-Timers Of The Area Recall The Bizarre Tale Of 'The James Boys Of The Bayous'

Blanc Brothers Still Topic Of Conversation

[Article text]

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Wed. Jan. 30 1963
Section A
pg. 9/10
Old Timers
(Continued From Page 9)

search by Bloodhounds

But, no case could offer a clue to the identity of the killers. Even the bloodhounds were useless after the mob had tramped over the scene.

The dogs were turned loose, however, and headed for Col. Boudreaux's home. Fearfully, Ernest and Alexi saw them approach. All the way to the railroad track, within yards of the house, the dogs ran. Then, by some chance they turned away, and the brothers were safe.

A check of the safe revealed that one drawer had not been opened. That drawer contained some $6,000 belonging to Simon Begnaud, who held the key to the unopened drawer. On Friday, funeral services were held for the murder victim in St. John's Church. A newspaper account said "public sentiment had been aroused to such an extent that the church could scarcely contain the crowd which thronged to witness the ceremony."

Father E. Forge conducted the services. He urged against mob action, entreatimg the crowd to allow justice to be meted out by constituted authority.

In the days to follow, as Sheriff Broussard searched for clues, people for the area talked of little but the murder. Even speculation over the outcome of the election was crowded out.

Broussard requested assistance from the New Orleans police department, asking that a detective be sent to assist in the investigation. The New Orleans police chief denied the request, suggesting that the sheriff "secure a competent Negro to work on the case."

New Orleans police did, however, maintain a vigil for several suspicious characters known to have left Lafayette, headed for New Orleans.

Six days after the murder of Martin Begnaud, Col. Boudreaux hitched up his wagon to take Ernest and Alexi to town. The brothers had announced their plans to leave for the city, and by that night, they had left. Their former tutor, a friend of their late father, was to give them shelter and employment when they arrived at 97 Louisa St.

A letter with traveling money was to be waiting for them at the post office, they told Boudreaux.

Having business in town, the colonel rode on ahead, and, on an impulse, stopped at the post office. "Has a letter for the brothers Broussard?"

"There is no such letter here," the postmaster replied, "nor has there been one."

A short while later, Col. Boudreaux met the brothers as they arrived in town and invited them to his wagon.

There is no letter," he told them sympathetically.

"Oh, I picked it up earlier," Ernest replied glibly.

Brothers Board a Train

Within minutes, a train arrived and the Blanc brothers departed on a trip that was to take them across the entire country and across the ocean.

Then, on May 2, the arrest of Gustavo Ballin was announced. Late Broussard had recanted the story of Ballin's arrest and had heard the tales of the strange actions of Ballin and Boudreaux at the time of the murder.

Ballin claimed to have been in his cabin the night of the crime. His alibi could be substantiated, he said, by an old Irishman who had spent the night there. But the Irishman fudged him. He was drunk, Ernest said, and could remember nothing except being carried into Ballin's cabin in the early morning by Ballin and Boudreaux.

Hamp Benton was not as easy to capture as Ballin. Hearing of the sheriff's arrest, he swore he would kill the sheriff if he came for him.

Friends of Broussard urged his people to form a posse rather than try to capture Ballin alone, but Broussard refused for fear that Benton would be harmed.

For several days, Broussard camped in the woods near Ballin's cabin in Carenco. But Benton, who had formerly worked for Ballin, arrived in town and checked into the story told by the two young men from France. An inquiry revealed that the supposed benefactor who had sent them money and offered work in New Orleans was not to be located at 97 Toucans St. The Blanc Brothers were not to be found in the Crescent City either.

But Broussard kept his suspicions to himself, and quietly worked out a definite solution to the murder.

Sheriff Remains Suspicious

There were some of the things occupying the minds of some of the people. But Sheriff Broussard was still concerned with the murder of Martin Begnaud. He was far from convinced that the two brothers who were the prime suspects were guilty. Yet he feared that if they were brought to trial and freed for lack of evidence, they would fall victims to a lynch mob. And so, Benton and Boudreaux remained in prison, while an inquiry was made into the story told by the two young men from France. An inquiry revealed that the supposed benefactor who had sent them money and offered work in New Orleans was not to be located at 97 Toucans St. The Blanc Brothers were not to be found in the Crescent City either.

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And so the time passed. The newspapers told of the assassination of Abdul Azim, the venerable Shah of Iran, who had created sensations in Europe with his unwonted benevolence. A diplomatic controversy, that of the elections, remained unsolved, but the murder of the late Martin Begnaud was still unsolved.

In July, while the front page of the Lafayette Advertiser carried the official charter of the city of Lafayette, New Orleans, the railroad was reported as in the Evangeline Country. Also reported was the story of how the state capital was to be moved to New Orleans, creating the great cycle of the New States, and a new capital of the United States.

In November, Simon Begnaud showed some doubt that his brother's murderer was in the custody of the law.

On Nov. 1, he offered a $1,000 reward for the capture of the murder. But the reward remained unclaimed. Then, on January 1, 1897, two men, bedraggled men, stepped from a train at the Summit. Soon, they knocked on the door of Col. Boudreaux's home. "Qui c'est gos de!" the colonel asked.

"C'est Ernest et Alexis," came the reply.

The Blanc brothers had returned.

Once again, Boudreaux was captured by the apparent innocence and sincerity of the boys. They were taken into his home, and then came to the house, apparently with some suspicion, possibly prompted by his sister, Mrs. Ganche Boudreaux, who had suspected the brothers from the beginning. However, the demanage of the boys fell silent.

He was more fully convinced after the boys showed and were given jobs on the farm of his brother-in-law, Ganche Boudreaux.

Sheriff's Net Tightens

But, once all was well with the Blancs and Boudreaux, Sheriff Broussard was busy. Before Justice of the Peace T. A. McFadden, the court was out a warrant for the arrest of Ernest and Alexi Boudreaux.

But McFadden knocked on the door of Col. Boudreaux's home. He was ushered into the house.

parlor where the brothers were engaged in conversation with Gauche Boudreaux, Simeon Begnaud and Dave Dussy.

After a few moments of small talk, Broussard called Simeon aside and told him he had come to arrest Ernest and Alexis.

Simeon was dumbfounded. He had developed a fondness for the boys in the few hours since their return. Couldn't the sheriff wait for more evidence? The boys would be readily available, working for Gauche Boudreaux.

But the unyielding sheriff quietly placed the boys under arrest. They went peacefully... Alexis to the corporation jail and Ernest to the parish jail.

The next day Broussard visited the prisoners. He was accompanied by Simeon Begnaud and by William Campbell, an attorney and former sheriff who had been defeated by Broussard. Campbell was later to assist in the prosecution of the brothers, as a special counsel hired by the family of Martin Begnaud. In later years he was to serve as district attorney and district judge.

Alexis the first to be visited, appeared on the verge of confessing but changed his mind before fully revealing his part in the crime.

(Continued on Page 11)
Old Timers

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Section A

The arrest of the three men was the result of a carefully planned police operation. The men were caught in the act of burglarizing the home of the late Mr. Henry Brown, who was a well-known businessman in the city. The police had been following the men for several weeks and had gathered enough evidence to obtain warrants for their arrest.

The men were questioned and confessed to the crime. They were charged with armed robbery and faces charges of assault and battery. The court has set bail at $50,000 for each of the men. The trial is scheduled for next month.

For The Defense

The defense attorney, Mr. John Smith, will argue that the men are innocent of the charges. He will present evidence to show that the men were innocent at the time of the crime.

The trial is expected to last several weeks. The public is encouraged to attend the trial to show support for the victims of the crime.
Old Timers
(Continued From Page 11)

sent back to the custody of Cap
Fulham in New Orleans to wait
their date with the executioner.

Still prime newspaper copy, the
brothers were visited frequently by
reporters, who presented and em-
broided the tales of their experi-
ences.

French Consul

The news coverage eventually
led to a great interest in the case
by J. E. D'Anglade, French con-
sul in New Orleans. D'Anglade,
touched by the youth of the con-
demned murderers, went to the state
attorney general for advice on
how to make application for a
repeal for them, with an eye to-
ward ultimately securing con-
mutation of the death sentence.

In a newspaper interview, the
consul said he did not fear that
"a horrid crime had been com-
mitted."

"I do not contend that there was
anything irregular in the trial," he
said, "nor am I influenced by
the nationality of the accused. The
dead man was French also."

D'Anglade said he was influ-
enced by a "broad feeling of human-
ity."

"The boys never had the advan-
tages of restraining home influ-
ces or education, and from the
beginning they led, became de-
praved and easily fell into error."

The consul appealed particularly
for Alexis, who he said was "un-
der the influence of his brother,
who actually committed the mur-
der."

The advice of the attorney gen-
eral was that the quest for com-
mutation of the sentence begin in
Lafayette Parish. D'Anglade set
out to achieve this.

Meanwhile, on March 24, a dele-
tation from Lafayette and Iberville
parishes arrived in New Orleans
to perform a grim duty — read-
ing of the execution warrant to
the Blanc brothers. Ernest and
Alexis greeted Sheriff Broussard
politely.

Alexis was calm during the read-
ing of the warrant, although Er-
nest showed some nervousness.

Afterwards, members of the del-
egation chatted with the brothers
in French. Some of them gave
them pocket money.

Ernest, in reply to a question,
said he was aware that the French
consul was seeking to assist them.
"But I am afraid it is too late," he
said.

Before leaving, Broussard secur-
er permission from Cap Fulham
for the boys to walk about in the
corridor outside their cell.

At this time, and apparently at
all times when the brothers were
being visited, members of the
press were present. This consistent
news coverage, plus the actions of
D'Anglade, apparently led to the
next step in the drama.

During this week, the execu-
tion of the death warrant and
march of the brothers through
New Orleans was watched with
mischief by every resident. The
people were more concerned with
the last week on the street of Ca-
renco, where a twister had whirled
down on the little community,
ripping the steeples from the new
Church.

In New Orleans Prison, the spir-
its of the condemned Frenchmen
brightened somewhat as the
French consul and the consuls
continued to work in their behalf.

On March 25, D'Anglade had
cleared his conscience that the
brothers were not guilty of the
killings. They read an account of the activ-
ities in their behalf, and the broth-
ers began to hope for the best.

The best telling reporters they had "found
friends at last."

Many of the officers of the pri-
son told reporters they would like
to see a commutation of the sen-
tence.

Artistic Talent

During this period, Ernest in-
particular became lighter of heart
and thought of things other than
the gallows. Asking for paper and
pencil, he began to sketch, dem-
strating an artistic talent carefully
hids before.

Meanwhile the New Orleans Dal-
ily Picayune took an editorial stan-
paign praising the people of Lafay-
ette Parish. A letter to the editor sig-
ted "an old lady citizen" urged the
newspaper to make an appeal on
behalf of the boys, urging that they
be held in prison and not returned
to the "bloodthirsty men of Lau-
ayette Parish" for hanging.

The paper answered that the "in-
terest and welfare of the com-
unity require that they be pun-
bished."

In regard to the claim that
the men of Lafayette Parish were
bloodthirsty, the editorial replied
that of the 13 parish auditors who
were asked to decide the case,
they would have been hung to the
nearest limb without a fair and legal
trial.

Plea Rejected

Finally, the results of the efforts
of D'Anglade and the nests was
realized. The petition had yielded
only a few hundred names rather than the thousands
expected, and Gov. Foster rejec-
ted the plea for commutation of
the death sentence.

The brothers, although greatly
disappointed, accepted the news
philosophically. They announced
that they were going to confession
and would spend their remaining
days preparing for their suffer-
ance."

The following day they partic-

In Lafayette, Sheriff Broussard
was supervising the construc-
tion of an enclosure around the gallows
on the court house lawn.

The scaffold had been built
3 years before, but had never
been used.

Later, it was moved to Enron for
the hanging of the two Negroes,
convicted of causing a train
wreck in which a fireman was killed.

Before the scheduled day of the
execution, Thibadeaux escaped from jail. He was caught
and secured a new trial and was
acquitted.

The gallows was then moved to
Crowley, before being brought to
Lafayette for the hanging of Er-
nest and Alexis.

Broussard had a 15 - foot fence
built around the 18 - foot gallows.

Having completed these prepara-
tions, Sheriff Broussard asked
the prisoners to claim the
prisoners. He arrived in the Cre-
cent City on Tuesday, March 30.

The brothers had not been
allowed to leave the cell before
when they would arrive, they
traveled in the dark themselves.

They spent that day with one of
the priests from St. Joseph's
Church, believing they were to be
transferred to Lafayette on Thursday.

However, on Wednesday, Brou-
sard arrived at the jail. The pris-
ners knew immediately where
they had come. Alexis became agitated.

He pressed back against the cell
wall:

"They're taking us today," he
said fearfully.

"They've got us now," he
said, "and we're going to be
just the same for us
to go now," Ernest replied. "We
have to be there Friday."

This seemed to calm Alexis.

"Yes, and the brothers remained
unusually calm for the rest of their lives.

They were handcuffed together,
and the entourage — lawmen,
prisoners and reporters — began their
journey to Lafayette.

They traveled on foot for some distance, then
boarded a street car. The other
passengers stared curiously at the
cuffed youths, who refused to
return the prisoners' glances, but kept their eyes on the passing
scenery.

The group on the railroad train
began their journey to Lafayette. Broussard
was tied to their coattails until they
were seated in the smoking
then he shackled their legs.

Ernest warned Broussard
we might escape yet."

""He was caught
additional information.
Try it if you think you can; no sheriff replied.

"Will you protect us if a reprieve is granted before we hang?" Ernest asked.

"I will protect you with my life, and there will be friends of mine who will stand by me," Broussard answered.

"Who will bury us?" the prisoners asked.

"I guess the coroner will do that." "No, my duty ends with the execution." Alexis caught the sheriff's arm between his cuffed hands. Please don't let the doctors cut us up after we are dead," he begged.

As the train passed through New Beris, Alexis spotted a large tomb rising out of a cemetery. "I would like to be buried in one of those," he said, "instead of in his cold ground."

Ernest laughed. "It would make no difference. I couldn't feel it anyway."

Seeing the Train

The train rolled into Lafayette. At least 300 curious men and boys were awaiting the arrival. They followed the prisoners to the parish hall, muttering about the justice of the hanging, but making no attempt at violence.

At the jail, LaCoste, the blacksmith, was called to make their confinement secure. He shackled a chain onto Ernest's leg, then ran it through the bars of the window and shackled the other end to Alexis' leg. Thus, the two were chained to the window which overlooked the gallows where they were to die.

Among their visitors was Simeon Beaugrand. He brought them a small bottle of wine which they drank with their dinner. Father Bouard and Father Knapp of the Dominican Order came to pray with them. They promised to take communion on Friday.

After the priests left, the brothers stood looking down at the gallows. Alexis had studied it thoroughly and surprised Ernest and the reporters outside the cell door with his knowledge of its workings.

He explained to his brother that the two trap doors were opened by the iron lever on the left side; that the iron bar through the "steeple" or steel eye held the doors shut. With the pulling of the lever, he said, the bar flies free of the steeple and the traps open.

Down below, newspaper men appeared to inspect the gallows. Ernest called to Sheriff Broussard to "take the reporters up and make them test the gallows. We wouldn't want to get on it unless we're sure it's in working order."

That evening, C. H. Mouton made a last effort to save the youths. He took the petition of D'Anglade to Judge DeBaillon, who refused to sign. It was a fair trial, DeBaillon said.

The day of the hanging dawned bright and clear, but as the day grew on, the vantage points to venture out to a public eating place was a gala day for the 4,000 or so people who had gathered to witness the event.

Holiday Rates

From a number of points along the Southern Pacific line, excursion rates were offered to passengers going to town for the big day. Carencro turned out almost en masse. Scott was deserted except for the railroad agent and a few women and children.

Every hotel in town had been filled by midnight the night before. Lodgings were practically impossible to secure.

Daylight saw a steady stream of curiosity seekers pouring into the town in oxwagons, afoot and on horseback. The men wore their store-bought clothes, the women their gayest prints and calicos.

On the courthouse square, the spectators bought cakes, pralines, bonbons and oreilles de cochon from aged Negro women, rather than saw people climbing onto the rooftops and into trees for a better view of the gallows.

"Here are some people who will surely have their necks broken in advance of ours," he said.

The boys went to confession that morning and took communion. After a breakfast of eggs, ham and bread, they were offered wine by Sheriff Broussard.

"We'll have some wine," Alexis said. "It would not be good to die with water on our stomachs."

"Ask for anything you want," Broussard said. "We have had all that we desire," Ernest replied.

Alexis asked for their only possession: 3 prayer books. He asked that after the hanging, one of the prayer books go to Sheriff Broussard, and the other two to Deputy Mouton and Andre Billaud.

(Proceeds from the sale of a pamphlet in which the brother told the story of their lives in French went to Deputy Mouton.)

At 10:30 a.m., Broussard affirmed (Continued from Page 13)
Old Timers
(Continued From Page 12)

two ropes to iron rings on the beams of the scaffold.
At 12:30, while the skies grew darker, he ordered Ernest and Alexis to prepare themselves for the hanging. They calmly donned their new suits: blue-black trousers, white shirt and alpaca coat. They refused to wear collars. “It will make the job easier,” Ernest said to Broussard.

At 1:05 p.m. Father Knapp arrived and began the exhortation for death.

At 1:55, the men who were to witness the execution were called in. The group included B. Doucet, J. P. Mulkern, Simeon Begnaud, Jean Begnaud, Leo Judice, Jean A. Begnaud, Dr. P. M. Girard, P. B. Roy, V. E. Dupuis, Adam Bourgeois, A. Comeaux, William Campbell, L. Billeaud, E. Breaux and H. Church.

The Last Mile

At 2:15 p.m. the procession to the gallows began. Father Knapp led the way, Broussard held Ernest’s arm. Deputy Mouton held Alexis’ arm. The brothers went calmly and peacefully.

Atop the gallows, they were visible to the crowd. Ernest turned to the great throng and spoke:

“Fellow men, pardon us, and we forgive all. My friends, these are our dying words: never depart from the teachings of your religion, and follow in the precepts taught you by your parents. Never read yellow - back novels or bad books, and may you eschew the course that has brought us to such an awful death.”

Alexis leaned toward Broussard.

“You have been kind to us and we are grateful,” he said.

The brothers embraced each other, then turned to the sheriff.

“We are ready,” Ernest said, without a muscle quivering.

Broussard slipped the nooses around their necks and adjusted the black masks over their faces.

Then, almost in the same gesture, he stepped back and quickly opened the trap.

A sudden silence descended on the great crowd as the brothers disappeared from view behind the high wall. The tightening of the noose could be seen from outside the enclosure.

At 2:34 p.m., 14 minutes after the trap fell, Dr. Trahan pronounced the Blanc brothers dead.

Before the crowd could recover from the initial reaction to the sudden execution, the boys were cut down and immediately placed in coffins.

As Broussard started down from the gallows, some of the men in the crowd began ripping at the boards in the enclosure. A plank gave way, and the men crowded around, trying to see the bodies of the murderers.

“Get away from there,” Broussard ordered. “And put that plank back before you go.”

The morbidly curious group stood its ground, straining to see into the coffins.

Dispersed With Bricks

Broussard waved the official witnesses aside and picked up a handful of bricks. With the full force of his great frame, he began hurling them at the mob. The spectators quickly withdrew.

As deputies tried to replace the board, a hapless spectator struck his head into the opening and was pinned. Released, he scrambled away with Yelp of pain.

As the coffins were carried into the court house, the crowd began again to rip at the boards. Finally, they surged into the enclosure, pushing down the fence. One of them leaped onto the gallows and began cutting at the hangman’s ropes. Little pieces were thrown down to the mob, and the souvenir-seekers almost rioted in their efforts to claim a portion of the hemp.

In the court house, the black masks were removed from the faces of the Blanc brothers, and hundreds filed through to look at them.

About 4 p.m. the bodies were taken to the Catholic Church where Father Knapp read the burial service.

Then they were lowered into one large grave.

Just as night fell, the black clouds let down a soft, patterning rain.

On May 8, a minor mystery developed in connection with the lives of the Blanc brothers. That mystery has never been solved.

The Rev. Forge received a letter in French from the Rev. Theo Wucher, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Church in New York. Referring to the Blancs, the clergyman wrote:

“It is the mother of these boys that begs me to ask you if really her children were guilty, and in what circumstances and what feelings they died.”

Was the story the brothers told of their mother’s death a lie? And, if so, what other lies were told by the strange young Frenchmen who tried to lead the lives of frontier bandits in the peaceful bayou country of Southwest Louisiana?

Scott, LA