PEOPLE OF SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA

October 1, 1972 - January 31, 1973

On July 29 we left the river boat and waited at an inn at Plaquemine for a chance to board the bayou steamboat, which was undergoing repairs. We spent seven days there at 20 francs a day, besides 60 francs for transportation three leagues to where the steamboat was. Then we had to pay 35 francs apiece to travel for 24 hours on that boat. We had hoped to reach the landing in it, but the receding waters had left the place so Sty, the oxen could not be driven into it. So the boatmen decided to transfer us and our baggage to a small boat that cost us 50 francs to travel four leagues on another little bayou which, they said, would bring us to dry land. As the captain considered this a good plan, I thought it best to do what these men who knew the country advised, so we got into the canoe. The men at the oars were soon pretty tired, and from the second little bayou we passed into a third.

You can form some idea of the place we were in if you recall the descriptions of the waters surrounding Tartaros. The water was black and evil-smelling. As far as the eye could see, it flowed through the most dismal forests which stand in water all but one or two months of the year. The trees have only a little dark foliage high up near their tops, and this is almost hidden under the long gray beards that hang from every branch of these old trees. (This hanging moss is a parasitic plant; when dried and beaten, it becomes a kind of fiber from which the countryfolk make mattresses.) The further we advanced, the denser the forest became; but there was no dry land in sight, not even a sign of it. The day wore on. We had only a little bread to feed the eight people in the boat. I said to the guide, "I think you have lost your way. Would it not be more prudent to turn back and find a place where there is dry land, no matter where?" He replied that that was impossible, and his embarrassed manner convinced me that we were lost in the swamp. Just then we heard shouting. "Listen," he said, "they are calling from the bank to tell us they are waiting for us." I answered, "But notice, the shouts are coming from a very different direction."
At that same moment we saw coming rapidly from behind us a canoe filled with Indians, Negroes, and whites, mostly naked except for loin cloths, the most frightful looking men, yelling and whistling as they are represented when rushing to an assured victory. Our boatmen grew pale and not one of them would have been able to put up any resistance. My three young companions were terrified, though they never dreamed of dangers as great as I was picturing to myself. I told them to pray earnestly to God and to place themselves under the protection of the Blessed Virgin, and I immediately promised a novena of Masses in return for our safety. The canoe was already upon us. The savages stared at us as if petrified, then passed by, after having stopped some time close beside us. They eyed our water bottles, which they thought were filled with the liquor they are so crazy about. They seemed to have nothing to eat with them, yet they left us without asking for anything. I thought they had passed us by just to go ahead and wait for us at a place where they could attack us more easily, so I gave myself up to prayer, recommending my soul to God in preparation for death, but to my companions I only suggested prayer and patience. As the boatmen were exhausted with rowing, I feared my complaints might annoy them.

At last, just when I was positive we were lost in the swamp, dry land suddenly appeared, and we saw a cart drawn by four oxen waiting for us. It was like a resurrection—I really was not ready to die. I shall never forget the names of those animals: Flambeau, Rouseau, Guillard, Tout-blanc—the words rang through the woods every minute, for the driver had to urge them on continually over the muddy ground. We spent the night at an inn, where a few days before all this the travelers staying there had been robbed. But we were quite safe. At two o'clock in the morning we set out again in a cart and at nine o'clock (on August 7) reached the convent of the Sacred Heart.

"Philippine Duchesne"
Louise Callam, R.S.C.J.

The above passage is taken from a letter written by a missionary, Mother Philippine Duchesne, to her superior in France. Her route to Sainte-Coteau in 1822 from St. Louis was the shortest possible and took 18 days.