C'est Vrai:

Acadian prairies good for health, wealth

When mapmaker William Darby toured south Louisiana in 1816, he was impressed with our mild climate, rich soils, and the huge potential of the prairies of the Atakapas and Opelousas districts which included practically all of southeast Louisiana.

The Atakapas district included what is now Lafourche, St. Martin, Iberia, St. Mary and Vermilion parishes. The Opelousas district included present day St. Landry, Evangeline, Arapahoe, Cameron, Calcasieu, Allen, Jefferson, and Beauregard parishes.

On the prairies in this Opelousas district, Darby wrote, "You behold these vast horrid of cattle which afford subsistence to the natives, and which furnish the city of New Orleans. It is certainly one of the most agreeable views in nature, to behold from a boat of elevation thousands of horses and cows, of all sizes, scattered over the indescribable mead, interestingly wild confusion. The mind feels a glow of correspondingly innocent enjoyment, with those useful and insensible animals grazing in a sea of grass. If the active horsemens that guard them would keep their distances, fancy would transport us backwards into pastoral ages."

He called this "ground that must forever remain covered with grass" one of the "great meadows of America." "Allowing 10 animals to be produced annually from each five acres, he said, "more than two hundred and twenty thousand can be raised and transported from this prairie alone, at an average of $10 per head would exceed two million four hundred thousand dollars."

That was a lot of money in 1816, but he said it was no exaggeration. "This calculation will, I know, appear extravagant," Darby wrote, "but it is certainly not exaggerated beyond practicability; so much has nature done for a country where even sterile lands are the sources of wealth, ease, and human happiness. The time is not remote when the bunson and flour of the western states will be exported by the waggon, boat, and lines of Louisiana."

Just as important, according to Benjamin Franklin, who traveled through the backcountry a few years before Darby, "the prairies could bring health as well as wealth. Free from stagnant waters, with the exception of a few ponds, he wrote, "the atmosphere (on the prairies) is not poisoned by venomous vapors, and open to the breezes from the south. They enjoy a cool and refreshing temperature, while the rest of the state is suffering from the effects of a close and sultry air. Without fear of contamination, I may pronounce that to be by far the most healthy part of the state." Brokenschneider found a subtle beauty in the wide expanses of prairie.

"There is nothing wild or savage, yet the scenery is not tame or monotonous. There is sufficient variety and succession of scenes which may soothe the mind, or inspire it with lovely and elevating emotions."

As he rode across the prairie, he observed the beauty of the landscape and the potential of the land, which he believed would bring wealth and health to all who inhabited it.

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