River Water Once Flooded Land Near Bayou Lafourche

Barriers Lacked to Withstand Pressures

By CLAIRE PUNKEY

DONALDSONVILLE, La. — The high water situation along the Mississippi River at present carries the historic recollection of past eras when there was no barrier to withstand pressures of the mighty artery on Bayou Lafourche.

It was an every spring occurrence, the overflowing of river waters onto lands adjoining the bayou until man-made force through a dam separated the two for a half-century, letting a limited flow begin to enter the bayou two and a half decades ago through a pumping system.

This bayou stretching from the great river to the Gulf of Mexico is an interesting stream to those who live or travel along it on highways bordering both sides. Much has been written about it.

A booklet published last year by the U.S. Geological Survey in cooperation with the Louisiana Department of Public Works and composed by W. Harry Doyle Jr. on sediment transport in the bayou carries an historic item about its very early days.

REDUCED IN SIZE

Bayou Lafourche, it is recounted, "was formerly a main outlet of the Mississippi River but, by the 12th century, was reduced in size by aggradation to that of a minor distributary."

Plantations along the bayou were reported frequently flooded in the Mississippi's high stages, relieved only when in 1904 a temporary dam of 50 years' duration was placed across the bayou here.

As related, while the dam did away with the flooding it initiated a water problem for the populace dependent on this supply of fresh water. The tremendous bayou industry, that of sugar cane production, felt the water pinch too.

In the wake of the water cut-off, water lilies choked the bayou from bank to bank. Idle it became stagnant, and in those days prior to pollution concern

it was a prime area of that unwelcome situation.

SIPHON OR PUMP

Attempts to siphon or pump water into the bayou fell short of the objective, and the pumping from the river carried considerable sediment into the upper bayou.

Cancienne Canal in Assumption Parish was built from Lake Verret to Bayou Lafourche in a move to obtain fresh water from the lake and was partly successful when the lake was at a high stage.

"The stage of Lake Verret was influenced by the Atchafalaya River, and the river's influence ended when the East Atchafalaya basin protection levee was constructed in 1939," Doyle wrote.

It was only in 1955, with construction of the Walter Leman Pumping Station on the Mississippivey where that fresh water again in volume entered Bayou Lafourche.

LONG-GONE RIVER

An account in a published survey of Assumption Parish's resources and facilities states in relation to the stream's early days that the area was a delta for a long-gone river.

Geologists are certain, reads the account, "that the present Lafourche Valley was once the delta of a mighty prehistoric river which laid down its alluvial in bygone ages." This valley was first explored by Europeans in 1699 by Bienville and he reported inhabitants of the Chitimaches, Washas and Cha-waschas tribes.

The flow of the bayou water is southeasterly from here over a course of more than 100 miles to empty itself into the Gulf of Mexico. Lining its banks is variety of vegetation, including willow trees.

ABOVE SEA LEVEL

The assumption account notes that the bayou valley extends on either side of the valley miles and is well above sea level, differing "from most river valleys because it is not bounded by the usual uplands and hills, but by deep swamps."

"It is said that these swamps on either side of the valley "provide complete protection from floods on the Mississippi or Atchafalaya River," and that these swamp lands also tended to isolate the bayou from the rest of Louisiana for a long time because of highway construction costs.

The bayou has been used for pleasure and profit with excursion boats transporting people bent on fun, and with steamboats taking products to market and delivering others at bayou stops. It has been used, it is said, by adventurers, such as Lafitte, by artists who wished to capture on canvas the luscious countryside, by ever so many who caught the romance of the waters that for centuries have placidly been flowing in their quiet way along the changing scene of civilization.

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