Little towns get deserved credit in artist’s ‘Louisiana Proud’ book

By DOTTYBAGBEY

Was Amite named for the Choctaw word for “Red Ant?”

Did Captain Haas give his daughter a real or a mechanical monkey for which theories are that it came from the French word friendship (amitié) or from Sagamite, the word for a staple corn dish native to the Indians in the area.

Was Amite named for the Choctaw word Himmita or selected their word, “Red Ant” which symbolized threat among Choctaw people,” he said. “Some local tradition recalls this as a place to meet and others referred to the small community as a-mite of a place.”

One of Smith’s favorite stories concerns the routing of a railroad through one town and the naming of the community.

“In the 1850s, Richmond was the parish seat of Madison Parish and the natural selection for the train route, he wrote. “Important reasons, indeed, but not as important as the lady to the north whose charms enchanted the railroad engineer. It was he who routed the Vicksburg, Shreveport and Mississippi tracks through her land. And it was he who, after the tracks were laid, suffered when she switched her affections to another.”

“The widow got her railroad and the engineer the right to name the town in honor of an old sweetheart in Georgia. To spite the widow he named it Tallulah.”

Jonesville had its own version of the Hatfields and the McCoys. According to Smith they were the Liddells and the Joneses who had a feud that lasted almost 20 years.

As the drawings were developed, some were grouped into poster formats and used as promotional items by banks and chambers of commerce in Louisiana. Seventeen posters were produced, so many people around the state were familiar with the work of Smith before the book was published. He can remember the layout of many of the towns he visited though many people would get them all confused in their minds because of their similarity.

When he had collected large stacks of drawings he decided to start researching the towns. He gathered his information on a computer and it was stored on floppy discs.

Many of the buildings photographed by Smith have been torn down; his collection will no doubt be even more valuable in the future as more of the old structures disappear. His father, Andrew M. Smith Sr., developed all of the film, printing thousands of photographs. The book is dedicated to both his father and his mother, Audrey. Selecting from the bulk of information required some thought. The naming of some towns was unclear.

Take Amite for instance. “Was it named for the nearby river?” he wrote. Other theories are that it came from the French word friendship (amitié) or from Sagamite, the word for a staple corn dish native to the Indians in the area.

People remember buildings for sentimental reasons. “That movie, that’s where I met my wife” or “The doctor of the town lived there and he delivered our son.”

Smith gave up on trying to name buildings when he would regularly hear things like, “that’s the Duhon Building, no the Broussard Building.” There were often disagreements about names.

“The book is for the people in the town,” he said. He did take poetic license with some history. He told why the towns were there; who the first settlers were, how the towns were named and other things that make each unique.