The Acadians in Louisiana Today

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We have come from Acadian Louisiana to do honor to the distinguished poet of Cambridge on the centennial of the writing of the beautiful poem, "Evangeline."

In that Eden of Louisiana where dwell the sons and daughters of the Acadian exiles, the name of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow has become an established part of their most cherished heritage.

This chronicler of the wanderings of their fathers after their deportation from Nova Scotia until they reached a haven among their kith and kin in French Louisiana has been adopted by them as not only their favorite poet, but also one of their greatest historians.

We are here representing the Acadians, as well as all other citizens of Louisiana, to pay homage to a great American writer and to extend an invitation to you who love the poet and his creation, "Evangeline," to visit Louisiana in order that you may see how faithfully he recorded that lovely land and those who live there.

I hope that each one of you will be privileged to visit the Acadians in Louisiana. I know that you would make every effort to come to their land if I had the words today to describe properly the beauty and charm of my native state. I am sure that if you made such a visit you would re-
alize that the Acadian wanderers have now been amply rewarded for the trials of their deportation and the long journey southward with all of the hardships which they endured.

Nearly 200 years have elapsed since the Acadians came to Louisiana and 100 years have now passed since the distinguished poet of Cambridge made these wanderers and their way of life familiar to all men. Yet today the descendants of that group live in Southwest Louisiana much the same as their fathers did in Nova Scotia, adhering still to many of the old customs and traditions and holding to their quaint language.

Today is harvest time in the fertile fields along the bayous and among the prairies of Southwest Louisiana. If you were to ride along one of the highways in the bayou country tonight, you would smell the sweet odor of freshly cut sugar cane and in countless factories you would see the lights gleam as the cane is crushed and its juice boiled to make sugar.

There are a few of the primitive syrup mills left in which horse-drawn crushers are used, but the greater part of the cane is processed in modern sugar factories which have equipment that costs in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some of the plants are owned by outside interests, but more and more they are being owned and operated by the Acadian farmers themselves and financed through the bank for cooperatives.

In the western part of the Acadian country where grazed great herds of cattle during the early days of Basil, the blacksmith, and his fellow Acadians, there today thrives the valuable Louisiana rice crop. While the cane crop was developed altogether by the French in the alluvial regions, the rice crop was first grown commercially about 1884 on the prairies of Southwest Louisiana by emigrants from the midwest.

At first the Acadians resented the breaking up of their grazing land, but today these same Acadians have become the leaders in rice growing, and in the rice territory many persons who bear the Anglo-Saxon names of the Yankee emigrants of 60 years ago are as Acadian as the natives.

Where women are as fair as Longfellow describes that Acadian maiden of 17 summers, and where the men are well-favored, gentle and kind, it is impossible for a staid Yankee farmer, whether he be of English, Scotch or Irish stock, to rear his children in the Acadian section and not have grandchildren that are true Acadians.

The Acadian girl is not only fair to look upon and sweet to be around, but is also superior as a wife and as a mother. However gay during girlhood, she becomes at marriage the most decorous of wives, with her entire attention centered upon her home and family.

In the land of the Acadians, big families are still in vogue, and what real happiness and joy is to be found in the Acadian home where, with few exceptions, the children are like stairs in a great staircase, one following right after the other.
Holidays and feast days, which are numerous, are times of family reunions and rejoicing, and how these fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts and even distant cousins love one another and with what joy they gather around the festive board on such gala occasions.

There are few drunkards among the Acadians, but wine is an integral part of all such holiday feasts. The Acadian does not gulp his liquor as the Anglo-Saxon for the effect, but sips and laughs and gaily chats with his kinsmen and his friends, one small glass lasting for an hour or more of such festivities.

The wine for merry occasions may be purchased, but in many cases it is made in the home. Blackberries, the flower of the elderberries, dewberries, and many other native fruits are used for this purpose. A favorite drink for winter is cherry bounce, which is made by soaking the small native wild cherry in sugar, and later thinning this thick syrup with bourbon.

The Acadian, like all people of French descent, is a connoisseur of good food and tends to be a rather heavy meat eater. The Acadian woman, however, is very thrifty and able to make much from little. During the winter the main dish may be a heavy soup which can be made from a soup bone or a small piece of a cheap cut of meat with a so-called soup bunch consisting of only a carrot, onion or leek, and a few leaves of some green vegetable.

On feast days, mutton, pork, beef, chicken, goose or duck may be the main dish. In some of the more prosperous homes three or more kinds of meat may be served at one meal. On Friday and fast days shrimp, fish, both fresh water and salt, crabs, and oysters form the source of the main dish.

These fish dishes, delicately flavored, as only an Acadian cook can season, with bay leaves, garlic, and the different types of onion and pepper which form an integral part of every Acadian pantry, will compare favorably with the cooking of any of the world's finest cooks.

The Acadian men are usually as skillful cooks as the women and enjoy nothing so much as preparing their specialties over a camp fire. One who has not enjoyed a Good Friday fish dinner prepared and served by an Acadian man along one of the numerous bayous of French Louisiana has missed the finest in the way of food.

The dish may be courtboullion, a fish soup prepared with a roux of flour and water gravy as its base, or the more sophisticated bouillabaisse in which special cuts of fish are prepared and placed in a cast iron vessel, together with a layer of green pepper, another of fish, a third perhaps of tomatoes, and so on until the pot is filled. This is then covered and placed upon a fire of coals where the contents are cooked for hours in their own juices. It is delightful to sit on a sward of green clover in early spring and smell the delicate odor while the pot is boiling for some two
or three hours. One can enjoy no finer meal than a dish of bouillabaisse, with a crusty loaf of French bread toasted brown and a glass of red wine, and even though the Acadian who serves it may never have been out of his native parish of St. Martin or Vermilion, he has enjoyed a way of life that few others know.

While the Acadian still speaks the French language, there is in his heart no divided allegiance. He is a citizen of the United States, and, as I told countless FBI investigators during the last war who were looking into the loyalty of men being considered for strategic positions, "When a man has an Acadian name, there is no need of further investigation. Without exception an Acadian loves this country devotedly and will give of his all to preserve it."

The Acadians are very proud that their sons have taken part in every war in which this nation has participated. In 1779 their men went with the young Spanish General Galvez against the English in what was then West Florida, and thus weakened what might have been a successful British attack from the south upon the armies of the colonies.

In 1812-15 with Louisianians of all races and creeds, they remained loyal to their new country and aided Jackson in repelling the mighty British invasion from the Gulf. In 1846 Louisiana was, of course, the spearhead in the fight against Mexico, and in the ranks of the lost cause there were no more gallant soldiers than the Louisiana Acadians.

I like to tell my students—youths named Arceneaux, Broussard, Breaux, Mouton, Landry, Martin, LeBlanc and Hebert—of the great tribute paid to the courage of their fathers by Stonewall Jackson. These Acadians were members of the brigade commanded by General Dick Taylor, son of President Zachary Taylor. Dick grew up on a Louisiana plantation and knew and liked the Acadians as few outsiders ever have. For Taylor, the Acadian soldier would fight to his utmost.

At the time Taylor reported to Jackson just before one of the early engagements of the Civil War, it is related that his soldiers began playing on mouth organs and dancing with one another. When Taylor spoke to Jackson, the dour old Presbyterian remarked concerning his lack of confidence in men who would be gay on the eve of battle.

Taylor replied, "General, those are Louisiana Frenchmen. They and their fathers have made love to the women and fought the men all over the world. Please reserve your judgment of them until you have seen them in action." Surely enough, after the battle was over, Jackson called Taylor in to his headquarters and told him that, although he had seen brave soldiers, never had he seen men display such courage under fire as had those Louisiana Frenchmen.

The two World Wars were no exception to this rule of Acadian bravery. An Acadian, a coun-
try doctor, Claude Martin of Welsh, was the most decorated Louisianian during World War I. An Acadian from St. Martinville, Brig. Gen. Robert Maraist, was one of the two American commissioners at the surrender of the African corps during the last war. Later General Maraist commanded the 69th Division in France.

A Broussard from Breaux Bridge was the executive officer who was given much credit for the survival of the cruiser Houston when that ship was so badly damaged during one of the early Pacific naval battles. Jefferson DeBlanc, a brave young St. Martinville Acadian, who served as a marine aviator, had the Congressional Medal pinned on him by the President of the United States. St. Martin parish claims the honor of having more of her sons decorated in this last war than any other parish in Louisiana.

As far as loyalty to France, today there is only a cherished old memory of the connection that once existed with that nation. The severest criticism of France that I have ever heard was from the Acadian boys who were in that country either during 1917-18 or at the time of the last war. Their comparison of the people of France with those of the Louisiana French of today was stringent.

The description of the Acadian would not be complete without touching upon his contribution as a citizen. I do not wish to leave the impression that I am here to laud the Acadians and to paint them as being perfect. There are, as in all groups—men with varying degrees of morality, honesty, and idealism.

In Louisiana, however, as a group the Acadians are an influence for good. Where people have not been educated, where ignorance is still too prevalent, especially in the older generation, demagogues are prone to rule. However, the average Acadian is a man of high ideals and, when properly informed, will choose the way of right and honor.

If one were to list the leaders of the state who have been the most honorable in their public service, men who have had integrity to stand for right and the courage to carry out their convictions, one would find the names of the Acadian leaders in the forefront.

Originally the Acadians all settled on farms which they laid out along the bayous, notably those of the Teche, Lafourche and Vermilion. Later, as they increased in numbers, they pushed westward to the boundless Louisiana prairies, which they first used as meadows for grazing herds of cattle, then later as fields for the cultivation of rice.

Families of ten and twelve and even more children, however, soon made it necessary for other means of livelihood to be sought. Today Acadians are trappers of muskrat, miners of salt, pickers of the gray Spanish moss, trawlers for shrimp and workers in all the industries and commercial undertakings of their native state.

Literally thousands of Acadians have trekked
on to the new industrial cities of east Texas, and in Beaumont, Port Arthur, Port Neches, Texas City and Houston these people comprise a large percentage of the industrial workers. The telephone directories of those cities now look like a replica of one of the Acadian cities, Lafayette, Opelousas, New Iberia or St. Martinville.

The poet's description of the promised land sought by the wanderers as one where under the feet is a garden of flowers is literally true in Acadian Louisiana. There is no other place where every month of the year there is a greater profusion of flowers.

This is especially true of the winter months, which in Nova Scotia are bleak and cold, but in this Acadia are the season when the lovely camellias and azaleas are at the height of their bloom. During February and March one may stand in the second story window on the campus of the college at Lafayette and look out over a veritable sea of azaleas, with here and there an island of Pink Perfection or Governor Mouton Camellias. Forming a background for all of this bright color is the dark green of the live oak, a tree which has become symbolic of the Acadian section of Louisiana. The great masses of crepe myrtle which bloom during the late summer are just as lovely, their pink, red, and melon colors being more delicate than those of the winter blooming camellias and azaleas. The most perfect flower of that Eden of Louisiana, however, is the wild Iris, which grows in profusion along every ditch bank and all over the marshes during spring.

This flower is more like an orchid than is any other blossom and is today being bred to grow as a cultivated plant.

The Acadian has been deeply influenced by all of this natural beauty which surrounds him, and in the yard of every home, humble or otherwise, there are always flowers blooming—camellias, azaleas, and many others in their season.

In Lafayette each January hundreds of Acadians gather to pay homage to the lovely camellia in a pageant which is presented annually at the college. Acadian beauties, decked in the lovely blooms which the Jesuit Father Kamel brought from the Orient long ago, attract tourists from many states.

These visitors are amply repaid by the beauty of the pageant and the exhibits of the hundreds of varieties of camellias of every hue and color, every size and shape, displayed in the camellia show which is held at the same time.

Later the State Iris Society, a small but enthusiastic group, holds its show, and in Louisiana it is accepted as a matter of course that such shows and festivals are always held in the Acadian section of the state.

It has been my good fortune to serve as a teacher for 28* years in the state college which is located in the Acadian section of Louisiana. I have come to know and respect and love the Acadian citizen of my state. A large majority of the students of that college, which today has an en-

* Now 34 years.
enrollment of 3,500, are descendants of the Acadian exiles.

On that beautiful Louisiana campus dotted with live oaks, pines, camellias, and azaleas one may occasionally hear the patois as it was spoken in far-off Nova Scotia, and there abides still among these children the gracious courtesy and genuine friendliness of old Acadia. On that campus everyone speaks to everyone else when passing and strangers coming there for the first time are impressed with the friendliness and graciousness of the people.

You will be interested to know that this college is the direct result of the vision and leadership of an Acadian leader, Robert Martin of St. Martinville. Mr. Martin, a successful lawyer, sugar planter, and banker, in his only term of office as an elected official secured the appropriations with which to found this school for his people. Until his death in 1928, he served as an active member of the board which controls the institution.

The growth and development of the college founded by Robert Martin mirrors to a great extent the development which has taken place among the Acadian people during the past half century. When the college opened its doors for the first time on September 18, 1901, admission was based upon completion of the second grade. Even then there was difficulty in securing enough students to make it worthwhile to keep the school open.

Fortunately for the college a brilliant young scholar, Edwin Lewis Stephens, was selected to be its president. Dr. Stephens was a member of an old Louisiana Anglo-Saxon family, and he was aware of the many good qualities of the Acadian people and immediately charted an upward path for this school over whose destiny he was to preside for thirty-eight years. It had been Robert Martin's idea originally to confine the efforts of the school to vocational or practical studies, but as time passed Edwin Lewis Stephens convinced him that education of the hands alone was not enough and that regardless of vocation or profession a thorough basic education is an essential to success in all fields of endeavor.

Today the college which was guided for so many years by Edwin Lewis Stephens with the support of its founder, Robert Martin, adheres to the course which they marked out so well. Although the school is now comprised of four distinct colleges or divisions, namely agriculture, education, engineering, and liberal arts, the basic subjects of English, mathematics, history, and other liberal arts courses still form the most important part of the curriculum and the selection of able teachers in those departments is looked upon as the most important phase of the college administration.

When the Acadian leader, Robert Martin, made a fight in the Louisiana legislature for a school to serve his people, there was not a public institution of learning worthy of the name in all of Acadian Louisiana. Today within 30 miles of the school now has six colleges; new ones are commerce and nursing.
Lafayette in any direction one may take there are consolidated standard public schools housed in modern brick plants; enrollments of above a thousand students are a common occurrence in that thickly populated section of the state.

I realize that it is daring for one from the deep South to make claims for educational progress in this very center of learning, but Hughes and Lancelot in their recent publication *Education, America's Magic* aver that some states have made great advances in education in recent years compared with what they had made a few decades ago. They cite Kansas, Wisconsin, and Louisiana as examples.

Much of the progress that Louisiana is making today is being accomplished within the Acadian territory, where not only the public schools and colleges are working earnestly to overcome ignorance, but where there are many efficient church schools, especially those of the Catholic faith. Catholicism is the religion of the Acadians.

During his early days in Louisiana the Acadian youth was taught by French teachers, textbooks in French being used. All books and newspapers of the people too, were in that same language. By the time of the Civil War, however, the ties with the mother country had been severed to such an extent that it was impossible to secure the French publications. There was a long period from about 1861 to the beginning of the present century when education of any kind was lacking in the South.

Even after the Anglo-Saxon peoples had begun to recover from the poverty and ignorance of the post civil war period, Southern Louisiana made little or no effort to develop public education. Today, however, that section is making greater progress educationally than is any other part of the State. A recent study made by the College of Education of Southwestern showed that in the Acadian parishes high-school enrollment and graduation have increased seven times more than high-school enrollment and graduation have increased for the State as a whole.

Those of us who are in educational work realize that much, much more progress is needed, but if one of you had visited Acadian Louisiana twenty-five years ago and had not returned until today I believe that you too would be greatly impressed.

Those of us who are responsible for the training of the Acadians are eager for them to have as excellent an opportunity for education as the children of any section. We do not, however, feel that standardization of these people into an accepted mold for Americans is good either for them or for the nation.

There are those of us who are working through the schools, through the colleges, and through civic clubs to retain the beautiful Acadian language and the delightful Acadian customs. We feel that it would be a tragedy indeed to allow Heberts to become Herberts, LeBlancs to become Leblanks, or Sonniers, Swinneys. We know that
in Acadian Louisiana exists a basic culture and patriotism which is today found in too few places and is genuinely needed in our nation.

If you stood today on one of the highways or roads in lovely Southern Louisiana you would see hundreds and hundreds of the descendants of the Acadian wanderers climbing into the busses which transport them to modern high schools. If you could see those bright-eyed Acadian boys, those countless maidens, many with eyes black as the berry that grows on the thorn by the wayside, I am sure you would agree with me that this nation is fortunate indeed to have such fine children among its future citizens.