

Rayne, Louisiana

The Frog Capital of the World

Shortly after the Civil War, French immigrant Monsieur Jules Pouppe established a small mercantile store adjacent to the stagecoach line "exchange station" on the long-established Old Spanish Trail (OST) which trekked westward from New Orleans across the great prairie of SW Louisiana into Texas.

In the ensuing years, a handful of other "entrepreneurs" gathered near the community first called "Poupeville" in honor of the first resident.

Around 1880, word reached Poupeville that the Louisiana Western Railroad Company was surveying a line -- a mile or so north of the prairie settlement -- to connect New Orleans to the Sabine crossing into Texas, ultimately to fulfill the long-held American dream of a transcontinental rail line to California across the southern section of the nation.

With good business acumen, railroad medical doctor William Cunningham purchased the acreage "at the crossing" of the proposed rail line and the OST -- approximately a mile north of Poupeville.

Sensing the future, the merchants of Poupeville bought "lots" from Dr. Cunningham's drawn plat, his "Plan of Rayne", -- and hauled their "business houses" on log rollers with teams of oxen to adjoin the rail line, which proffered greater opportunity. In 1883, the new rail community, named Rayne after a railroad engineer, was officially incorporated by act of the Louisiana Legislature.

And -- to Rayne, the only organized community west of Vermilionville, would soon arrive any number of other young entrepreneurs, all of whom saw the same promise that Dr. Cunningham had envisioned from the vast natural resources of the surrounding virgin prairie.

Some even came "accidentally" as it was said, like Mervine Kahn, who on his way to Texas, disembarked the train to witness the unusual sight of oxen-drawn "business houses" being aligned along the tracks. Mervine Kahn would stay in Rayne in 1884 to become one of the leading financiers and promoters of SW Louisiana -- to "grow" his \$3,000 investment into the acknowledged premier mercantile house between New Orleans and Houston.

From New Orleans came Emile Daboval, Sr. -- married into the DeLesseps family of Panama Canal fame -- to build the first rice mill in the newly created Acadia Parish, carved from "Imperial" St. Landry Parish in 1886 and named by Jesuit Father Joseph Anthonioz in honor of the French-Canadian emigrants from Nova Scotia.

The same Father Anthonioz, from the Grand Coteau mission near Opelousas, had earlier "settled a dispute" between the Castille and Poupeville factions by building the first Catholic Church in 1872 on a "rise" in the prairie between the two communities. By 1880, the church -- with its "Poupeville"-inscribed bell, found itself on the eastern outskirts of the sprouting rail town.

Another arrival in Rayne -- Mattias Arenas, originally from Cuba -- bought the whole of Block No. 9 from Dr. Cunningham's "Plan of Rayne" to grant to Father Anthonioz for the purpose "of building a church" in Rayne. The "good priest" already had a church building -- but it was "out on the prairie."

So -- the log-rolling and ox-hauling was repeated -- this time to draw a church onto the Adams Avenue and Anding Street corner of Block No. 9. And, when -- somehow or other -- the grave sites were disinterred from the original "rise" on the prairie onto cemetery adjacent to the new church setting in Rayne -- the above-ground tombs were laid facing the north, in contradiction to the tradition of facing eastward toward the rising "resurrected" sun -- an oddity to be recognized in "Ripley's Believe It or Not" and to be viewed by thousands of visitors through the years.

But, it would be Dr. Cunningham's widow, Mrs. Mary Robertson Cunningham, who donated a whole block of her own from the "Plan of Rayne" upon which to build, in 1882, the first public school in Rayne. And more, Mrs. Cunningham presented yet another "block" to the Centenary Methodist Church. And, immediate to all that was the building of the Starlight Baptist Church by Reverend Henry C. Roy for the African-American congregation.

Incorporated by an Act of the Louisiana State Legislature, Rayne first appeared in the Federal Census of 1890 with a population of 569, its first mayor being the former Pouppeville merchant, J. D. Bernard. By 1900, Rayne had nearly doubled its size, reaching a total of 1,007 residents. By then, one of Rayne's most dynamic personalities, Druggist-Mayor Olivier Broussard -- and descendant of the intrepid French-Acadian leader "Beausoleil" Broussard -- was "bringing electricity and water" to Rayne households, while equally busy "fining" Southern Pacific engineers for "driving through Rayne at the dangerous rate of eight miles per hour."

By then -- in fact, by 1887 -- reporters from the New Orleans Picayune were in Rayne observing the "dynamism of the new town on the open prairie."

Rayne has a commodious depot, situated in the centre of town Ascending the steps of the platform, (we) witnessed such bustle and confusion as is only equal by the French Market in New Orleans on Saturday mornings. Draymen were running here and there looking for freight consigned to their respective employers . . . or unloading goods . . . to be shipped to different points east and west.

And, after all that -- the writers from New Orleans added they had "engaged the most remarkable sight of all."

*One party, who is a very heavy shipper, comes from a distance of 25 miles south of here . . . **with bullfrogs** . . . which we suppose on arrival gladdened the hearts of worthy connoisseurs.*

And -- with that -- was the news first published about what **Donat Pucheu** was doing in the back rooms of his *Rayne Drop Inn* -- at the SE corner of the Depot Square.

By 1887 -- Donat Pucheu had emigrated from Bordeaux, France -- married and had lived long enough in Washington and SW Louisiana to understand that this relatively undeveloped part of the country was a "natural paradise" -- with its vast virgin prairie, bayous, coulees, swamps, and marshes -- "stocked" with wild game -- duck, quail, etc. -and **frogs!**

And the Frenchman was cosmopolitan enough to know that "frog legs" were considered a delicacy -- both in his home country and in places like New Orleans and beyond. With a general interest in nature's produce, Donat Pucheu "zeroed in on frogs."

In the back room of the Rayne Drop Inn (the Pucheu family lived upstairs, above the saloon), Donat Pucheu initiated the business of shipping frogs from Rayne in 1887.

He and his workers "prepared" the frogs -- and "iced down" the first shipment of frog legs to New Orleans, some of which were simply "bartered" for the finer wines and cheeses he so enjoyed from the better restaurants of the Crescent City. The hunt was on -- initiating a new industry -- and crediting Rayne with a distinct sobriquet -- "*Frog City.*"

By the turn of the 20th Century -- actually in 1899 -- competition arrived in the person of Jacques Weil, another young Frenchman who, with brothers Edmond and Gontran, established a general merchandise business across Polk Street from Donat Pucheu's

Rayne Drop Inn. There -- the Weils -- in a variety of business ventures -- rice, cotton, theaters -- and into "brokerage" of everything from hides to eggs -- and into **frogs** -- soon overshadowed Mr. Pucheu's pursuances.

But Donat Pucheu continued to operate his *Rayne Drop Inn* at a considerable profit, all the while adding to his reputation as a "*Bon Vivant*" - his evening dinners always well attended by guests

who were invariably “toasted” by “*le bon vin de Bordeaux.*” “*Water, said Donat Pucheu, “is to wash in!”*”

Just as the Weil brothers were coming into their “own” in Rayne – tragedy struck the Pucheu family. Rayne’s “great fire” of 1903 destroyed all of Block No. 1 in Rayne – restaurant, hardware store, livery stable – and more, the Pucheu *Rayne Drop Inn* – residence, saloon, and frog shipping business!

From this happening – Jacques Weil Enterprises would emerge as ***the frog industry shipper*** of Rayne. Indeed – of all of Mr. Weil's “doings” (rice, cotton, general merchandise), it would be the “*fat ouaouarons*” that not only tempted – in a widening circle – the palates of the connoisseurs, but also caught the imagination of the curious and the venturesome.

What had begun, almost as a “novelty” – now commandeered attention – and, with that, the local *Rayne Tribune* was happy to assist.

Then – there appeared the near-iconic photographs of early Rayne – duplicated over and over again – and, in later years, reproduced in part as an official *Frog Festival Poster* – and subsequently painted in Robert Dafford mural artwork on the wall of today's Koury's Jewelry Store -- for all to see, tourists welcomed!

The first, dated 1903, shows the scene of the dressing department of Jacques Weil Shippers, with Henri Blanc, Manager, and the workers filling a 50,000 frog order for Chicago. Pictured also are Jacques Weil, brother Edmond and Edmond's son, “*young Jacques.*”

The second photograph – undated, but taken several years later – depicts the shipment of “dressed frogs” in wooden casks, topped with ice – and “*soon figured in tons.*”

The Weil operation is seen awaiting a train's arrival. At least three workers arrange the barrels as the Weil brothers and managers pose in front.

At the peak of the “frog mania,” travelers on the Texas Western Railroad line disembarked in Rayne during brief “lay-overs” – to walk across the depot square to witness the wonders of a live frog pen — “ . . . where 15,000 frogs are kept in a pen for shipment to distant cities. Five men are kept busy day and night preparing ‘frog legs’ for the amateurs. As the frogs are butchered and skinned, the hides are thrown into barrels and sprinkled with salt, then sent to tanneries to be made into purses and other goods for women.”

And, in less than two decades – Jacques Weil, no doubt partly because of the curious nature of his trade, became a “*legend in his own time.*”

When the Weil enterprises suffered a financial setback after World War I, a young Louis Baer, who had survived the ice floes of the North Atlantic just hours before the Titanic disaster in 1912, briefly teamed with Lionel Babineaux to form the *Louisiana Frog Company* – one of the *Largest Shippers of Frogs in the World* at the corner of 702 S. Adams Avenue in Rayne. Their iconic sign is in the Bernard House Museum on the Boulevard.

There followed the “Golden Age” of the frog industry in Rayne -- as the Louisiana Frog Company expanded its reaches across SW Louisiana -- even, briefly, “*canning*” frog legs for sale and offering “mating frogs,” with which to start “frog farms.” Rayne’s “notoriety” as the “*Frog Capital of the World*” was enhanced when Ripley's *Believe it or Not* featured the Louisiana Frog Company in its editions.

Subsequently -- after WW II, the Rayne Lions Club sparked considerable interest in Rayne's frog industry by initiating what quickly grew into a major publicity coup -- the ‘Lions Club Frog Derby’ performed annually, for years, at the International Rice Festival in Crowley, Louisiana. The initial frog-jumping contests were reported live on Station WWL radio from New Orleans - and came to challenge the Calaveras County Frog Jumping Jubilee of California -- the two events swapping world-record jumps by its frogs -- which, of course, were “jockeyed” by young ladies. For years, Rayne and Calaveras County exchanged visits of both champion frogs and beauty queens.

At mid-century, Rayne's unique frog industry continued to attract wide attention. The nationally

syndicated cartoon, "*Strange As It May Seem*" put the community into its headlights:

Didja Know -- Rayne, La. -- The Frog Capital of the World -- is the only U. S. City with a carload rate on Frogs?

Foreign competition and changing technologies caused an erosion in the profitability of the frogging industry over the next 30 years.

Yet, still operating under the business name, *Jacques Weil Company,*" Wiltz Chatelain conducted a hugely *successful* concern, injecting biological specimen for medical research institutions, colleges, and schools -- everything imaginable from frogs, snakes, crayfish, grasshoppers, beetles, bugs -- and even a starfish or two. *Parenthetically* -- in 1967, Mr. Chatelain "*injected and preserved*" 390,000 grasshoppers alone for institutional sales.

That is not to say, however, that the community had lost "*interest*" in its sobriquet -- *The Frog Capital of the World.*" Though the industry was in some decline a somewhat magical moment occurred in 1970. Mrs. Myrta Fair Craig of the *Tribune* -- always alert to an opportunity to promote the community -- spotted a news release by NASA that the space agency was planning to launch an "*Orbiting Frog Otolith Spacecraft.*" Truth be told -- the only word Mrs. Craig saw was "*frog.*"

That was enough! What followed was a campaign to get Rayne frogs into space -- so well-conceived as to be worthy of a pre-launch sequence at NASA itself. NASA, concluded Mrs. Craig, "*desperately needed Rayne frogs.*"

Politicians from Washington to Baton Rouge came for the "send-off" of "*Pierre*" and "*Tee Nom*" -- the two Rayne frogs who *boldly went when no frog had gone before*" -- on November 9, 1970. Hey, all the major TV networks carried the story!

And more -- in late summer, 1973 all of Rayne, it seemed, caught "frog fever." The undisputed "Frog Capital of the World" would stage a festival to honor the industry that had given "identity" to Rayne -- in so many corners of the country, and beyond.

The Lions Club brought their charming "Frog Derby" back home to Rayne's festival platform -- to break Calaveras County's world-record jump, of course. An official Frog Festival song was written. Beauty queens came from everywhere. Dr. Lauren Post -- the Rayne native who had written "Cajun Sketches" -- came from San Diego University to renew old acquaintances. *The Grit* newspaper from Williamsport, Pennsylvania featured the event. And a "Grand Marshall" led the Grand Parade at the festival finale.

That would be the first of some forty festivals held to date. And, in time, the official caricature of the frog that represented Rayne as its "*Frogbassador*" was named "*Monsieur Jacques*" in an obvious tribute to the Weil- family founder of the frog industry of Rayne.

Today -- Rayne sits still "at the crossing" of the Old Spanish Trail and the Southern Pacific Railroad, -- astride intercontinental Interstate 10, the second-busiest thoroughfare in the nation.

And it has its distinction as the "Frog Capital of the World" reaffirmed by the thousands of guests (visitors to others) who enjoy the hospitality of the largest RV Park in Southwest Louisiana at the city's entrance, welcomed by the ten-foot statute of Monsieur Jacques, as they enter the community to visit a "live frog pond" at the Chamber offices, and to view the tens of murals that adorn the business houses in Louisiana's official "Mural City." And, no visit would be complete without a viewing of the hundreds of frog statuettes, all cleverly hand-painted and named, of course, which adorn the business district.

Friends are forever -- Come Back.

Compliments of Sidney Stutes