

Chapter Ten: The Movie at the Dixie as it Was

The previous chapter tried to see the premiere of Louisiana Story in the context of history and in the relevance it has to our own times. In doing so a few liberties were taken with the normal conventions for an historical narrative. There was no premiere at the Frank's. The premiere was held at the Dixie which in time became the Frank's Theater. It was not held in 1948 which is the official date of release but early in 1949. The two chapters are meant to illustrate also the problems with what I call folkloristic evidence. There is no doubt that people not old enough to be there who do have a memory -- in the folkloristic sense -- of the film remember it being at the Frank's in 1948. There are some who have better data and some worse. But such memories are not rendered entirely worthless. The building known as the Frank's today is indeed the spot and 1948 is the place to find the film on most lists arranged by year. This chapter seeks to look at the premiere of the film as it was viewed and understood at the time, also to provide a kind of plain and straightforward narrative history of the film as it was perceived although not in great detail nor exhaustively. It does not seek to apologize for the fact that it has been perceived through an evolving lens. It only seeks to balance that view with one more restricted to the known responses of people to the film at the time. It especially looks at the response of local journalists and the interviews they did with local people whose own words about the film have not appeared much in this text so far. This work of history is obviously more personal than most works of academic history and the people and places make up a framework of the writer's life. In addition, the time and delays involved in the production of the text give it a certain quality of intimacy that may not be ideal but cannot be avoided. My own experience with the *Abbeville Meridional* newspaper is very extensive -- I have been featured in it, read it and been employed by it on far too many occasions to discuss here. That is for the reader to bear in mind. Clearly, I think that a great deal of academic objectivity is brought to all the varied sources relied upon by this text and to the questions raised in pursuing its arguments and narrative. But the reader will have to evaluate that for him or herself.

The masthead under which the coverage appeared was different than that of today but similar and familiar as well. Today's masthead states that the paper is "The Voice of Vermilion Parish, The Most Cajun Place on Earth". In those days it merely said: "ABBEVILLE MERIDIONAL OLDEST CONTINUOUS BUSINESS IN VERMILION PARISH ABBEVILLE, LOUISIANA, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1949 LEADING NEWSPAPER OF VERMILION PARISH SINCE 1856 NO; 8 "

There were two articles on the front page in that issue but deeper inside was an extravagant full page pictorial spread that told readers it would be at the Dixie Theater from the next day, Sunday, February 20, 1949 to the following Thursday. The newspaper also had a regular advertisement for its films which showed too mainstream films playing as a double feature on Friday and Saturday which were its biggest money making days. That same advertisement did

however give the "Southern Premiere" of Louisiana Story bigger billing than either of the other two films. But in addition to being extravagant for such a spread in this particular paper it has the following telling lines on the side among others:|

Showing In The South A GEM! Abbeville has been chosen as the "Premiere City for this great film, LOUISIANA STORY, because it was filmed here and stars Vermilion Parish people. It's- film is the everyday story your friends and your relatives.

The pictorial spread shows review snippets from the *New York Times*, *Life Magazine* and other sources. The celebration of the film as everyday life is very telling. It is not clear if the writer of those lines had seen the film but it has some significance in any case. It was a Saturday issue and in Louisiana to be classified as a daily one need only publish five papers a week. That is what the *Meridional* has done for a while including at the time of this writing. Today there is no Saturday or Monday issue but in those days the Saturday issue came out regularly and this was one of those issues. There were at least two articles about the film on the first page and may have been a mention elsewhere that has escaped my research.

The first and more background oriented article begins; with a montage of photographs described as follows:

Filmed entirely in the marshes of Vermilion, Iberia and Lafayette parishes, "Louisiana Story" has as its stars Joseph Boudreaux of Cameron parish and Lionel LeBlanc of Abbeville. Scenes reproduced from the picture show Mr. LeBlanc, above, looking into the sky, Joseph talking with Frank Hardy, an oil worker, left, and fondling his pet raccoon, top left.

This little detail is significant because photo essays are expensive and time-consuming for small community papers and this would not be the last to be placed in the paper related to this film. This article goes on:

Louisiana Story's Lionel LeBlanc -- Abbeville's own movie star, came to our office Tuesday, sat down in our chair and told us how much he enjoyed making "Louisiana Story". "It's too bad we didn't meet 20 years ago," he quoted Producer-Director Robert Flaherty as telling him, "because we could have done great things together." LeBlanc, who is now 65 years old and . 'almost past the times when he could spend days and days bogging through the marsh country, says that, despite his age, he didn't find the filming of the story, too rigorous a job "Times have changed since I first went into the marshes. Then it 'was work to kill an alligator, but now my four sons, all of whom are trappers, can drive their boats with 'motor paddles' right up to where the 'gator is," the Louisiana Story actor remembers. "Then all they have to do is shoot him and drag him into the boat."*

The personal tone is typical perhaps of Southern rural newspapers and even small American newspapers but it is especially true of the Cajun rural community press. The story about how much harder life was when he was young than it is for the pampered trappers of the modern era

is also an old Cajun tradition which resonates no doubt among cowboys, loggers and lobstermen of other American rural ethnicities. The article continues to let the reader get to know more about this man lifted to the movie screens which Cajuns generally liked and admired.

LeBlanc killed his last alligator 10 years ago. He now handles E. A. McIlhenny's trapping ranch • and has been doing that work for 20 years. It was through Mr. McIlhenny that Mr. LeBlanc was discovered by the film producer. He reports that Mr. Flaherty asked the fur ranch owner where he could find a man who knew the marshes and who looked like and was a fur trapper, Abbeville's star, whose home is on Maude Avenue, remembers one bad experience during the filming of the movie.

In the days of the film Abbeville had racial segregation of housing. Today Maude Avenue is made up of some white families, some Vietnamese families and is largely an African- American (with the distinct cultural mix that still exists to a fading degree among African Americans in Acadiana) middle class neighborhood. In those days it was a neighborhood of the prosperous white working class. Nothing fancy but a good place to live from which a daughter or son might contend for a place in what economically based social strata existed in the parish not as an equal but above a few other neighborhoods in a town which did note such things. After this implied bit of social introduction and orientation as to who Lionel Leblanc is in the community, the Meridional gives a brief passage a chance to relate the worlds of trapping and movie-making as they coexist in this new moment of history. Here it is worth repeating the last half of the last sentence.

... Abbeville's star, whose home is on Maude Avenue, remembers one bad experience during the filming of the movie. He and a crew of others went out into the marshes on a "marsh buggy" which bogged down. LeBlanc and the crew had to walk several miles to get out of the swamp. Mr. LeBlanc smiles as he remembers that the producer, who is about 65, wanted to make the trip with them. With his knowledge of the danger in the swamp and the weaknesses of all man-made attempts to tame the swamps, he adds that "Mr. Flaherty might not have gotten out because you have to know how to 'walk the marshes' ".

Walking the marshes is no joke. Harnett T. Kane has a passage in his influential book in these projects about walking what I was raised to call *Flotant* and there so many risks they literally could fill a chapter very neatly. The marshes and swamps are beautiful and abundant but they offer more risks than a stranger can usually even properly imagine. Flaherty of course was no ordinary stranger but a man who had put new lands into the world's maps. Yet the trapper, who clearly liked Flaherty just fine knows the man was not ready for that environment in the time of preparation allowed in a shooting schedule. Trappers walk the marsh -- almost nobody else does. Native Americans rarely did and more as proof of manliness under grave risk than as a

livelihood. Hunters, fishermen, ranchers and oilmen may boast of having done so a few times now and then and they do so usually with a lot of bravado in the telling. But for the true trapper it is a matter of daily life and daily bread. The *Meridional* knows that many of the parish's young people of greater advantages would in many cases dream of being movie stars and they have catered to such interests in varied ways over decades. Therefore, they explore what the unlikely local hero of the glamorous industry has to say about life on film.

When asked if he intended continuing in the movies, Mr. LeBlanc said, an emphatic "no". He says that he will continue to trap however, in this, however, he also is a bit discouraged. "Trapping isn't as good now as it was. This season I have seen many go into the marshes and come out with their expenses on their backs." But, at 65, he has the right to 'hibernate' at his home on Maude Avenue, and bask in his glory. There aren't many who can become full-fledged movie stars after spending 64 years in the marshes of Louisiana.

There is a whole fabric of social cues in this brief article which cannot be spelled out without making too much of them but which the reader may be able to speculate upon after reading this text. The next article on the front page serves as an interesting framework and foundation for better understanding an earlier chapter about "Cajun Works". Remember that the film industry has become rooted in this small place of small enterprises and the newspaper coverage shows that this work was begun as people took every advantage they could of the possible opportunities to make the moviemakers feel connected and welcome in this place. The next article is about the premiere itself. It is reproduced in full below as it appeared.

Throngs Are Expected For Southern Premiere

The first premiere in the history of Abbeville will be held Sunday when "Louisiana Story," a film depicting the encroachment of modern industry over the fur trapper in his native marshes, opens here. State officials, representatives from nearby towns, stars of the film, representatives of the state press and a contingent from Life magazine

Robert Flaherty, producer and director, with his staff, will arrive by plane Friday and will remain through Sunday. Invitations have been extended to Governor Earl K. Long, the directors of various state departments, Mayor Delesseps Morrison, the mayors of Lafayette, New Iberia, and Crowley and to others. The film, which has been awarded several prizes for its excellence, was produced by Robert Flaherty under a grant from a major oil company. The veteran producer spent 14 months making it and maintained his headquarters at the Mettles home in Abbeville.

He picked the stars from the surrounding territory, Lionel LeBlanc, who lives on Maude avenue and is employed by E. A. McIlhenny, was selected to play the part of the father in the film. Joseph Boudreaux, a native of Cameron parish, was cast in the roll of the son. It is around him and his experiences with the members of the oil company crew that is the basis for the story. But the film is more than the story of the boy and the oil country—it is the story of the adventure and the intrigue of bayou swamps, the marshes. The film was shot in the natural surrounding and depicts the marshes as they are. The 'characters in the film are real, too. They are the trappers who have lived for generations on the bayous and have learned their ways of trapping the muskrat and mink from their fathers and grandfathers. Even the oil company men are taken from real life, many of them being brought Abbeville from the different locations at which they are now working. Joseph Boudreaux, Lionel Le Blanc, Mrs. Evelyn Bienvenu, and Frank Hardy are coming for the premiere. The Chamber of Commerce and Civic organisations, along with the Abbeville Women's Club, are planning to entertain Mr. Flaherty and the out-of-town visitors.. ,

The occasion is clearly anticipated as a major event in the small town. It is also true that not everyone is presumed to have been very closely following the production of the film prior to that point. Had the film been well covered in the Meridional prior to this front page coverage? The local paper certainly gives some indication of how the film crew were received.

Flaherty had received favorable press in the newspaper back in the 1930's for Elephant Boy made in India and the admiring reviewer also lauded the earlier Man of Aran when he praised this film. All of this preceded his coming to Abbeville or having any plans to do so for that matter. On Saturday July 12, 1947 the following piece appeared in the Meridional as reproduced below:

Film Production Unit Shoot 250,000 Feet Near Abbeville

Shooting schedules of "Louisiana Boy", a feature motion picture with a southwestern Louisiana background, were completed this week and the company of Robert Flaherty Productions from New York' were preparing to head north again to complete technical finishing afj the 250,-000 feet of film made here. Flaherty, discoverer of Sabu; the Indian youngster who rose to stardom in "Elephant Boy" and other films, stated that he had spent approximately three months looking for a native Acadian' boy to use as a star in the production, finally finding J. C. Boudreaux of Cameron, Louisiana on a lucky hunch by Mrs. Flaherty. Other native characters were found to fill supporting roles. Including Lionel. LeBlanc of Abbeville, well known trapper and fisherman of Vermilion Parish, where most of the scenes were laid. The film depicts the life of a 'youngster of the Louisiana , marshes, and the change brought when the barge derricks of "oil survey crews begin to probe into the remote fastnesses of the swamp. The film shows many scenes of the lonely grandeur of the marshlands,

and records the sounds of its amphibious Wildlife. Flaherty said that title 'Louisiana Boy' was purely a working title, and that the film would probably appear under another name when released sometime in November 1947.

There may have been a bit more coverage of the filming process but not so very much more. The film was not as big of an event as the premiere. Some films had been made in part in the region but a film premiere was unheard of and was received with a very warm welcome. The Saturday, February 26, 1949 running mostly in ENGLISH had a full page pictorial coverage of the premiere. It ran under the banner:

SATURDAY FEBRUARY 26, 1949 THE ABBEVILLE MERIDIONAL as usual and then in French ***Vien ici ~~ mon Petit Salo-pri*** . The words loosely indicate that a call had come out to display Acadian heritage and that the people had responded. The chief manifestation was the much photographed buggy parade. The central brief article in this pictorial was as is reproduced below:

They 'hooked ole Dobbin to the shay' last week and came to Abbeville to stage the now famous "Buggy Parade" to the Dixie Theater for the Southern Premiere of the movie "Louisiana Story." Mr. and Mrs. Ulysse Hebert came in from Maurice in their buggy to lead the parade. They followed behind Police Officer Howard Guidry and Happy Flats the hillbilly singer, and a member of his band. Representatives from Life Magazine, from Time Magazine, from Harper's Brothers Publishing company, and many local photographers started taking pictures and they couldn't stop. When the buggies were unloaded and the crowd had filed into the theater, there had been more pictures taken in Abbeville than in any other one day in History. Uncle Nick Broussard of Erath, who traveled "many a mile in a buggy, arrived just in time to join the parade as it was going into it's last lap. Co-chairmen of the parade were Corbette LeBlanc and Ernest Trahan of Maurice.

The future Buggy parades of Church Point may have owed something to this precedent and the totality of the event was clearly in the realm that has earned Cajuns a reputation for exuberant celebration among many Americans. However, to a Cajun there are other aspects to this story than mere exhilaration and the coming together in this way seems suitable to the event. Nonetheless, it was clearly a big event that would long be remembered in the town.

What could be gleaned from the local press about the way the film itself was remembered and appreciated as a final complete work viewed and remembered? Here again it is useful to work through the limited text that exists in its complete totality. The March 5, 1949 article incorrectly names Frances Parkinson Keyes as Evelyn and has a few other problems typical of the overworked and understaffed quality of small papers. For while big city papers may have more pressure they also have more resources and so careless errors are ferreted out that a local rural writer carries into eternity on every

piece even when they are not added in by other careless errors. The errors are as much the result of cares in many cases as they are of carelessness.

LOUISIANA STORY—A REVIEW Premiere Film Uses New Technique To Tell Story Of State Marshes

By Gene Yoes, Jr.

"Louisiana Story", the great documentary film about the marshes ' of Louisiana and of Vermilion parish has come and gone. Behind it, it leaves some who did not appreciate the picture But the vast majority of those who saw the stirring film acclaim it as magnificent "Louisiana Story" is the recital of ' the life of an Acadian fur trapper's son—told through the all-seeing eyes of a camera It is a true to life story, a story that is happening every day in the marshes at our back door It shows the fur trapper's son, played by young Boudreaux, as a child of nature almost untouched by the synthetic mechanized world we live in.

But, as the story develops, we see this child's playground, the marshes, invaded by an oil exploration crew. We see the ordinary calm of his life, at first, disturbed, later altered, by the man-made machinery.' Then, the oil company leaves. Left behind is a child who feels empty because of its departure!, but a child who very easily slips back into his normal, everyday way of life. Two of the most magnificent sequences in the film were presented without the use of words—a technique that is new, and many times as powerful as the shopworn phrases of Hollywood. After the oil well had "blown out" with dangerous underground gas and. water, the crew was waiting! for orders to move to another location The child, in his desire to keep his newly found friends from leaving, poured the contents of his evil-spirit-chasing-salt into the well to remove the "hex" that was causing the well to "blow out". This dramatically demonstrated the change in the child, his acceptance of this new mode of life. In the other sequence, the child was fondling his new rifle that his father had bought in the city. His pet raccoon, which he thought had been devoured by the alligator, returned. The child dropped his new rifle, and went to his coon. "Told" without the use of dialogue, this sequence powerfully shows the child as he rejects the mechanized world, the artificial world created by machinery, and returns to his native environment, to his native way of living. Some have said that the film gives a "bad impression" of this area of Louisiana, that it presents this area as a large swamp. But, we think that they may have missed the point of the story. At the beginning of the film, it is implicitly stated that the movie was made in one particular locale, Bayou Petit Anse.

It is true that the people of the Northern part of the United States may believe that all of Louisiana is a swamp. "Louisiana Story" will not change their opinion—no amount of films or stories can change them. But, after seeing this film, we are

sure that the occupant of a penthouse on the richest ground in New York would gladly exchange his property for the property of John La-tour or any property in the marshes of Louisiana that are capable of spouting black, liquid gold. Robert Flaherty's product was not an ordinary film—it was not' made with the flourish that is typical of Hollywood films. For its locale, the producer picked the area around Bayou Petite Anse in Vermilion parish. For its star, Flaherty picked native Acadians—Lionel LeBlanc of Abbeville, Joseph Carl Boudreaux of Little Pecan Island.

The cost of the film was less than one-fourth that of a Hollywood production—but the film has been acclaimed as great by the New York Times, New York Post, New York Mirror, Harper's Magazine, the Brooklyn Eagle, the New York Herald-Tribune, Life and Star. And the comments of many of those who saw the film here—Miss Evelyn Parkinson Keyes, (noted author), W. B. Cotten, Jr., (Baton Rouge), F. A. Godchaux, Sr., Mr. and Mrs. W. B. MacMillan, Mr. and Mrs. Matt Vernon (Daily Iberian), President and Mrs. Joel Fletcher of Southwestern Louisiana Institute, and many others echoed those reviews.

Boudreaux's family had moved for Cameron to Little Pecan Island while he was making the film. He used the thousands of dollars he earned to buy the family a set of propane powered appliances. Later he would continue to hunt alligators but would not be in films other than *Louisiana Story*; *The Reverse Angle* as himself. Beyond that, one who has read up to this point should not need much explanation to follow this review. An opinion can be formed of how Southern, Cajun and rural American identity are interrelated in the minds of various people.

One of the questions in a book like this is whether a book mostly without presidents, armies and stacks of dead bodies deserves really to be an academic history at all. For this book aspires to a serious record of this film and these photographs and the people about whom they were made. But the fact of the lives of the actors does raise a question, if history is to really cover such apparently ordinary lives can it be history in the same way that a history of commanders in World War II is American history? The trivial details set in the Battle for Gettysburg are one thing, but should history take cognizance of the trivial details of daily life? That is the question which led me to show in earlier chapters all the ways I believe Cajun significance has been unfairly diminished in our history. If they deserve (or we deserve) real historical recognition then it will consist largely of ordinary people and events being described in stories of special significance. Not every story can be significant history and have those words mean much. But where the significant stories are Cajun the ordinary will usually predominate as a mode of experience.

The ordinary is a trait of Cajun and Acadian culture more than of most places. There is an extraordinary ordinariness about life among these people in some ways. Even those to whom they are very exotic note this as well. In that ordinary life things that are real and useful are seldom wasted. The premiere had much to offer the people of the region in terms of support for memory and recollection. A March 12, 1949 issue of the *Meridional* had this something still to say. It is reproduced in full on the following page

BUGGY PARADE' FILM HAS FIRST SHOWING

On Monday night at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lionel LeBlanc, a film of the "Boggy Parade" was presented by Charles Nunes. The movie was made during the pre-premiere festivities of the "Louisiana Story" which had its Southern premiere here three weeks ago. Lionel LeBlanc, a native of Abbeville, played one of the leading roles in the movie. He was chosen to play in the film because of his knowledge of the Southeast marshes. The "Boggy Parade" movie was made by Mr. Nunes from the sidewalk awning of the Audrey Hotel and from in front of the Dixie theater where "Louisiana Story" was shown. Attending the showing were Mr. Nunez, Mr. and Mrs. LeBlanc, Mr. and Mrs. Minos LeBlanc, Mr. and Mrs. .Gene-Yoes, as well as several children.

We will return before the last words of the conclusion to other written responses to this film among the Cajun people and the people of Abbeville. But in this brief chapter the bulk of the *Meridional's* published response to the events related to the entire series of events related to the SONJ cinematic invasion has been reproduced. The photographs are not here and add a great deal. The struggle of different Americans to correctly perceive and understand one another is illustrated in these relatively few words. Not the only local paper to discuss these events the *Meridional* still deserves a chapter of its own. They give us the record not necessarily of the premiere at the Dixie as it was in any absolute sense as perhaps this chapter title might suggest -- but at least how the film's premiere was perceived in town and in the Parish as a whole at the time.

In segregating this particular source here I both show respect and a kind of mistrust. Community journalism has very real limits and shortcomings. I choose to expose the reader to this voice after having said some other things. Likewise differences in my perspective and those in these articles are more clearly and I think fairly illustrated when the words are joined into a single compelling voice for whatever perspective the local newspaper represents.

