

**Chapter Five:
The Write Way:
Stories, Screenplays and Texts**

In the last chapter an analysis was done of how the film which we now have as *Louisiana Story* compared and related in some way to the film *City Lights* by Charlie Chaplin. Other references were made to how the film compared and contrasted or may have been positively or negatively influenced by the films *Nanook of the North* and *Gone With the Wind*. It is hoped that each chapter in this book builds toward a more complete understanding of the whole subject.

Therefore bearing in mind all that has been written about movies and moviemakers in the last chapter should continue to inform the analysis and narrative of the remaining chapters. However this chapter looks at a different reality. Here there is an examination of the film itself and of our larger subject by examining the transformation of the project Robert J. Flaherty was paid to produce from the earliest form we have of that idea in full to the final production. That is an effort to understand the transformation of the project from the screenplay *The Christmas Tree* written by Robert and Frances Flaherty, which appeared shortly after that initial business meeting lubricated by Jameson Irish whiskey, into *Louisiana Story*.

The two titles are quite different. One can make too much of such changes surely but one can also make too little of them. The first title is not specific to the location and is the common name of a piece of oilfield equipment. To the average viewer or reader such a title suggests children receiving gifts from their parents, perhaps in the disguise of Santa Claus and offering little in return. In the second title it is a story and not an object and it belongs at least to the state and larger region. It does not imply the child waiting for the magic of unearned wealth but the story and whatever magic, skill or spell-binding quality it may contain and embody belongs in some way to Louisiana. If that were the only difference in isolation then it would not be very significant. However, there is a great deal more evidence to support a similar line of transition. Toward end of this chapter there is an examination of the way in which the transition was not complete. But there was a transition.

Virtually the only proper nouns in the early screenplay are: Cajun, Jean Latour, Avery Island, Houston, Texas and -- debatably -- *Mon Dieu*. In the final production Alexander Napoleon Ulysses Latour is introduced in a single long name made up of four significant parts. In the original it seems that a shot of Avery Island rising 150 feet above the marshlands around it will be central to establishing the look of the film and in the final film there is little if any visual reference to this isolated and elevated prominence. Cajun and Jean Latour exist in both and Texas finds its way into the film. But Jean Latour is an old Cajun in the first concept and while he is certainly not a young father he is not particularly old in the final film. The boy carries magic salt and a frog with him in the final film to ward off werewolves. Werewolves and mermaids are not mentioned in the first concept. The idea of the werewolf and the mermaid will be revisited later in this chapter and again in the next but for now it suffices to say that they were added on location.

This plot transformation is not an entirely positive desirable one from the point of view of every Cajun. There is a humiliating aspect to the boy's use of these talismanic objects in the way he uses them for those Cajuns seeking to fit in a little better and not worse in American society and clearly they are not typical practices of Cajuns or Cajun trappers and were not in the mid 1940s or probably ever. On the other hand the magic salt seems to save the day. In the original the oilfield equipment is referred to as "the monster" and there is not great story about the giant alligator only the pet coon. In the final version the boy bravely avenges the perceived murder of his coon by hooking, landing and killing a giant gator. His inability to understand the oil industry is shifted more in the direction of his condescending to observe their odd behavior from his position as a master and being of the swamp. In this new version the boy master the blow out with magic and fights what was discussed as a giant alligator with grit and still boyish muscles. Yet he is afraid and anxious about werewolves who are not specifically said to become wolves but are said to dance at night in his wilderness with red eyes and long noses.

There is an idea here that the boy is not a trifle and that some being greater or at least more dangerous than he is haunts his environs or at least his imagined version of it. Something is or is imagined to be scarier than large alligators or drilling rigs close at hand. If one counts every time the boy touches his talismans as a reference to werewolves then there are many references to these creatures although they are scarcely noticed by most viewers. In the final version magic used against werewolves has not lost its effect when it transitions into the modern context of oil drilling. There is a mythopoeic feel to the whole which is not so odd in Flaherty's work but is largely absent from the original concept. The magical cure-all the boy keeps with him at all time could remind one of HADACOL. That magic salt if it is a reference to HADACOL in anyone's mind would also be a reference found on site from the real Cajun people.

So Robert Flaherty and Mrs. Flaherty establish contacts with Avery Island and the McIlhenny family early on. It turns out that the property is largely overseen and the operations on it largely administered by a Cajun who does know how to trap and has done a great deal of it. He is also an experienced hand in the wetlands. They soon meet Lionel Leblanc themselves and he is cast as the imagined Jean Latour. The struggle between the product of original imagination and the real Cajuns on the ground had begun. Cajuns like Dudley Leblanc were sensitive to the many efforts to collect information and to communicate the Acadian tradition which in their view were openly hostile. Specifically the legislature of Nova Scotia had commissioned a sort of published archive of Acadian documents and letters related to their colony and their expulsion from it. The documents paid for were collected and edited by Thomas R. Akins between 1857 and 1869. The consensus based on the small archives preserved or supported by Acadians made people in the ethnic community feel that his was a grossly biased and distorted collection of letters and documents intended largely to establish the claim of Nova Scotia to the land taken from the Acadians without compensation. For Cajuns this formed part of the seamless trial and horror that these Civil War years would produce in the end. In addition the years since 1915 had seen openly false, hostile and even absurd lesson plans make their way into the English only schools from time to time. All of this meant that Dudley Leblanc kept an eye out for people who came in with a story to tell of their own in which the Cajuns were to be characters.

Cajuns continued to wish for and actively seek good relationships with many different communities, However,

If there was a meeting between Dudley Leblanc and Lionel Leblanc in these early days it has not yet emerged into the clear light of the kind of sources which provide the relative certainty and clarity of the best and even the average in professional academic historical writing. The next chapter deals with folklore and folkloristic evidence but it has pervaded all chapters to some degree and this one more than most. The fact is that those who know and are really part of the region can imagine numerous connections and excuses for contact between the two men and in addition there was a whole complex of cultural connections which joined them in the first place. Leblanc had numerous contacts in the genealogical professionals and near professionals in the Cajun ethnic community. He could be pretty readily acquainted with all of the people who were or should be associated with the *Grand Famille des Leblancs*. Lionel Leblanc was in a sense that would seem alien to many Americans at his time or this time Dudley Leblanc's kinsman. In addition there were a limited number of highly visible and interesting places within his realm of greatest interest and influence in the world which was Vermilion Parish and the rest of the Attakapas and the Cajun prairies. One of those very interesting places was Avery Island and it was managed largely by a man he thought of as his kinsman. He had a good deal of respect for the McIlhenny operation but it was not a simplistic admiration. He saw plenty to value and admire in the mingled Avery and McIlhenny clans and their operations on the island a set of institutions and the accompanying values that sustained those institutions. That Lionel Leblanc had a good and constructive relationship with them was a fact which was worth something real to him. He had a great deal of awareness of the ways that the Cajun and Acadian identity and heritage had been contested for generations. He had spent a life working to preserve that heritage and he knew of numerous instances when there had been large and organized slander campaigns in the centuries since the expulsion and before. He had meetings and connections with people from virtually all parts of the Cajun and Acadian ethnic community.

While Flaherty had been working on an officially New York based film that was funded and produced by a French Canadian fur trading concern which became the stunning *Nanook* released to success and acclaim in 1922. Leblanc was starting to organize a constituency. He had his honorable discharge and a university degree when he was elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1924. His greatest achievement in that office was that in 1926, the last year of that first term was that he wrote and introduced a bill to buy the land and begin the project that was at the time called Evangeline State park located near St. Martinville. Later in 1926 he was elected to the Public Service Commission and in that position he represented a third of the State of Louisiana. In 1927 he wrote his first book, *The True Story of the Acadians* secured his status across the larger Acadian ethnic community. In 1932 he took his First Official Visit of Louisiana Acadians to their Ancestral Homeland and on the way he and his large segment of officially uniformed women posed with President Hoover in front of the White House. The Public Service Commission was considered a very good springboard to the governor's mansion and in 1932 he ran and lost in the same year that saw Huey Long elected to the United

States Senate and one of Long's lieutenants in his political machine elected Governor of Louisiana. In the midst of that run and his defeat he edited, improved and published another version of his *Acadians* book also in 1932.

He had a large network of people who were both connected with him and with other people and so he had a value to many of the enemies of the Long Machine even when his politics differed from theirs. In 1936 he took the Second Official Visit of Louisiana Acadians to their Ancestral Homeland and on the way to Grand Pre he stopped at the White House for a few photographs and some brief meeting with President Franklin Roosevelt and his administration. In 1938 and 1939 he distributed a number of fine statues of St. Therese of Lisieux. In 1940 he was elected to the Louisiana State Senate to represent Vermilion Parish. That year the Food and Drug Administration began to investigate and harass him and he discontinued making the Dixie Dew Cough Syrup and Happy Day Headache Powders that were the principal source of his income. In 1941 while serving in the United States Senate he began to manufacture and distribute HADACOL. The commitment to innovative advertising set the product apart from the start. But at some level this writer has to address the fact that he was more than all of these things. Some time in 1943 the first Roy Stryker researchers or photographers made their first forays into Acadiana. It is not all that improbable that Dudley Leblanc was aware of these forays before anything much had developed from those early days of the SONJ project under Roy Stryker. Stryker was of course confronting the demands of a project that embraced not only the oil producing regions of the United States of America although that has been most often mentioned in this text by way of comparing the work to the work done by the New Deal agencies. The truth is that they were already envisioning shooting around most of the oil producing regions of the world especially once the Allied victory that they hoped would come had come. The size of this project was vast and the commitment to Acadiana was a tiny part of it. However, the filming of *Louisiana Story* puts the Acadiana region in a category of its own. Stephen Plattner's book on Roy Stryker and this Project gives a sense of the scope of this project and the qualities and experiences that made Roy Stryker the man in charge of this vast enterprise.

Dudley Leblanc never met Roy Stryker but he too had many concerns of his own. Beyond his public *curriculum vitae* were the countless interactions within the culture as a whole which formed the very fabric of life he was trying preserve. The Cajun ethnic community was deeply committed to making life and culture work as Americans at this very time, There had been an impulse after World War One to both restore Acadian heritage and also become more integrated into the culture of the United States as a whole. That had been the struggle which had defined much of Dudley Leblanc's life. He could see that the new postwar era might offer even greater opportunities. The same year that the SONJ project got started Harnett Kane's Bayous of Louisiana came out in its 1843 Victory Edition which turned a nicely designed book with photographs and drawings into something that felt a little cheap because the wartime paper conservation protocols were observed. The book was not the best or the worst treatment of the Cajuns, Acadiana and the other peoples with whom they shared the region. But it was highly accessible to the people working the project. It is likely the Flaherty's had both read the book when they were approached by Stryker and it is certain that several of the photographers had

read it when they started shooting. To a significant degree it was this book's version of Acadiana and this book's version of the Cajuns which the people on Standard Oil's payroll came to shoot. They will still go back to it and in some ways their experience would always be in a conversation with that text. But for example the book may not have a sufficient clarity about the Cajun house to make it clear what a Cajun house is but it has some helpful information and in some ways the understanding of the photographers who worked the region and had read the book seems clearly inferior to the understanding embodied in the book itself.

Harnett T. Kane was vastly more knowledgeable about rural Louisiana and about its French heritage than many or most writers of the time. He had some real Cajun friends and while that is dismissed as the catch-all excuse of all bigots today the truth is that it makes a vast difference over not having any friends in the community one describes. Kane could read and speak a bit of French and knew some educated leaders of the Cajun community. Despite all of those qualities and attributes Kane was as almost always was the case after 1915's outlawing of the French language and bilingual public schools more or less a bigot. At least he was what could only seem a bigot to many Cajuns. However, he was not nearly as intentional a bigot as many and although there are a handful of errors and falsehoods in the book it is mostly a matter of confused context and misunderstanding. A lot of the controversial information is true enough but like the elements in treatment of those elements is simply confused where it would mean the most.

One of those cultural elements is dueling which continued to exist in Prairie Cajun communities in 1943 and perhaps afterwards. However the knife fighting duel in an unconcealed list by two men biting on different ends of a single bandana was certainly the least classy expression of a practice Americans already found objectionable. But it was an easier kind of dueling than others for a reporter and an outsider to track down because it was more in the province of those who had the least to lose by being discovered. All duels in Acadiana's Cajun communities are different than mere street fights in that they were developed in a system of ritual confrontation which limited fatalities however deadly they might appear to be this had been the case for centuries. There were few fatalities relative to the number of challenges in all Southern dueling before the Civil War as is shown in Kenneth S. Greenberg's book *Masters and Statesmen*. Dueling in 1943 meant gathering a group of people for extra-legal violent activity. That has some relevance perhaps to scary beings that might or might not gather in the swamps near a trapper's cabin at night.

Longfellow's poem was part of the Cajun heritage in which Dudley Leblanc and all the others still found an attachment to both their traditions and to the United States. The folkloristic traditions of the spoken tale in the Acadian villages before the expulsion are summarized in the following few lines:

Ripe in wisdom was he, but patient, and simple, and childlike.

He was beloved by all, and most of all by the children;

*For he told them tales of the Loup-garou in the forest,
And of the goblin that came in the night to water the horses,
And of the white Létiche, the ghost of a child who unchristened
Died, and was doomed to haunt unseen the chambers of
children;
And how on Christmas eve the oxen talked in the stable,
And how the fever was cured by a spider shut up in a nutshell,
And of the marvellous powers of four-leaved clover and
horseshoes,
With whatsoever else was writ in the lore of the village.*

The *Loup-garous* are werewolves, All of this folklore is coming through a lense or two of the perceptions of Longfellow who had heard the basic story from a student at Harvard and had further educated himself by collecting a good bit of published and primary unpublished material before writing his epic poem. Here the werewolves are clearly merely a literary motif in the spoken folk tales of the village and are not intended to represent any very specific underlying reality. Although Longfellow allows for a little ambiguity. He tells of men and dogs out among the wolves in the colonies wilderness places. Depending on whether one sees the word “wolfman” or lycanthrope in its various forms as being a word related to words like cowboy, horseman and fisherman. If one sees the folklore from that point of view then Longfellow’s shepherds of Acadie have a chance to be familiar with wolves.

In the same poem he mentions people lurking on the edges of the colonies watching for an English invasion. In the next chapter we will discuss whether in all these disparate elements there is a suggestion of something essential to the Cajun culture. Perhaps something like dueling may have existed in the atmosphere in the 1940s which influenced the final development of *Louisiana Story* in its released and exhibited form.

The next chapter will attempt to deal with those other aspects of his life more directly but suffice it to say that Dudley Leblanc lived a life very much at the heart of the Cajun ethnic community. He was also very much at the heart of the Leblanc family network. He definitely had many connections with Lionel Leblanc that went beyond any of his connections with these projects or with the public offices he held or businesses in which he was involved. In addition, the road between Abbeville and Avery Island ran near his Erath home and only full-fledged official residence. The chances for him to meet with Lionel were almost too numerous to count as this other Leblanc made this trip many times during the filming year.

Dudley Leblanc had the opportunity to review his files, the SONJ people had not come into Vermilion Parish with great stealth. They were not shooting any of the film at Evangeline State Park on any large scale but rather mostly at Avery Island and a few other locations. They did not make a clear public case for why they were portraying the Cajuns at all. He could go through his files on the founding of the State Park and his research files for creating a more complete living history site there in the future. He could peruse the copies of his two versions of the book about the Acadians. He could go through his correspondence with the Herbert Hoover and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administrations when he set up the White House visits and Presidential Photo-Ops with his pilgrims from Acadiana to Acadie. The women from each Acadiana community on the trips were lined up in front of the White House dressed in a representation of traditional Acadian costume. He could look at the photographs and the documents associated with these and many other projects. He could speak with those who assisted him in finding old unpublished papers.

The basis of any understanding of what happened in this period of Acadiana's interaction with the Standard Oil projects has to start with the written word. But the right texts are not always easy to find. They are not always easy to find nor is it clear what books and texts were determinative in setting out the vision that was developed. In addition "writing with light" is the closest literal translation of the compounded words behind the word photography and it is important to remember that the language of visual imagery comes into play on its own and in its own right. But Dudley Leblanc surely was very much aware of the legislation he had written for the Evangeline State Park, in his twice released book about the Acadians and in his plans for various groups and organizations that he had worked with under the umbrella of his position as President of the Association of Louisiana Acadians in the late twenties and the early thirties.

At the time of this writing there is a Jean Lafitte National Park near Lafayette that honors Cajun culture in many ways at a site called Vermilionville. However his Evangeline State park Legacy has changed a bit over time here is a 2016 description on the park's website:

Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site explores the cultural interplay among the diverse peoples along the famed Bayou Teche. Acadians and Creoles, Indians and Africans, Frenchmen and Spaniards, slaves and free people of color-all contributed to the historical tradition of cultural diversity in the Teche region. French became the predominant language, and it remains very strong in the region today.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1847 epic poem Evangeline made people around the world more aware of the 1755 expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia and their subsequent arrival in Louisiana. In this area, the story was also made popular by a local novel based on Longfellow's poem, Acadian Reminiscences: The True Story of Evangeline, written by Judge Felix Voorhies in 1907.

Once part of the hunting grounds of the Attakapas Indians, this site became part of a royal French land grant first used as avacherie, or cattle ranch. The first Acadians to settle in Louisiana established themselves here, on the banks of Bayous Teche and Tortue, on the edges of this vacherie.

When the grant was sold and subdivided, this section was developed as an indigo plantation. In the early 1800s, Pierre Olivier Duclozel de Vezin, a wealthy Creole, acquired this property to raise cotton, cattle, and eventually, sugarcane. He built the Maison Olivier, the circa 1815 plantation house which is the central feature of Longfellow-Evangeline SHS. His son, Charles, made improvements to the home in the 1840s. The structure is an excellent example of a Raised Creole Cottage, a simple and distinctive architectural form which shows a mixture of Creole, Caribbean, and French influences.

A reproduction Acadian Farmstead is situated along the bank of Bayou Teche. The Farmstead is an example of how a typical single-family farm would have appeared around 1800. The site includes the family home with an outdoor kitchen and bread oven, slave quarters and a barn.

In the pasture located adjacent to the barn, there are cattle typical of those raised by the Creoles and Acadians at that time.

In 1934, the property became the first park of the Louisiana State Parks system. In 1974, Maison Olivier was designated a National Historic Landmark.

One of the many facts that is simply not taught or studied is that the Louisiana State park system was founded out of the struggle and labor of the Acadian ethnic experience. The other fact about the park is that its central focus on the Acadian experience has been clearly diluted. There are many different kinds of writing of course. Dudley Leblanc's best efforts at writing lay in the future when he would write and publish *The Acadian Miracle*.

The full story of how the screenplay was transformed is complicated at the least. It includes notes made and shared by Helen Van Dongen, correspondence between the filmmakers and Standard Oil or Roy Stryker. It involves shared conversations about Harnett Kane's book. But in the end the place they had chosen and the relatively powerful engines of creation for a locally acceptable understanding of the region and its people also had some influence over what ended up on the screen.

One of Dudley Leblanc's favorite passages from Longfellow's favorite poem was:

Thus dwelt together in love these simple Acadian farmers,—

Dwelt in the love of God and of man. Alike were they free from

Fear, that reigns with the tyrant, and envy, the vice of republics.

Neither locks had they to their doors, nor bars to their windows;

But their dwellings were open as day and the hearts of the owners;

There the richest was poor, and the poorest lived in abundance.

The next chapter will deal with some of the possible and competing ideals of Acadian culture, it was clear that Dudley Leblanc was a man with an economic and socio-economic vision informed by his Cajun heritage. In the next chapter we will get to the more contentious elements of that vision. But many Cajuns in Vermilion Parish and elsewhere believe that the achievements of Acadie in early colonial America are not enough appreciated. *Louisiana Story* is not perfect as a portrayal of Cajun culture but the evidence does suggest that there was some transformation of the presentation which Cajun culture received in the film.

Here in Vermilion Parish Flaherty and Stryker would come into contact with a culture deeply concerned about the endless struggle for a more honest and competent portrayal of its image. However, they would be more likely to tolerate an account that was unduly flattering over one that was unduly embarrassing. The Boy in the film kills the alligator out of revenge and that also developed on site. Revenge is a big theme of Cajun culture. However, forgiveness and forbearance are also part of the culture. But avenging his pet raccoon is not so absurd a motivation for a Cajun boy to espouse. But one thinks that the questions of cultural awareness and portrayal were not those of an ethnologist confronting a pristine culture. The transformation of the screenplay reflects to some degree the location of the work in a place where the culture was understood in an autonomous and local intellectual framework and was presented in an up to date manner to anyone seeking information and was being promoted as such a basis for cultural identity allows a culture to be promoted...