

***Emerging Views:
Louisiana Story, the SONJ Photography Project
and Acadiana's Regional Identity***

Thesis Introduction:

This thesis seeks to explore Acadian and Cajun identity and the identity of the region in which these people lived through the metaphorical lens of two interconnected projects which employed many real physical lenses. Both of these projects were largely funded by Standard Oil of New Jersey and largely took place in a region which is called and was coming to be called Acadiana. However, one project took place only in that region whereas the other was undertaken by photographers all across the oil producing regions of the United States. This thesis largely ignores the specific work of photographers outside the region but is aware of the difference between Flaherty working only in this area and the Roy Stryker project working in this region among many others. Visual images are the central documents involved in this study. Historians who are concerned about such things may be assured that written documents will play a significant role. Formal oral history will not play a role simply because the resources need to employ such techniques on an effective scale in a timely manner have not been forthcoming.

One might argue with considerable reason that this project demands too much of its sources and is too ambitious in scope for a thesis at the level of study for the Master of Arts Degree or even a Doctoral Dissertation if such a dissertation is to rely heavily on the film *Louisiana Story* and photographs taken by the Standard Oil of New Jersey massive photographic project. The supporting documentation preserved in the Roy Stryker Papers in the Ekstrom Photographic Archives of the University of Louisville provide a real and necessary context for these images but that context is in every way minimal. The photographers on this project, Standard Oil, Roy Stryker and Robert Flaherty are all secondary characters in the story which this thesis seeks to capture and communicate. The photographers are made known largely by their work. There are notes and letters from them in the Stryker Papers. Richard Leacock was a kind of living bridge between the two projects. Flaherty's photographer was both in and not fully in the odd fraternity of those roving photographers who made the rest of the Standard Oil of New Jersey photographs. The breadth of this great project and its ties to the Farm Security photographic Project and Pare Lorentz's film provide a broad subject about which several good books could be written. This however is not that book. This book is mostly about the Cajuns. But this must be. The Acadians becoming known as Cajuns in the time when the images were produced take pride of place as protagonists in the story. That ambiguous name issue persists to the present day and is manifest in the film *Louisiana Story*. They are not seen primarily as individuals. There is a definite influence from anthropology and its tendency to study communities as such and not rely as exclusively on the narrative of individuals and their behavior. One test of the success of the thesis will be whether it successfully remains a history while experiencing largely a set of communal and ethnic realities as the principal historical facts and events in question.

This author grew up and worked in Abbeville, Louisiana writing for *The Abbeville Meridional* a newspaper which had its offices and still has them directly across the street from a home called the Nettles which is where Robert J. Flaherty and Helen Van Dongen edited the film *Louisiana Story*. The film had its premiere at the old Frank's Theater which in 2015 is the object of a preservation society but which was an active cinema or movie house at the time of the filming and also was the venue in which this author saw many of his earliest films. When this author interviewed JC Boudreaux decades ago he indicated how much the movies meant to him as a boy. Standard Oil reached out to the Cajuns as a force of assimilation by offering one of the best loved and most admired aspects and artifacts of American society. One thing that must be kept in mind is that this was a film made in an area where films were appreciated but were not made.

Louisiana Story exists as by far the most central and significant single source among the sources used and relied upon in this thesis. This thesis is not intended primarily as a work of film or photographic history and the author would rather have it considered as some contribution to American cultural history. But that does not take away from the historical significance of the film itself.

Louisiana Story was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Writing, Motion Picture Story in 1948. This 78-minute black-and-white film remains controversial in many respects. In fact, there is little one can say about it which is not controversial among the relatively few scholars and learned persons well versed in the history and impact of the film. Robert J. Flaherty was in fact a great documentarian, he did in fact have a lot of experience living and filming among varied peoples around the world and he did live in and among many Acadian or Cajun people while creating this work that is in essence fictional. Journalists, Wikipedians and informed people are increasingly eager to point out that it has often been misidentified as a documentary film, when it is better described by some hybrid term like "docufiction". The distrust of many cultural and film scholars for big businesses in general has often been surpassed by their distrust of businesses which earn their profits outside of communication and pay for any sort of communication which in any way presents itself as fact. Thus whatever prestige or trust is earned for the film because its script was written by Frances H. Flaherty and Robert J. Flaherty and the film which was written by the grand old man of the time was also directed by Robert J. Flaherty -- whatever capital is gained in terms of a basic learned willingness to undertake the journey the film offers is lost to a writer such as this author for other reasons. The principal reason is that the film was commissioned by the Standard Oil Company. Let us not pretend in this introduction to really address all the motivations behind the funding of the film and all of the conditions imposed on the project. Standard Oil assuredly had an agenda and any scholarly view of the film and its subjects must take that agenda into account. Where does that admission leave the writer and readers of this text?

This text does not manifest the point of view that the film accurately captures and portrays all that was happening among Cajuns at the time. It does not seek to endorse all that Standard Oil may have been trying to say at the time the film was made. However, this text does demand of

any reader, professional scholar or otherwise, a willingness to take the film on its own terms and the related photographs as well even as one explores sources and conditions which allow for a more nuanced critical and historical evaluation both of the works on film and also of those subjects. The reader is asked to see both the photographs and the film as serious attempts to record real conditions and events in a way that required skill. Such works deserve a certain respect, however critical that respect may be.

Besides the Academy Award Nomination there are other indications of the greatness of the film. These indicia also manifest the same complex realities as are evident in the script. There is a transformation of that which is perceived through the work of art and in turn this transformed reality is presented to the larger society and becomes part of its perception of the community being portrayed. Like Flaherty, Virgil Thomson was doing real musicology at least in some imperfect sense and when won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his score to the film he allowed it to be clearly understood that it was in fact based on scholarly tape recordings by the contemporary Alan Lomax who had collected the music of indigenous Cajun musicians. The product which those bestowing the Pulitzer Prize and any audience of the film experience is his professional artistic interpretation real Cajun musical experience and expression which he scored for the film and which then was beautifully performed by the Philadelphia Symphony. Following the Academy Award Nomination and the Pulitzer Prize there was a third laurel to distinguish the film in the early years of its existence. *Louisiana Story* was also in the top 10 of the first British Film Institute's Sight and Sound poll in 1952. In the thesis there will be some detailed treatment of the movie and its filming but not in a thorough or exhaustive sense. If this thesis is worked into a long book it will not be the exhaustive book on the film much less on Robert J. Flaherty. Nor is this text a challenge to Carl Brasseaux's great series of works on the history of the people and region. But the text is going to move definitively in the direction of Brasseaux's subjects after starting with each piece of filmic art and with the entire collection. For most of the next few pages this introduction will depart from the film and look around at the place and people to which Flaherty had come. For a moment and for many moments hereafter the text will entirely ignore the occasion of its existence and one might well wonder what any of this has to do with the SONJ filmings. It has nothing to do with them except that they came to the place described to do the work which occasions this text but is not its principal subject. Considering all of this it is more unusual that it was not given more scholarly attention that it is questionable whether or not it deserves scholarly attention. But since this is not primarily a text about the movies why does all of this matter?

It matters because this text seeks to give a simple set of relatively uncontroversial facts about the underlying historical reality being filmed by those in the employ of Standard Oil and then to bring the reader to an understanding of what the perceptions of those creating the film works, the perceptions of their viewers and audience and the perception of the Cajun subjects. In understanding all of that one hopes to emerge with a better understanding of how perception functions in defining cultural boundaries, limits and identities in America in the twentieth century. Most people first reading this text even if it were widely will have lived in the twentieth century America and so it may seem to be very near to journalism and yet one can see the entire

century's greatest struggles, challenges and promises related to how America saw smaller communities within its larger society and how these communities both saw themselves and the larger society. Often the most important questions relate to how the smaller communities believed that the larger society saw them. Louisiana Story and these photographs allow the questions related to perception very directly.

I would like to take a break from considering these images and their makers and the subjects posing or not for their benefit. Let me briefly introduce the place and people to which they had come for the purposes of this thesis. Whether it is the an entirely correct of that people and place is less important for the purposes of an introduction than is the question of whether the reader can embrace as a reader the underlying suppositions and parameters of the portrayal of this Acadiana and Cajun experience. The thesis depends for any hope of success on the reader accepting the basic parameters and features of this cultural experience as having at least a limited historical validity for the purposes of this text. These parameter and features share with other histories the reality that one is selecting a handful of subjects to consider and a handful of stories to tell in what is actually a far more complex and rich context. Those features and stories are not so much selected out of some universal sense of what is most important. Rather they are the facts and conditions most relevant to the discussion in the text being written. The frame of mind in which this thesis was conceived differs from the frame of mind in which it might be finished. The text has its own history as does its writer. The writer knows that there is a chance that this might seem a much more clever book if the basic structure of this underlying reality were sort of leaked amorously into the whole context of the thesis rather than revealed in all their humble nakedness here in the introduction. However, understanding the asserted nature of the cultural and regional subjects in the context I propose is vital to understanding any discussion of the perceptions these films create or allow. So who were these Cajuns? What was Acadiana? What was their role in American history? How did they relate to Standard Oil and the interests it represented?

Those four questions and some others are among the questions this text will answer in a somewhat cursory way. This introduction will at least introduce the answers we will give in a far more cursory manner.

Flaherty would shoot the film outside of Abbeville. He shot in Bayou Petite Anse where the story is dramatically set and it was shot in Weeks Island but several of the most compelling scenes in Louisiana Story largely on Avery Island in Iberia Parish. That is not far from either Abbeville or the other locations just mentioned. But just as Abbeville was a very definite kind of place where Flaherty would live, host photographers and have his real base of operations. Avery Island is a definite and unique place as well. It is a place with which this writer is extremely familiar. The role of the Tabasco hot sauce magnates in production and the likely influence upon Flaherty and his cast and crew has to be considered in any consideration of what influences affected the making and conception of the film. In working with this family and its patriarch at the time Flaherty entered a tiny world within a world, within a world and one could sustain this metaphor for a few more iterations. The place had its own small histories and the

current McIlhenny with whom Flaherty most had to contend had his own involved outsider's view of the Acadians and the big oil companies. He was largely able to deal with both of these groups of people and their institutions from an autonomous and often advantaged point of view. He was not an outsider at some distant remove but a man who was rooted in his own local history with real insights and well developed prejudices. The connection of *Louisiana Story* to Avery Island is a connection to something close to the Acadian and Cajun experience and yet largely outside of it. The Tabasco fortune is founded largely on continuity in a very specific place. The roots of the fortune which preserves the natural environs in which some of the film was shot began with a kind of invention of Tabasco Sauce by an already well off man whose family owned the salt dome which lifts up a hill of farms villages and wilderness above the flat, wet and otherwise similar lowlands spreading out over the region. The salt mine inside was the source of a good fortune and of a kind only a few neighbors could emulate. Unlike oil, salt is only extracted in a tiny number of places in the region. One of the heirs of this estate invented a product and saw its potential in 1868. The man was Edmund McIlhenny who mixed up his own personal pepper sauce recipe with three natural ingredients: fully aged red peppers, salt from Avery Island, Louisiana, and high-quality, distilled vinegar. Decades of continuity and industry had already established Tabasco as a major beneficiary of American society and its opportunities for trade and commercial development. To some degree this connection affected Flaherty's dependence on largesse and resources of Standard Oil. But to a much larger degree it served as a further and additional footing from which to perceive the Cajun experience from the outside. His belief in documentary film, his funding from Standard Oil and his connection with the hot sauce empire all shaped his perceptions of his subject. But he still had entered directly and reasonably honestly into the heart of Acadiana. Specifically, he had come to Abbeville. Abbeville is and was a small town in South Louisiana now named after a town in France. This writer's connection to it could scarcely be greater for anyone who is not a native. I was born elsewhere in the region, the city of Crowley to parents who were both natives of Abbeville. The town was named La Chapelle when my Leblanc ancestors sold the land to a man recognized as the founder and known as Pere Megret, meaning Father Megret. Pere Megret was the French missionary priest who developed the town. The church is much at the center of the town and religion was everywhere presented to Flaherty. He was living near local Catholic experience. I was baptized, made my first communion, and wed to a young woman native to Abbeville in a church which Flaherty could see from his base in the house called the Nettles. Religion was all around Flaherty but has little to do with his film. This was also the historic home of Severin Leblanc a prominent vigilante in the era leading up to the Civil War and Dudley Leblanc who was this writer's cousin and Severin's descendant had published a book called the *True Story of the Acadians* in 1927 and had published a better edition of the same book before World War II. He had tangled with the prominent Huey P. Long Machine in the state and known both victories and defeats. He was a wealthy enough man who enjoyed entertaining people from out of town.

Flaherty had come to the very epicenter of information from the inside. Flaherty would cast a Lionel Leblanc as the father of the Cajun trapping family who along with the drilling team more or less make up the characters portrayed in the film and every Leblanc or LeBlanc in the town of Abbeville could be assumed to be aware of that casting choice. The boy who had the largest

role in the film is a Boudreaux, Joseph or J.C. Boudreaux these people are also a prominent Acadian family with widespread relations across the region. Back in 1993 I interviewed J.C. Boudreaux by telephone to get his impressions of the experience of making the film and since then he has been featured in the documentary *Louisiana Story: A Reverse Angle*. Dudley Leblanc would have been indirectly connected to these and other people with whom Flaherty worked. The very best place to hear a well informed advocate from the inside tell him about the Acadian experience. it is an overstatement to say that there is no evidence that Flaherty became deeply immersed in this interior set of perceptions. This thesis will attempt to illustrate and explain what the signs of influence are and how they are manifest in the film but the larger absence of Leblanc's vision of the Acadian experience is more telling than its lesser presence. In the end one has to say that picture does not have some of the authenticity and integrity which one might hope to find.

The larger reality which most distinguished the historical moment in which *Louisiana Story* was made and in which the other photography of the Standard Oil of New Jersey photography directed by Stryker was that really all of the men involved and the women as well had been through the intense and formative experiences that together constituted the Second World War. World War II had placed the United States of America at the forefront of the world in ways never really imagined by most Americans. The McIlhenny family, Roy Stryker, Dudley Leblanc, Robert Flaherty and cast of locals who played the fictional family at the heart of Flaherty's film were all looking toward the future and were wondering what that future might have to offer. These photographs and the film that Standard Oil had commissioned Flaherty to make do not seem to have been advertising and public relations geared to making a quick return on investment. Standard Oil's motivations are not entirely revealed in the sources on which this thesis is based and it may happen that over time other sources might reveal more nuance to their motivations. Perhaps colorful and compelling quotes from key players in these decisions will offer a different insight. However, what seems clearly to be the case is that these executives and stakeholders in Standard Oil wanted to show that petroleum could usher America and Americans into a new era of prosperity and help the country to find its feet. Dudley Leblanc had been in the Louisiana State Legislature during most American active involvement in World War Two. He brought many experiences to bear in that office but none more important than serving as a Sargeant in the Army in the first World War. His brother Raoul Leblanc and others who fought in France had learned the value of speaking French and English both in that war and the advantage had been relevant again in the Second World War. America had twice helped to save French civilization and in the eyes of many boosters and defenders of Acadian and Cajun culture and ways of life the cajun troops had played a crucial role more often than recorded because of their bilingualism. In addition their record as it stood was not negligible. In addition to all of that like many Americans who came back from the wars Cajuns felt a reason to hope for an America that would have more to offer them as it had more to offer everyone. This was not only in the sense of material prosperity but also in terms of a more capacious way of life that recognized who they were. Womens Studies and African American Studies have noted the rising expectations of women and African Americans after the Second World War. Cajuns experienced the same increase in hopes for the future at least to a degree that any number of voices in the community

have since recognized. It was in this context that Standard Oil sought to illustrate how the oil and gas industry might help bring many of the remote and rural parts of the USA into the bright American future. But while they shot photographs across a large portion of the entire country they made no other film similar to *Louisiana Story* which was largely produced in Abbeville Louisiana. For them this was the place to make the most compelling statements about the way the oil industry would interact with rural American culture or a largely rural American culture.

The Standard Oil photographs in the larger project directed by Roy Stryker constitute a broader vision which is discussed in these pages. Those other photographs depict pirogue races, boats that act as school busses, people dressed up for church, Catholic priests blessing the fleets of boats that supported the nearby Cajun villages and towns as well as many of the fine regional restaurants and what existed of the national seafood market at the time the pictures were taken. Poor families with guns and Catholic religious articles are also part of a cultural mosaic of the relatively quaint, exotic and rural. But the pictures also show the movies, cars and other symbols of the national American culture which attracted the Cajuns to the future which Standard Oil seemed eager to provide for many. Any real depiction of these towns and villages and fleets is largely absent from *Louisiana Story*. Flaherty sets the focus close and depicts the life of a very rural trapper family. Trapping continued to be an important part of the life and economy of Vermilion Parish of which Abbeville is the seat. Flaherty did not invent or fabricate the idea of trappers. Trappers constituted a significant [part of the cultural fabric and the human community. Like cowboys in Texas and Oklahoma, lumberjacks in Washington and Oregon and lobstermen in Maine the trappers manifest a kind of ideal and had an influence on other rural people in the community that went beyond their numbers. While Flaherty may not portrayed cajuns very fairly he came much closer to achieving a fair portrayal of Cajun trappers.

This thesis will have to return again to the question who Flaherty already was when he took the commission and to a lesser degree consider who Stryker and the photographers and members of the production crew may have been. There were in fact numerous problems that the Cajuns and other rural Americans faced in the emerging economy of the new American superpower. Flaherty saw the exotic nature of the Cajun way of life as a cinematic opportunity. Acadiana and the petroleum industry were forming new connections to bring about a truly distinctive future in a distinctive region. Dudley Leblanc had helped to put all of his brothers through college. His cousin and my Anglo-Acadian grandfather who later became Louisiana Chief Justice Frank W. Summers had commanded a ship in World War Two and been part of the great Pacific campaign and the Occupation that followed. Abbeville was full of people far more educated and worldly than the Cajuns portrayed in the film. There is some discomfort in watching the film and some have rightly pointed out that the film was reissued in 1952 by film distributor with a reputation for exploitation and was under a new title, *Cajun*. This release was in fact on the bottom half of a double bill with another film called *Watusi*. Clearly the existence of ethnic slurs against the Acadian and Cajun heritage and the individuals associated with it was not going to end. The film could be and was part of a set of perceptions which allowed the larger society to look down on the Acadians and dismiss many of their claims to prosperity and recognition. But is there a simple relationship between the uncomfortable feeling some members of the

community feel when they imagine others watching the film and when they worry about perceptions it may reflect of their way of life. In 1966 years after the film *Louisiana Story* had been released and the released again Dudley Leblanc published his book *The Acadian Miracle*. By then there was a kind of renaissance underway of Cajun music, language and folk rituals. The oil industry in Louisiana and in Acadian portions of Louisiana inside and outside of what is sometimes called Acadiana. In many ways the prosperity brought by oil seemed to have resulted in the way suggested by the *Louisiana Story*.

So America was coming out of the War. Acadians and American elsewhere were seeking a way into the future and Standard Oil was willing to show a path into that new future of hope and prosperity, Flaherty meanwhile made a fairly memorable film about a Cajun trapper family and a drilling crew. It is possible now to return to the question of why these sources are worth considering in this context. In brief, is there a current history book in all of this?

While the truth is that this author, Frank W. Summers III, deserves whatever glory and whatever shame there may be in this endeavor up to this point it also was written in periodic dialog with the late Professor Mark T. Carleton of the Louisiana State University Department of History. Carleton brought a sense of the power of photographs from his book on Prison reform and brutality in Angola, Louisiana's great prison. He also was able to look at questions of race and racial consciousness among all those involved in these projects and depicted in them. Further he could see from his work on a book like *River Town* how pictures can be used by various parties to tell stories and then reinterpreted by historians in a way which tell the tales of those taking and using the photographs as well. Professor Carleton also brought a knowledge of Louisiana and Southern History and a sense of how visions of American consciousness and American society described by historians like David Potter who had influenced him early in life did and did not apply to Louisiana. Nonetheless, we did not always have the easiest relationship and disagreed about some historical points which mattered profoundly to each of us. He did seem to trust the closeness I had to the context especially of Flaherty's work where some other historians might have distrusted the whole project because of this same closeness.

The boy who is the protagonist is named Alexander Napoleon Ulysses Le Tour has in his name a great deal to say about what Flaherty may have absorbed from his surroundings. The name is French and Greek and slightly Anglicized. Whether or not the boy deserves the connections with Napoleon and the two great Greeks for whom he is named is for the viewer to decide, the overall evaluation of the film is dependent in part on what one takes to be ironic or comical. This writer tends to believe that very little of the film is intended to be comical or ironic. However what is not ironic is certainly ambiguous because in the credits the character with the grand and glorious name is just identified as "the boy". was played by Joseph Boudreaux. Flaherty who immersed himself in Abbeville and its larger surrounds as well as the rest of the Acadian cultural context which surrounded him. In that environment he heard of genealogies in plenty. For while Flaherty loved to tell stories he was a conversationalist as well as a raconteur. He could and did find interesting people and listen to them. In that environment he had words and snippets of stories and bits of information which was sort of a mixture of history, folklore and

mythology. In French and in English there had already been and continued to be a first and second Acadian Coast and the talk of an Acadian triangle. There was talk of the western parishes being known as Acadiana: That part of Louisiana where the Acadians have been perceived to be the dominant cultural and population group most definitively in recent decades has increasingly become known as Acadiana. In 2015 Vermilion Parish where Flaherty had his base claims to be “the most Cajun place on Earth”. The sources reviewed here do not show exactly what parts of the tradition Flaherty was exposed to but among the streams of claims and names are the following:

First Acadians came from Acadie: Mostly the same place as the Canadian province now officially known as Nova Scotia. although it also included much of New Brunswick and some parts of other provinces in Canada. The next level of knowledge that lived in oral history and tradition was that Acadie had first been named Arcadie when it was settled. That is the French equivalent of Arcadia and reflected the Greco-French character and heritage of those intending to settle there. *Ulyssee* (as the name often enough occurs in Cajun genealogies) or Ulysses was a mythical and legendary king in ancient Greece who also knew and interacted with ancient Arcadians. The name was not unknown among the Acadians but Flaherty selected it the deeply Christian religious names selected by Longfellow for his fictional representations of real people are also realistic names -- Gabriel and Evangeline, But Flaherty chooses to take a boy with the very Cajun and very Christian name of Joseph and give him the name of two Greek pagan kings. Ulysses with his claims to the legacy of Homeric verse and Alexander the Great: King of Macedonia and Greece who conquered Persia, the Eastern Mediterranean and much of Western Asia Alexander reshaped the world. His father was Philip King of Macedonia who conquered much of Greece. The Macedonians were a people with very long and close ties to the Arcadians. The connection of the Acadians to ancient Greece is a relationship first among themselves. The sense of community which was captured in many of the SONJ photographs was based on a real set of connections that were deep rooted and continued to be maintained. It is likely that Flaherty had been somewhat exposed to the oral tradition that related to the basic structure of medieval France. The division between *Languedoc* and *Languedeouille* was one of two vital distinctions. The other was between *Paix des Coutumes* and *Paix des Droits Ecrit*. To return to these topics later may be useful and necessary but in this introduction it is sufficient to say that the Acadians had been a somewhat autonomous group or a *coutume* they held to a Greek heritage within their French identity just as other communities had hyphenated identities across much of France.

Alexander may also have been a references to Alexandre Mouton a former Acadian Governor of Louisiana before the War Between the States. He was also the father of Alfred Mouton who had attended St. Charles College in grand Coteau, enrolled at and graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point and then led the vigilante movement in which Abbeville's Severin Leblanc. Alfred had later been a Confederate General who died achieving the last major Confederate victory of the war. The contrast between this father, Governor and cultural icon and the odd little boly in the swamps may seem a stark contrast indeed. Yet it may be that Flaherty was speaking a somewhat different language.

When one writes of Flaherty's vision it is easy to see that the vision was not entirely individual. The film was not made by one person and was well photographed by Richard Leacock and skillfully edited by Helen van Dongen, who were also the associate producers. Original release was through independent film distributor Lopert Films with Flaherty and not SONJ staking a claim to most of the rights and glories one might expect the oil company to hold on to. All of them became involved in the community and aware of the history of the people around them not to a scholarly degree nor not necessarily even to the extent which the very best journalist might have achieved and yet it was something substantial which informed their work. . Although the film was both fictional and constricted to a narrow focus on a single family that is not all the film is -- some glimmer of the other level of insight is preserved. This thesis will attempt to examine that level of insight as well.

Flaherty's film is like the larger collection of photographs discussed in this text in that visual appeal, an attraction to the exotic and the chance to show the modernizing and Americanizing potential of the "Oil and Gas Industry" writ large provide the main motivations for where to point a camera, what to develop, what to print and what to display. But those motivations are not the only ones involved and to some scholarly tastes this work may seem more than a bit too sympathetic to these works and those who produced them. To the sources themselves in that this author has no doubt that the vision through the cameras in question in itself is a vision which greatly enriches our capacity to understand the region and contributes directly to Louisiana's cultural history. To note the flaws in that vision is not at all the same thing as dismissing that vision. *Louisiana Story* is also an effort to deal with consciousness of the past and with ongoing tradition. That same sense of history pervades the SONJ photographs. In order to show that they were leading America to a better future Standard Oil had to show that they were aware of the background and roots of the people to whom they were bring petroleum funded progress.

In the *Louisiana Story* the mythology, history and memory of the Cajun people is especially compressed into the first sequence. The early voiceover in the open swamps does give us some valuable information however truncated.

A relatively attentive viewing of the film by someone who is not watching with a scholar often as not reveals a story dealing with the adventures of a young Cajun boy and his pet raccoon, who live what may be more quirky underprivileged or seen as a somewhat idyllic existence playing in the bayous of Louisiana. One may also see that the boy clearly has developed skills related to hunting, fishing and other folkways he will need in his life. Some see the signing of the oil lease and the subsequent production of oil as an authentic economic working out of the new way of life. Others see the story of the little boy and an alligator as being the major story with the oil merely being a kind of subplot involving the boy's elderly father's allowing an oil company to drill for oil in the inlet that runs behind their house in the swamps. For those taking this view the main plot is what happens in the swamp. Conflict these people hope to see between traditional people and the new oil company does not materialize. The conflict is instead between boy and nature in this view and action for the plot is provided by the experience the boy has of a giant alligator in the area, which the boy and others believe to have eaten the pet raccoon and which

is hunted in revenge. Another possible view of this is that alligator hunts and the risks of dealing with giant alligators are simply a real part of the boys daily life.

For some who have commented in various formats, the boys magic, mythical beliefs and other eccentricities have a double meaning. They are not intended to be literal characteristics of the young trapper in that view. So here there is visual and other tension in plenty between the rural child and the completely assembled miniature oil rig which with its friendly crew which is towed on a slender barge into the inlet from connecting narrow waterways. One of the struggles with very recent history is to achieve some kind of historical distance and sense of perspective. If one is writing about the Roman Empire's Gallic Wars it is safe to spend a few pages on the similarities to the current wars of the historians homeland but if one is writing about the Vietnam War it may be wiser to be more miserly in such comparisons. It is not so easy to bring oneself or the reader into the period and draw up the borders which so effectively kept the people about whom one is writing from knowing what would happen next. 1946 to 1952 is within a great deal of living memory. To many historians it seems close enough in time, But it is important to remember that there is a significant moment of crisis in Flaherty's film when the rig strikes a gas pocket and there is a blow out. It is hard to see that footage today without thinking of the Macondo well blowout and the BP disaster with the vast spillage of millions of barrels of crude. In addition, the years which followed the growth of the oil industry led to a great deal of environmental damage which can be discussed and evaluated with the insight gleaned from a great deal of evidence that was not available to Flaherty or anyone else at the time these cameras were capturing the images that would form this larger view of the region. So if to many viewers today it seems that most of this blowout is dealt with swiftly and off-camera that is not necessarily an attempt to hide some larger truth that Flaherty is aware of and wishes to distort by concealment. Today's environmentally viewer may see an unrealistic and distorted construct and view of the drillers with what they perceive as a barge, rig and loads of pipe. They may feel there is a menace being distorted in the faces and voices of the friendly drillers but in fact many drillers were friendly especially when dealing with landowners who had legal rights, local connections, weapons and notoriously bad tempers when offended. To the same sensibility it seems more than a bit too perfect when the representatives of big oil depart from the Louisiana swamps expeditiously leaving behind a boy sitting more or less on top of a device called a "Christmas Tree" which promotes the continued and useful production of oil and in the eyes of these critics this continuous production suggests the future of phenomenally clean environment and a wealthy Cajun family because the spill has shown no lasting damage and the first funds are shown being spent on real and practical needs as they continue to live their life of relative simple austerity in the swamps. But there were far richer Cajuns, Dudley Leblanc's HADACOL would be a marketing phenomenon and a source of profits that would briefly eclipse Tabasco Sauce and most oil checks. Cajun cattle barons and planters had long existed. In addition it is true that many trappers and small farmers experienced a very significant financial benefit and that benefit would be a positive force in the region. Many Cajuns from a very large portion of this ethnic community realized that this exact kind of prosperity did offer real hope for the advancement of the community. The same sorts of viewers have seen the actions of fishermen and shrimpers struggling to address the crises of the year when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit

and again skimming oil during the BP disaster. A few may be aware of the struggle of trappers against Leander Perez and the oil and gas interests in Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parish and assume that Flaherty is portraying a fantasy when there is no individual or organized resistance to the incursion of the oil interests in the swamp a blowout which has such similarities to the BP disaster has occurred. However, the truth is the oil industry were not pirates, often as not at least they paid their bills and the lease or purchase of rights to wealth beneath the surface benefitted many families like the fictional La Tour family in keeping pace with and competing with the economic progress of city people of all ethnic groups, people like the McIlhenny family and traditional Cajun financial elites like large ranchers and planters. Hard work, thrifty behavior and oil or increasingly oil and gas wealth provided larger opportunities. The oil interests were often enough seen with reason as no less unequivocally friendly and progressive humanitarians by small landowners in this region. Oil leases made possible a new set of aspirations and realities for people in this region. While one may consider the larger conflicts, issues related to carbon and fossil fuels and the problems related to the oil industry it is not possible to dismiss the reality of the promise Standard Oil is paying to portray. From the point of view of the Cajun community it is hard to forgive or diminish the importance worst actions of the work actors in the oil and gas industry. It is nonetheless impossible not to be certain that the infusion of oil and gas funds made many positive changes and helped to preserve many cultural assets. The income especially of small landowners allowed many people to maintain and improve the environmental conditions of the land and to preserve wildlife and biological resources. The oil industry brought in many people with little respect for the local culture and tensions and hatreds are immortalized in the facts of the case *Roach v. Dresser*. An oil man there states his right to discriminate against Cajuns. The courts found against him. That is all part of the story. But the outsiders also rented apartments and plots of land from Cajuns, bought food and hired boats and sometimes married and settled down. It may well be the truth that there was going to be a crisis no matter what in the environment and among the people. It may well be that the moral questions relate to whether the set of crises related to the oil industry were better or worse than the crises that would have resulted from the absence of that industry. Really the absence would not have occasioned the crisis but the other pressures in American society and the region exerted enormous influence on America's rural areas. The coming of oil money to the region did allow for the people of rural Acadiana to face the new era with more resources and therefore more confidence.

This thesis has had two lives, one which began in 2016 and one which ended in 1993. The project never really reached a point of oblivion or death but was in a situation more similar to that of a patient in a coma. The author retained an interest in the subject, collected data and hoped a workable copy of the originalo largely finished Master of Arts Thesis would survive until such a date as it could be finished. During that more than twenty-two-year period of dormancy many things happened to both Acadian scholarship and to perceptions of *Lousiana Story*. There was less change and less scholarly activity as regards the Standard Oil Photographs, Roy Stryker or the particular images and particular photographers which formed the perception of Acadiana and Cajun experience which form the rest of the subject of this text along with the film and Cajun culture in the period in question.

In 1994, *Louisiana Story* was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant". It seems that there are certainly those who have been considering the film during the dormant years of this thesis. This thesis attempts to present the reality that was being recorded and the way that reality was modified by being recorded and portrayed in a certain way. The limits of this project are well defined and there is no doubt that scholars face numerous challenges in defining the status determining what were the means of adaptation of various communities at relatively greater or lesser disadvantage compared to the larger American society as a whole. The late forties in Acadiana is a small lense on the larger problems and promises of America in what is often called the American Century. The Acadian experience in Louisiana can be discussed in a number of ways and like any ethnic and particular community identity it has an historical context which defines both the reality of the identity and its perception over time. The perception a community or people has of itself and the perception that exists of that people outside of the community in a larger society or set of societies evolves and shifts according to trends created in the community and the trends that exist in the larger society or set of societies in which it exists.