

**Chapter Ten:**  
***The Premiere at the Frank's and the Years that Followed***



While most people who arrived at the premiere of Louisiana Story either walked from nearby or arrived in automobiles one is impressed by the horses and buggies hitched and posted around the Frank's Theater in the images of the premiere. There is something about a horse and buggy being driven to a movie premiere that is in itself noteworthy. Movies and automobiles seem to come together on to the world stage and we expect them to stay together. In addition, there are no horses in Louisiana Story. Furthermore it was funded and largely produced by Standard Oil which depended on selling fuel for automobiles for much of its income. Horses as most readers will grasp consume very little gasoline. So the buggies at the premiere are worth a comment or two and there will be a few comments here about them.

However, the cars not in this picture were also part of this scene. Postwar Acadiana was everywhere changing even as it continued to be a place either backward or culturally conservative depending on one's point of view. Or from this writer's point of view a little bit of both. The world of the fictional Latour family was being affected by all sorts of change and some of it was of a more global nature and some of it was profoundly local.

Some might think that the life of a trapper remained much the same as long as the person remained a trapper but that is not necessarily the case. Trapping continues in Acadiana today. The same Nunez family that provided pelts and alligator skins for the film operates just such a business today. I spoke with them and took the photograph below in working on this draft of this text. There is no hitching post notable in front of the fur trading post in 2016. But there are places where horses could be hitched. Many alligator skins are farmed today, many come from the broad expanses of the Atchafalaya Swamp and then some do come from the harvest of alligators during the carefully managed hunting season. Alligator hunters discuss the decline of nutria populations in Vermilion Parish and the impact that has on alligators. But in 1948 nutria pelts were the up and coming source of revenue for trappers in the region. Trapping was a more mainstream and less controversial part of life in those days. Today we live in a world where

trappers and fur traders are more defensive about their way of life than was the case in those days.



The world depicted in the somewhat arranged swamp and marsh scenes in Louisiana Story had been changing in the years since the first camera had taken the first pre-production shots for the film had been taken. In the January 23, 1947 issue of the Jeff Davis Parish News there was coverage of a report to the Kiwanis Club. Earl Atwood of Lake Arthur was an employee United States Department of the Interior in its Department of Fish and Wildlife. The man was speaking about the growing importance of the species called coypu and nutria variously. In the 1945 to 1946 season the nutria pelt on the coypu held the sixth place in the number of pelts taken in Louisiana went to the more or less invasive species at 8,784 pelts in the trapping season. But according to Atwood the following season had led to an improvement in the rank of the number of pelts taken to fifth place and the market allowed those pelts to take fourth place in total money value for a species of fur-bearing animal. The nutria (as it is almost always called in Louisiana) had some impact on plague of invasive water hyacinths. Those were promising results for trappers oilmen and anyone else struggling to keep rural waterways open in those days.

In the January 18, 1945 issue of the Jeff Davis Parish News there had been reporting of the shutting down of camps which provided German prisoners of war as local farm labor to area farmers. Four hundred hostile soldiers in that camp had then been returned to Camp Polk. The same process occurred elsewhere in Acadiana and Southwest Louisiana. The fabric of rural life no longer featured these exotic features. America's own veterans returned to seek out a path forward in this as in many other parts of rural America. The oil industry would play a large role in forming the economic structure of rural Acadiana and its fringes from the very moment the war ended. Abbeville was a little East of Jeff Davis Parish and Iberia Parish was East of Abbeville. But trapping farming and the oil industry were affected by these same very specific factors that got little national attention. People cared a good bit about nutria and hyacinths and German POW farm labor. By 1948 the nutria had abated the worst of the hyacinth crisis despite it continuing negative effects to this day. By 1948 POWs were gone and for all practical purposes all the troops were home who would be coming home. Abbeville where the film would premiere was a postwar town in the definable postwar era locally and nationally.

The postwar era if defined in almost any way that one might define it would not end in 1953. The year 1953 is chosen as the end of the period which is the direct focus of this study because it is the last year in which the Standard Oil of New Jersey documentary projects were working in Postwar Acadiana. Actually the date may be imperfect even for that standard but it is suggested by many of the most important and highly accessible sources. When this narrative arrives at the end of the year 1953 we just more or less magically stop without apology. But the postwar reality which had begun to take shape in 1945 was in full swing in 1948 when the film Robert Flaherty had made was exhibited at the Frank's Theater in Abbeville. The idea of a postwar era involves two smaller ideas forming a single complete idea. The idea is first that the war has ended and that is pretty well established in the case of World War Two to a higher and more certain degree than is the case with most wars. The second part of the realization of a postwar reality is the realization that the society, community, region and people being described as postwar entities are not merely the same as they were before the war. Rather they are somehow at least significantly transformed by having passed through the war. *Louisiana Story* was and is, I believe, a truly postwar film. That reality is essential to all that it is. It has a great deal to say about a new stage for the oil industry and for the Cajun people and for the region after the end of the Second World War. The transformations that had occurred during the war years were at a worldwide, a national and at smaller scales. Some of the transformations were directly related to the war, some were indirectly related and some were coincidental. But all of these transformations came together to create a single reality. That reality is what we have been describing as Postwar Acadiana.

The house on Main Street had settled back into its existence as something other than a place to make movies. Robert and Frances Flaherty had completed their last real collaboration on the full and complete work of making a movie. His filmography was not yet complete but the last film would be an editing and reworking of an existing film far more than anything else. *Louisiana Story* had really brought their lives as married filmmakers to a close. They had been busy promoting the film before its premiere and after the last edit and would continue in that mode for

a while. Their agent and principal publicist for Flaherty productions always felt they were not getting enough money for the film in various deals they made with exhibitors and distributors. The Flahertys had been paid all along, they did not have to share any of the current and future proceeds with Standard Oil and they had been able to keep a film unit together under their command for a reasonably long time. People do and don't become very rich for real reasons, in some ways it is not so different than having a talent for sports or music. The Flaherty's had lived well, had made a movie that they were proud of, had built a further basis for their legacy, had unique ties to a major industry. It is really not surprising that they were not in the mood or of the mind to drive hard bargains for the money to be paid by exhibitors and distributors.

In the few years since the surrender of Japan on the ship in the waters joining the vast and far off Pacific Ocean life had changed on the Gulf Coast of the United States of America. Abbeville, Acadiana and the rest of America had decisively and clearly moved from the wartime to the postwar American experience. While things were not yet as they would be in 1953 they were well on their way to that exact configuration of American life and society. The good and the bad of a really postwar way of life was making itself felt. The Louisiana Maneuvers which had trained so many men and some women for service in the U.S. Military during the Big One had involved an element of involvement by several colleges and universities in Louisiana. The funding and resources that came into the region at that time helped to remake Southwestern Louisiana Institute which was in Lafayette, Louisiana and now exists there as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Abbeville is its own Parish Seat in Vermilion. New Iberia and Lafayette are each larger cities that have their own Parishes: Iberia and Lafayette respectively. Lafayette is to the North of Abbeville and New Iberia is to the East. At the time of Flaherty's residence the cities had about an equal influence over the town and Avery Island where they and their SONJ photography visitors traveled most often was almost in New Iberia. But Lafayette was on the way to being the much greater influence and that is true now although New Iberia remains a very important neighboring seat of a neighboring parish. The postwar years brought back many men and a good number of women who had seen much of the world, achieved new skills and made more connections than they would have otherwise and all these factors contributed to dramatically accelerating the pace of life in south Louisiana. The oil business that SONJ was trying to promote and document was indeed growing rapidly, Lafayette which had already had SLI was emerging as a significant medical and financial center. Students and returned military service personnel would be among those attending the premiere of *Louisiana Story*.

Mr. Joel Lafayette Fletcher the former Dean of the College of Agriculture at SLI, became the president of this institution of higher learning in 1941 just before the years at the center of our study at the onset of U.S. becoming fully engaged in World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Not ignoring the draft it is also true that a huge number of people rushed off to volunteer out of reasons not so different than those which caused recruiting to reach new heights after the attacks of September 11, 2001. SLI had not had any really substantial military component to its institutions and so enrollment dropped both at very high rates and very suddenly. Fletcher had faced the prospect of presiding over the collapse of an institution starting with huge reductions in the number of faculty. Fletcher took action and with his academic vice president,

Dr. Joseph Riehl, went to the nation's capital and negotiated all that was necessary for the Navy to locate its V-12 and V-5 officer training programs at SLI. Among the results of all this change was the coming of recruits who were also athletes as All-Americans from many colleges transferred to SLI in Lafayette, Louisiana. As the SONJ film and photography projects were getting underway SLI won the first Oil Bowl in 1943 with these players. During the war years and early postwar years this same institution organized a College of Engineering. Some of it had a military component and a great deal of it would be about preparing engineer for the oil industry and its service sectors even when the engineers were not petroleum engineers as many would eventually be. When World War II ended the school was associated with the Oil Bowl, had served as a major part of the war effort and was ready to provide engineers for the oil industry. The school realized a further advance because of the war when it purchased 108 units of veterans housing, buildings that became known as "Vet Village".<sup>1</sup> The tradition of military roles for schools that were not particularly military was well established in Acadiana. St. Charles College in Grand Coteau in St. Landry Parish was the first Jesuit College in the Southern United States. This school which combined a preparatory academy of high standards and an abbreviated University level curriculum was a key institution for the Cajun elite and others of means in the region during its tenure. It was where future Confederate General Alfred Mouton had studied before attending the US Military Academy at West Point, where future Louisiana Speaker of the House and District Judge Estilette studied before continuing on at Yale. It had been a site for an army student company and a military radio course during World War Two. However St. Charles had closed after a fire in the early 1920s and one more connection to the golden era of Cajun Americanism in the late 1830s and the 1840s was lost. By the time World War II came around a period of real marginalization had preceded the changes brought about by that conflict. The fictional Latours really represented that marginalization in a strong way but one that people could identify with fairly well. Their feelings about the portrayal and the realities it represented might be complex but almost nobody doubted that the oil industry offered the best chance forward for a culture and ethnic community that was not thriving economically to the degree it once had and which was showing other signs of strain. .

War of course is never off of the radar screen of the entire planet. The military culture and the warlike conditions of the war years that had ended in 1945 and wrapped up in 1946 really had left a period of peace which was notable and profound in the Acadiana region. But there were seeds of the next war blooming and not all were oblivious to them. Yet it was already possible to guess that the next war would be huge and bloody but contained in the quiet and sense of restraint created by the unique Cold War conditions that were emerging. . Korea was to be the next place where many men and some women would serve under their country's arms and some would die for these United States of America. Korea had been ruled by the Japanese Empire from 1910 and was one of the last foreign possessions wrested from that dying and remade Empire in the 1945 and 1946 period when so much was happening around the world that defined the closing act on the real and bloody drama that was World War II. As part of that grand finale of struggle at a date later than many Americans would guess once this period faded

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<sup>1</sup> - See more at: <http://www.louisiana.edu/about-us/history/university#sthash.n0gozbZy.dpuf>

into the past, that is in August 1945, the Soviet Union joined in on the great Pacific theater of the war as allowed by the defeat of Germany in its very belligerent form as the Third Reich and declared war on Japan. This Communist ally to the United States who was already becoming a potential adversary in Europe undertook these efforts with the understanding of the United States and by specific agreement with the United States occupied Korea north of the 38th parallel. After the first and only recorded events of atomic warfare and all else that was involved the U.S. forces subsequently occupied the south and integrated a rule of the region tied to the rebuilding of the Philippines and most of all Japan which had surrendered. By 1948 when *Louisiana Story* premiered at the Frank's, two separate governments had been set up on opposite sides of the agreed line. According to what all parties saw as the state of international law both the government of the Soviet client state and the American client state believed the border dividing the country could not be permanent. Each of these countries claimed to be the legitimate government of Korea as a whole -- with some willingness to consider accommodations of the other government's claims and forms to some degree.. Cajuns like other American military personnel were already serving in a region offering signs of future conflict and a serious war at that. The Chinese Civil War was yet another strain in this growing symphony of tension and brewing violence likely to bring in the United States. But despite all of that this was a period of peace and hope in which the oil industry a path into the future and a new order distinctly different from the period before the Second World War or the period of that war. *Louisiana Story* was a good film for that sense of the likely trend of local events.

Postwar Acadiana was increasingly going to be an oil industry dominated Acadiana. *Louisiana Story* told a tale which many could relate to very well. It may not have been the story of very many lives directly in the sense that a tiny percentage of Cajuns or Acadiana residents were trappers and not such a large percentage were landowners who signed oil leases. Yet nonetheless the film was very relatable and relevant in that it showed the oil industry bringing in the promise of a new prosperity. That was in itself a hugely important theme of everyday life and daily conversations. When the film was exhibited it was not terribly hard to connect with local audiences. Horses and buggies and antique wagons nearly filled the town center as people chose to participate and show support for the event and the film that occasioned it. Cajuns were known for being the inhabitants of a part of the country where people kept their old buggies and related gear long after they had begun to rely on automobiles for daily transportation.

One of the realities of life in the Acadiana of the 1940s was that it was a society in which the horse which is absent from the film *Louisiana Story* still played an important role. The horse was still truly useful for working cattle and is still of some use in that regard. However, it had even more usefulness in other areas of life which focussed on ritual and recreation. Horses of course do not burn petroleum based fuels and that may explain why although they are not absent from the SONJ documentary projects they are very little represented there.

The role of Cajun quarter horse racing in shaping the cultural landscape is among the greatest realities in recreational life of the 1940s and fifties. The roots of these events and the impact they had on the larger world of quarter horse racing also revealed a number of realities within



the evolving culture of Acadiana which addressed a set of circumstances that were in themselves due to change. The horse was a mode of transit on and between farms especially for young people when the family automobile and tractors were engaged in the business of farming. The word Cajun had by force of varied circumstances come to have multiple meanings even in the Acadiana region itself and some people grew up especially as white creoles with no blood ties or marital ties to the ethnic community and no grounding in its folklore or associations who believed that they were Cajuns because they spoke French and lived in Louisiana's Acadiana region and were Catholics this was emphasized by the influence of the outside world calling all such people Cajuns in many newspaper and other media outlets. In addition the Cajuns did have many countless ties to the White Creoles in the community's vicinity and were not eager to be too earnest in excluding them. The larger world began to associate many of the most rural and poorest people with being Cajun and very often those people were not at all Cajuns. In fact though poor and very rural Cajuns did exist they might or might not differ sharply from those held up as examples of the group by the incredibly misguided floundering around of the mainstream consciousness. The Cajuns did really do a lot of ritual horseback riding and bring to the areas near the community many racing events and venues. So did some of their neighbors. But among other things the Cajun horseracing world was a form of employment for the most needy young boys and men and a handful of girls as well.

Much like trapping, jockeying offered a life at the edges of a society that was not all that likely to offer many opportunities. Some people made a really "excellent living" at trapping to use the term Helen Van Dongen used to describe Lionel Leblanc who portrayed the trapper Latour. Such people like Leblanc usually had a whole series of enterprises besides trapping to engage their energies and fill their hours or as in the case of Leblanc had a single job or regular position which allowed them to trap as well. A few became fur buyers and brokers and of those a few got rich rich. The abundance of the nutria, the rising market for furs in a world recovering from the austerity of war and many other factors contributed to the sense of hope that trappers had for prosperity. Into all this mix the oil industry in real life as in the film Louisiana Story offered a few new chances for a good livelihood. Even a new canal or an improved waterway in the vast marshes could make the lives of some number of trappers substantially easier. It was also noted fairly early on that the alligator benefitted from the rise of the nutria population. The alligators also controlled what was already coming to be recognized as the real risks and dangers associated with a large nutria population. While the muskrat built a kind of artificial island nest and was a small animal the nutria was much bigger and burrowed into natural and man-made levees which joined with emerging oil activity to disrupt water and drainage patterns. This whole set of pressures on the marsh seemed to be creating more understanding of fur trapping and alligator hunting -- both of which were often done by the same people as in the film. The sense of the way that these pressures would join with other emerging pressures to really challenge the fur trapping industry was not yet very manifest to everyone involved in the newly emerging economic situation in the marsh. People who might attend a premiere of a film in Abbeville were interested in fur trapping and felt as much connected to it almost as to the oil industry. Both industries were relevant to their daily lives.

The horse racing, breeding, cattle working and other industries of the Cajuns and of Acadian were significant. Thoroughbreds get more attention for many reasons but in the world of quarter horses many prizes and titles were associated with this very unique section of a very rural environment. The world of major thoroughbred racing has continued to feel the impact of Acadian's jockeys in recent decades as such greats as Calvin Borel, Shane Sellers, Randy Romero and Kent Desormeaux have created an almost incredible record in that more international, national and glamorous sport. All had deep roots in the races dominated by quarterhorse contests which have for generations filled the rural areas of Acadiana. Today these tracks may be in decline (although how seriously is hard to say) but in 1948 they were very much a going concern. Horses then which appeared outside the premiere in 1948 were very much a symbol of the Cajuns and Acadiana. Of course horses have been symbols of many peoples and countries. In fact that is probably why unlike the Russian bear, the English Lion, the American Eagle and so forth they do not stick. They are real and powerful symbols and images and realities for many peoples and so they do not come to be associated with one people. If there is an animal that now must recognizably be associated with Cajuns it is the lowly crawfish. A distant second would be the alligator. But the horse has always been very important and even now continues to be relatively important. The traditional length for a rural race in Acadiana is four arpents (*quatres arpents*). The arpent is 64 yards. The original yards would have been slightly different from the yards in the American system of measure and on real estate transactions this all led to confusion. However, in the racing world the standard American yard had been completely adopted by 1948. The riding of horses also at the heart of much of traditional identity.

The jockeys that made their livings and rose to some sort of prosperity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were often the most malnourished young boys whose families were perhaps genetically small but also did not have enough to eat. They started off earning enough to get a few meals for themselves and their families and perhaps some would gain enough weight to be disqualified from greatness. The rare combination of malnutrition, genetic smallness and coming to manhood without getting big but while growing in reputation, skill and business savvy laid the foundation for a successful jockey of the era between the 1860s and 1948. But the great rewards of the recent batch of professionals did not exist. Likewise Cajun rodeo cowboys were around and could supplement an income with skills used in ranching and the life of the old *vacherie*. However, this life was not built on the shadows which haunted the jockey culture but neither were Cajun cowboys extremely successful in the world of rodeo. There were plenty who were somewhat successful and there were a handful who were very successful but there was not kind of institutional dominance which united the Jim Boudreaux, Kenny and Jim Bergeron and Ernest Theriot with others in creating a kind of dynastic tradition atop the sport.

In addition the equivalent of the smallest bush races was more like the informal rodeos after a local cattle drive or roundup. That kind of activity fed and defined the local culture and had a lot to do with shaping local life and values but it did not make as good a basis for a larger



connection with society as a whole. It made for a world where the skills of the cowboy were tied to the business of raising beef and breeding horses almost entirely.

The buggies that appeared at the Frank's were part of a dying breed. 1955 is a year that folkloristically and generally speaking one could say and people did say (as confirmed by the Buggy Festival materials online) that almost all regular use of buggies as transportation in Cajun towns effectively ended. In 1961 Church Point Louisiana, which preserved a mounted *Courire* with mounted Mardi Gras riders when changing torts law made it more rare also chartered and organized a Buggy Festival where antique buggies were preserved and paraded. The horse played many roles in Acadiana. Horse breeding accomplishments have been significant. Lynn Richard's book *A History of Cajun Quarter Horse Racing* has done a decent job of documenting the achievements of these local breeders, trainers and jockeys and the fans who supported them in achieving national, regional and even international excellence. The stock used for racing bled its way into the farms and ranches of the region. The sense of communal economy was both real and promoted in this culture. Acadiana does not manufacture cars and trucks. All the dealerships, mechanics and roads in the region will not allow it to participate in the car based economy in the way that it could participate in the horse industry.

The new Postwar era of increasingly worldwide oil and petroleum was a set of opportunities that Cajuns wished to participate in as much as they could. However, it was also a period of many risks. The Cajun rancher could control the herd of horses and make their future and current plans adapt to current conditions. Like many other aspects of life the role of the small town and the common man in the coming years seemed likely to be more passive. But *Louisiana Story* told a true story of trappers given a new security by the newly confident industry. This was set around fictional events but it was the experience of many.

The troubles over lands and navigable marshes, old rights and state laws in the larger swamps would all have new aspects as the oil industry advanced. But those disputes were like the Korean War -- one can see the pieces in place but the troubles are not yet in full swing. Coastal erosion and the role of abandoned canals, cuts and the depredations of the nutria which allowed hurricanes to wreak vast damage. These things would be mostly whispers after Audrey would come in a couple of years and Hurricane Rita was far off. The BP oil spill and the discussions which followed were still a long way from center of most people's thoughts.



The days would come when trappers, coastal ranchers, shrimpers like those pictured above going out to fight the BP spill with specialized gear and others among the Cajuns and their neighbors would have to consider whether the promise of abundance offered in *Louisiana Story* was a fair promise. There would be times of trouble and many problems would not be resolved.

Yet when the film premiered at the Frank's it offered a happy ending that people could relate to easily enough. People wanted to be optimistic about the role of petroleum in the future and they were.