Emerging Views:  
Chapter Three 1947, Fulcrum and Center

Some might critique a few chapters of this text as being mere yearbooks in a text that already uses too many forms of expression in too many ways. That may be a bit unfair to the introduction and the conclusion but it is not so unfair to this chapter. The integrity of a study like this as a work of history is related in no small way to checking carefully with what was going on in the geographical region and in the ethnic and other communities or groups being studied at a given time. In 1947 both the work on *Louisiana Story* under Flaherty and the work of the Standard Oil of New Jersey Photographic collection as administered directly by Stryker were in full swing. The oil industry in the region was in full swing and the Cajun ethnic community was still very much alive.

Having asserted those general kinds of facts for which there is diverse and overwhelming evidence what else can be said? In a chapter examining the year itself what is there to learn?

In Louisiana politics at this time there were two of the most well defined factions within a single political party which have ever existed in the United States of America. The Democratic primary was tantamount to election for virtually every office except the Presidency of the United States where votes cast in Louisiana did not determine the outcome. The Democrats may have referred to their factions as Longist and Anti-Long as they are almost always referred to in historical journalism and documentaries today. But frequently throughout the state and almost always in Acadiana they were known as the Machine and the Home Rule factions respectively. Machine had the advantage that the word was spelled the same and only the pronunciation changed for English and Cajun French. Home Rule was usually said in English even among Cajuns who preferred never to speak English -- and such Francophone purists were rare in 1947. The Home Rule faction was in the Governor’s Mansion in 1947. Jimmy Davis and Dudley Leblanc were on different edges of that faction. In many way Jimmy Davis exemplified the British Louisiana cultural complex from which Cajuns felt alienated. Dudley was a major leader and living symbol of identity in the ethnic community. It was also true that Jimmy Davis’s very British American song *You are My Sunshine* could be given a different interpretation by Cajun politicians. Sunshine was a symbol of Joseph Broussard and the Beausoleil Broussards for most Cajuns and was for a much smaller number a symbol of the last French King who was really admired by almost all of the Acadian elite even if they sought a kind of social independence from him at many levels. That was Louis XIV, the Sun King. A Governor who would sing about sunshine a great
deal was easy to like in those days where the culture had felt most isolated in its history over recent decades. Harry Truman was President and, while there was little reason to believe he thought much about the Cajuns one way or another, some among the Cajuns felt that it was interesting that Missouri which was the second state admitted to the Union from the Louisiana Purchase was the home of the current President. In a place where memories were long there was a sense of attachment to that area and there were still those who had very old business ties all up and down the Mississippi River. Compared for example to New York which had produced both FDR and nourished the documentarians community as such -- Missouri seemed close to home. All of this went with a feeling of cautiously seeking more of an American identity as the really postwar era developed.

Every one of these ten years from 1943 to 1953 can be seen as having its own qualities derived from world events and the state of American society. Each year also has its own unique set of sources to a certain degree. In 1943 World War II is going on and in 1953 the Korean War is going on. The two wars are very different national experiences but in 1947 there is more or less as much peace as a great and powerful country ever has. In this time of peace new opportunities came with a new national prosperity. 1947 a company with was founded by a family with deep ties to the Attakapas country and a name that was commercial and political magic across Acadiana. Yet they were on the eastern periphery in Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish. The Broussard Brothers had one tugboat based in Chalmette, Louisiana. At the time of this writing they have a mile of developed waterfront on the Intracoastal Canal in Vermillion Parish’s Intracoastal City. The Broussard Brothers Company also have a prominent building in the best neighborhood in Abbeville where such a building can be on its own and a fleet of vessels working the Gulf of Mexico. They would create almost all of that wealth in the oil industry and would remain deeply connected to the region and the community. However, there was no reason for anyone to know that would happen in 1947 and their experience is not all that typical of the connections between the ethnic community and the oil industry.

At the time of her arrival in Abbeville in 1946 Helen Van Dongen seemed to feel strongly a desire to make contact with and get to know and rightly understand the Cajuns as individuals and as a community. She seems favorably impressed with the ones working closely with the film. But in my judgement, there is a strong trend to isolation and a giving up on that hope of a connection which is pronounced over time. However, much of that has to do with the stress of work and intensity of her schedule and her sense of responsibility which kept her fully occupied. Much of it could be attributed to those work related factors but not all of this trend could be. She had grown
accustomed to the society of the McIlhenny family, the Documentarians and the Standard Oil people. Interacting with the Cajun community was no longer what she sought out most eagerly. Her loneliness and desire for more pleasant interactions no longer drover her toward the Cajuns. She did not go to church, to Cajun dance halls, did not play golf at the all white but very ethnically mixed Abbeville Country club and did not much like the movies in town. The only movie she describes in detail in the diary she kept was outside of the Parish at a drive in and she does observe the largely Cajun families with small children going out for the evening there -- but not so favorably. There is never anything to indicate what might be called bigotry in Van Dongen's attitude toward the Cajuns that we have any evidence to support. In fact she seems taken enough with Lionel Leblanc at first that one could argue there was a bit of chemistry between the two very different people. But one can easily enough imagine things getting out of hand in the opposite direction. She was single, a bit adventurous, had an eye and an ear for new things. One can imagine her going native and learning the two-step, riding on a float or drinking too much at a Courire de Mardi Gras. One can imagine her complaining about some partner at a fais do do making unwanted advances at the family oriented Cajun street dancing events. You could imagine her complaining about the cruelty of pigs screaming their lives out at a boucherie. Those are not impossible things to picture but it is pretty clear that they did not happen. If some single event presents itself in the record somewhere it does not change the fact that her immersion was very partial indeed. She was surely under no great moral obligation to go native but she seems to have known her involvement was at some level unsatisfactory and by deep into 1947 she no longer worried about the deficiencies in that involvement.

On January 13, 1947 Helen Van Dongen made her first entry of the calendar year in the diary she had been keeping in Abbeville during much of 1946. the entry is brief and merely states, “Today I became an American Citizen.” In March she records moving the last of her editing process to her cutting room in New York. But those few months of entries provide a rich insight into the inner workings of the film and its making. They also provide some very limited but valid and honest insights into the Cajuns and their region. But perhaps the most useful effect of the diary is the degree to which they illuminate not how those making the film viewed the Cajuns but to what an almost extraordinary extent they did not view them in any natural or unscripted context whatsoever.

In a work of this kind it seems useful to take stock in the middle of the narrative of how everything was playing out at a point of importance in the action. The film was merely a proposal which Roy Stryker had prepared to make to Robert Flaherty in March of 1944. Since that time a first research trip and a simple screenplay called “The Christmas Tree” had been created, talent gathered for the film, the locations scouted the numerous
contracts made and largely honored without dispute. The movie had gotten underway in an America still at war that knew victory was coming. But a great deal of fighting remained to be endured and conducted as effectively as possible. Some on the crew had worked on patriotic films, Van Dongen had worked on the *Know Your Enemy, Japan* film. Many Americans and many Cajuns were fighting the war and many were not yet home when the planning for the film had been done. But by the time the contracts were signed in 1946 to start filmmaking in earnest the project had assumed fully its essentially post-war character.

The film *Louisiana Story* was one of the most significant projects of her life and Helen Van Dongen’s day to day life is not very well known to us. outside of her somewhat controverted book published under the title *Filming Robert Flaherty’s Louisiana Story: The Helen Van Dongen Story*. It may be that such a lifestyle could have been glimpsed in interviews when this work was begun but that opportunity was missed. Van Dongen was an attractive woman with presence who had worked with Robert J. Flaherty on *The Land*. Her serious relationship with Joris Ivens is mysterious but certainly grew out of a relationship where she worked as the film editor of an older man. It seems likely that some of the tensions which cropped up in her relationship with Frances Flaherty, Robert Flaherty’s wife grew out of the sexual tensions in the relationship. About a quarter of a century her senior Flaherty turned sixty-three in February of 1947. There is little to suggest he was either a prude or sexually exhausted. he may well have been exclusively involved with his wife and a very ethical employer to Helen Van Dongen. However there have always been rumors and innuendo. Partly the achievements of a woman in her profession were likely to be seen with some level of suspicion. Partly she was more or less and unmarried woman cohabiting with a married couple. But far more than that it has to do with Flaherty. In many ways he was an extraordinarily moral man but perhaps also the kind of man who could have lived in something bordering on polygamy in twentieth century America with very little sense of guilt. There is a real sense of extended family about his operation. Her salary had been the highest of those contracted to work on the film, She had been engaged in relating to all the different personalities and interest groups involved in the film. She had signed her contract when others had done so and that was in 1946. There was little in the contract that gave a great deal of information about the future of her work. However, it does enable one to make some interesting conjectures. In 1947 she was fully engaged in the work of the film. The challenges were truly significant as she had the artisanal challenge of laying in the soundtrack next to the film. Sync sound would owe some of its development later on in the industry’s life to the work of one of her colleagues on this project Richard Leacock. Leacock’s interest was inspired by the hard and demanding work that he saw Helen Van Dongen doing but that did not make theirs an easy relationship. Leacock
also seems to have learned some French from Van Dongen and her involvement with the Acadians around them. While LEacock seems to have enjoyed being part of the family of his wife and daughter and been reasonably devoted to them, someone given to such suspicions cannot help but wondering if Leacock was a bit infatuated with Van Dongen. This could fit psychologically with a more open and pronounced fact regarding his thinking which is that he almost worshipped Flaherty in many ways. Leacock may well have envied Flaherty the way the Helen with whom he worked closely and who was paid more than he was treated and related to the older man. It may be that he suspected sexual chemistry between her and the director whether it was there or not. But all these tensions that may or may not have occurred for any number of reasons were not enough to derail the steady progress of the film. One thinks too of all that could have been strained at times in the lives and establishments of the local Cajun people working on and associated with the film. It seems likely that there must have been some missed cues along the way. But whatever tensions there were when the Mr. Hebert who worked for the crew turned his skills as a carpenter to the new industry of filmmaking they were to produce the needed builds and products without major incident. Likewise whatever tensions there were between Evelyn Bienvenu and Lionel Leblanc playing a couple for the first time, between the real owners and residents of the trapper family cottage where the fictional La Tour family lived between the McIlhenny family and their filming guests — regardless of what challenges this process may have presented the show did go on. Unlike a touring performance it went on being made not being presented.

Lionel Leblanc was living a very different life in 1947 than he usually lived. Like most Cajuns he liked movies and the chance to make one was a source of joy and contentment. He was the McIlhenny family’s assistant manager on Avery Island and a very experienced trapper. He was used to working for a family who were certainly outside of the Cajun community. Nothing in the wilderness to which the oil industry was drawn was unfamiliar to him. He spoke French and English and he was very much aware his Cajun heritage. Representing his culture to the outside world and the outside world to his culture was a familiar task for him. The only unusual thing was making a movie but when that was considered in full and understood clearly it was an enormous change in his way of life. He was aware of the significance of what he was doing in shaping the way Cajuns, Cajun country and the Cajun culture would be perceived across the country for years to come.

Arnold Eagle was watching the progress of the film and was busy contributing in many ways to its progress he was receiving an incredible education that he would pass on to others in the profession of photography for many years to come but he was also
keeping the connection between Roy Stryker's larger operation and the activity going on in and around Flaherty's base in Abbeville. There was a sense in which he as much as anyone else was the real presence of Standard Oil on the site of the filming.

The film was a multifaceted project and everyone was aware of the challenges involved in getting the images, editing the film, working the sound, preparing the music, managing the people and balancing the financial books. One could easily feel that the film was all that any of them would ever have to do. Movies had a way of blocking out every other concern. The “movie people” knew that experience was temporary and for them would be repeated in the next film. However, the others could only reason that this was the case. Whatever perspective they were able to bring from their outside lives they could not help feeling the heady intensity of the filmmaking process. It was also a very special environment centered around the filming headquarters in Abbeville, Louisiana. Abbeville was just big enough to offer the benefits of a town to the crew that were often working in the deep countryside. Van Dongen admits she was unused to cooking for groups of people and when a few times in her time she found she had to cook she seems to claim that almost no foodstuffs were available in Abbeville. That seems on its face to be the most absurd and perhaps the only absurd statement in her Abbeville diary. Even in those days people came to Abbeville to eat and the restaurants acquire almost all the food from sources that other residents had access to. As i myself am one of the most experienced travelers that I have ever met I know that when things become unpleasant there is a tendency to blame the locale for problems really based on one’s own lack of familiarity with the region. The food comments are a sign of this growing alienation in Van Dongen. That alienation becomes a kind of lense of perception through which everything else can be seen. One’s sense of discomfort colors every observation of the region.

Here too there was a blend of forces at work in determining what could and would be the way that Acadiana was perceived. HADACOL was making its way into the national consciousness. It was a powerful economic formula for success and offered a great deal of appeal to an era and style of life in rural America that was passing into the mists of history. It offered access to a little alcohol in places where alcohol could not be sold except as medicine. This also had the advantage over whiskey sold in just the same circumstances that it actually was formulated as a healing potion. HADACOL was certainly not mostly an excuse for a means to get drunk. Its taste made it hard to drink a lot of it compared to almost any other way to access medicine. In fact a great deal has been done to show that moderate alcohol consumption has many health benefits and those were among the primary benefits most people got from HADACOL. One was less
likely to abuse it than tastier and cheaper beverages and so it was a benefit to the consumer who would receive the benefits of a mild intoxicant judiciously administered. That kind of benefit shown to have an effect on hypertension and heart disease comes closer to justifying the whole enterprise than was ever admitted by HADACOL’s critics at the time of its mass distribution. Besides the alcohol however the elixir offered the consumer some nutritional supplements which in fact both mitigate the risks of alcohol and provided benefits to large sections of the population likely to have deficiencies in b vitamins, niacin and iron. Beyond the components of the formula HADACOL increasingly offered intangibles that centered around a sense of belonging and a sense of community. It offered a sense of the glitter and fun of something special for those whose lives were lived in a great deal of hard work, tedium and plain living. None of this solves the basic problem of any perceived cure all. No matter what problems people had with their health someone encouraged them to take HADACOL. How often that someone was Dudley Leblanc is unclear. But he surely knew that it had a cure all reputation. Most things are not as effectively treated by any cure all as they are by the best specific therapies that existed in the late 1940s which existed and were expertly geared to each individual malady. If people who could have gotten better therapy only took HADACOL instead then HADACOL did some harm. It is not entirely clear how much that happened. But it probably did happen to some people.

Foster in *Moral Reconstruction* has shown how the South’s cultural history in an earlier period was of transformation into the Bible Belt, Clearly Evangelical Protestant Christianity had never typified the Cajun experience. But Cajuns had been part of the fabric of Southern experience and were not unknown to any large group in the South. While the distribution of HADACOL at its peak went far beyond the South, Dixie remained a major region and was an early region for its distribution. It could be argued that many in the evangelical Protestant South were conditioned to seek out things like this elixir specifically from Cajuns and had that tradition in their own communities and families. More convincingly it could be argued that they were accustomed to seek out those products and services on the edge of their laws and folkways from French Louisiana whether *Metis*, Creole of Color, Cajun or white creole communities were providing them. Whatever the reason HADACOL was getting more and more attention each year and that attention it received nationally did not have a large effect on the SONJ projects. There is very little about TABASCO hot sauce or any other major commercial operation outside of the oil industry. What did get reported and recorded were mostly small and traditional operations.

Hadacol was a mixture of vitamins B1 and B2, iron, niacin, calcium, phosphorous, honey, and diluted hydrochloric acid in 12% alcohol. It is unclear exactly what the fullest and most definite
But there are plenty of reasons for there to have been problems. In many ways HADACOL was for the Cajuns of this era very much what a more obviously political or paramilitary uprising would be for many other ethnic groups around the postwar world.

America had a long time concern about alcohol and for many dry counties around the rural south HADACOL had become a means of acquiring alcohol at the local drug store. The alcohol content wasn't all that high, but the hydrochloric acid meant it was delivered through the body faster than it would be otherwise. However it was certainly a medicine that delivered a variety of supplements and medicinal components that at least arguably had value in treating the sick. Dudley Leblanc used both the money and the fame generated in the production of HADACOL as part of an overall program which from a Cajun point of view was not so very different than what more violent men have done to lead the forces of a beleaguered people in rebellion against the changes in the larger world that they found most threatening. Cajun beauty pageants, statues of St. Therese of Lisieux in front of Catholic Churches in Acadiana, trips to old Acadie in Nova Scotia and many other manifestations of ethnic identity were expensive and Dudley Leblanc would gain renown in the Cajun community for doing all of those things before his life was over. In those days of the year 1947 the Cajun community could see where State Senator Leblanc was headed and where he had begun. His life was a continuity and a complex one at that. HADACOL would not peak until after Flaherty film had been released it had not yet become all that it would be but it was the biggest single voice coming from the community at the time. The question of what fraud is and what it is not has a cultural dimension. From its start there was an element of magic, entertainment and community that were as important as the element of medicine. But the Cajun traiteur is for all practical purpose a Christian witch or wizard and although that may be somewhat contradictory or even religiously anathema. Dudley Leblanc was more tied to that rich tradition than he was willing to declare clearly, The magical healer may have its problems and weaknesses but it was not an occupation he invented out of whole cloth. American History knows the HADACOL of the very early fifties as the last great American medicine show. the ethnic community to which he belonged knew him as something tied to something even older.

The record of his life has a great deal in it and he is far more than the record shows. It is important to remember that Forest Davis Huey Long's contemporary biographer called him the most dangerous man in America. Dudley Leblanc had been Long’s most effective and serious political opponent back in the 1930s. The machine guns, armored cars, concealed carry squads, political operatives and blackmail masters were easy for many others to forget and Long had his good qualities and his achievements. However, the Cajuns generally did not forget. They trusted Dudley Leblanc to broker the deal between the things they liked about the Share Our Wealth Plan and other aspects of Longism and also protect competing values and sensibilities.

So Dudley Leblanc needed a focus for his accumulation of wealth and his outreach to people outside of his Cajun community. HADACOL was the vehicle that people could tolerate and
sometimes endorse. The mixture really made a lot of people feel better because they were in distress and when they took it the elixir distributed alcohol quickly to the pain centers of the brain and nervous system, And although it wasn't a cure for the many diseases it was advertised for it is worth considering those claims with some definite care. there are a few sides at least to the story. Alcohol can ease high blood pressure in moderate doses, honey can soothe some manifestations of ulcers, iron can help to effectively treat anemia, it seems that with a vigorous placebo effect added in there were surely many people who did in fact experience some curative effects. But even if that were true to a greater extent than we can prove HADACOL was advertised to address many other health concerns.

HADACOL was booming in 1947 and people could see it would be everywhere, on radio, on billboards, in newspapers and magazines, and at the local pharmacy. There was generally a great deal of fear of its use as an alcoholic beverage and a great deal was made of the relatively tiny percentage of the concoction that was sold in liquor stores and bars. In an appeal to justice it was said by those seeking to disgrace Leblanc's empire that people paid $3.50 for a 24-ounce bottle much as an addict will buy a substance upon which they have developed a dependency -- spending their last dollars when they had no food in the pantry. HADACOL in Acadiana funded Dudley Leblanc's French language radio show as it largest and sometimes exclusive sponsor. It was clear to many investigating the HADACOL that was starting to The hope for a better tomorrow trumped common sense in those days, just as it does now. LeBlanc pushed Hadacol on his radio show, which he broadcast in French. He published a medical pamphlet extolling the wonder of his elixir. He gave away swag featuring the name Hadacol on it, including water pistols and a comic book for children with stories drawn from glowing testimonies. LeBlanc wrote a jingle called "The Hadacol Boogie" which was recorded by several artists including Jerry Lee Lewis. He gave out Hadacol tokens, good for 25 cents off a bottle. LeBlanc had to expand his factory, then build more factories. Hadacol use spread from Louisiana across the nation. Millions of bottles were sold every year.

The Food and Drug Administration objected, not to Hadacol itself, but to LeBlanc's use of suggestion and the placebo effect as tools within the caring mutual community. It is not impossible to believe that in the HADACOL community Leblanc really believed that people might have access to others who could better assist their needs for a cure for cancer, epilepsy, asthma, and other diseases when HADACOL itself clearly did not cure them. When claims were questioned he made it clear that he wanted to avoid trouble and direct confrontation with the Federal government. When pressed he always pulled those claims singled out for challenge as false, but the damage was being done with each wave of attacks by all sorts of groups sponsored by the FDA and others. Once an attack had been addressed in those days there were still forward bounding growth. It had not yet gotten to the point that the critics imposed an unbearable obstacle to him in doing business in those days.

Among the significant activities going on at that time was that organizing activity undertaken by Robert Leblanc within the Louisiana National Guard. He organized company H in Abbeville to continue the military service when he had begun when he served in the United States Army and
really with the Office of Strategic Services in Europe and then transferred to the China-Burma theater in World War Two. This was the origin of the Second Battalion of the 256th Infantry Brigade which exists and is headquartered in Abbeville at the time of this writing. This battalion has very distinctive Cajun and even Prairie Cajun identity. Of course there are no ethnically exclusive battalions. However, the Cajuns despite service in all sorts of units have a strong affinity for the militia and its most organized form in the United States -- the National Guard.

Fred Leblanc was Attorney General and Edward Hebert was a Congressman who in the future would become Louisiana’s longest serving Congressional Representative. Neither of these two politicians were particularly publicly known as deeply attached to the Acadiana region of the state. Charlene Richard who is venerated as a saint but has not been formally canonized was born that year. Bobby Charles Guidry who would become a famous musician in his late teens was a young boy in Abbeville and Whitney Adam Leblanc whom we will revisit in the last chapter was a young adolescent in neighboring Iberia Parish going to school and helping out on his family’s farm. There was no great scandal in the fact that the Cajun experience was far broader than was captured by the SONJ projects but it is nonetheless a fact that work they did would represent a great deal of the ethnic community’s experience to a good portion of the American population at one time or another. Lionel Leblanc was a man Helen Van Dongen described as good looking, competent man who made an excellent living and spoke precise excellent English. She at least was concerned about the possibility that he was being exploited and asked to play a kind of naive and backward trapper who not only was not typical but perhaps did not exist at all.

The SONJ project would capture many aspects of Cajun life and culture in these years. Much of their Cajun documentary work would be of the Bayou Cajun environment in the East of the State that went back to Olivier Theriot and La Fourche des Chetimaches would not be of the but besides Louisiana Story they had other work being done in the Prairie Cajun region of the Terre des Attakapas that had Joseph Broussard dit Beausoleil as its direct founding Patriarch. These photographers traveled through Vermilion Parish and visited Flaherty and others more often than not when they were doing work on the Cajuns and it is hard to determine all the lines of communication that existed between these people. But Dudley Leblanc had many connections across Vermilion Parish and he was well aware of most things related to Cajun identity that were happening he probably had at least a part of his mind’s eye focused on this Standard Oil effort to document the current Cajun experience. He left behind a great many personal papers, diaries and logs which have not been properly archived and even a relative harassing the family over the years has not produced an exhaustive inventory. Some have done much more than I have in looking through and copying his papers but I am fairly sure significant papers have been lost. Nonetheless, the Standard Oil documentary projects were not his priority -- that is certain.

My grandfather Frank Summers who knew Dudley Leblanc and considered him a closer relative by circumstance than he would be on a genealogic chart seemed to believe that he and Robert Flaherty met briefly once or perhaps twice and in that time did talk about their common interests. But again the absence speaks louder than the presence. Dudley Leblanc could have provided introductions, speedboats, parties, old photographs and much more but those things did not happen. However, it is a disservice to two extraordinary men to believe that they did not have an
influence on one another. These were both extraordinary conversationalists and if in fact they spoke for a few minutes then it is likely both took away some real influence and information from the other. Flaherty did not lack for a base of support, funding and prestige with which to make an impression on the local people.

Standard Oil was very committed to this great project. The real value of their commitment is not so easy to calculate. Hundred of thousands of dollars were disbursed directly to the people working on and running these projects directly. But the commitment was larger than that. SONJ subsidiaries also provided access and support in kind and any devotion of oil industry assets and time on any kind of large scale has a very high measurable dollar value. but those accounts were not presented to the people in the projects at all in many cases. Doubtless the accounts were better kept somewhere than I have found them. But clearly in 2016 dollars this total outlay runs into the millions of dollars.

1947 in postwar Acadiana was a region very much typified by uncertainty and also a certainty that change would occur and was occurring. The Standard Oil projects captured priceless images of this region at that moment. They brought out real truth and real beauty and pointed out real problems. They showed the viewers that Standard Oil could bring prosperity to a backward region and that was not entirely untrue. They made it possible to criticize what they did not do by doing something that certainly had real value in preserving information and images.

The reader can form an impression of his or her own of what exactly these projects amount to in the broad range of sources with which to view twentieth century America. Whatever the projects may be determined to be they were in full operation in 1947.