

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 16

Into Cajun Country

That one, unexpected, direction-changing phone call in Abilene seven years earlier was still affecting my life as Lea and I, with our six-weeks-old Sol, moved a hundred miles farther eastward into the real Cajun country of south central Louisiana in April 1951.

The French Acadians were deported by the British from Nova Scotia with nowhere to go. Their sad plight was immortalized by Longfellow's *Evangeline*. The Evangeline Oak still stands in St. Martinville. After enduring hardship and loss of life, they were eventually dumped on the Louisiana shore and allowed refuge in the then worthless mosquito infested marshlands bordering the Atchafalaya Basin. These gentle and industrious Acadians drained the swamps and developed a prosperous agricultural industry while nurturing their flavorful French-Catholic culture in relative isolation. The identification of "*Acadian*" soon corrupted into "*a Cajun*." By the time we arrived, the war had done much to blend their society and their new oil industry brought an influx from other states, yet many of the older citizens still spoke French.

From Lafayette westward was rice country but to the east sugar cane was the main product along with peppers, canning, and salt production. By the way, the "La" of Lafayette is not given the Spanish sound like in "Las Vegas," but it is as in "lack." Their flavorful cuisine is legendary but it was not like the supposedly Cajun foods I have found elsewhere that blistered the mouth with fiery peppers. They used peppers for seasoning, not for torture. Their recipes were developed by the poor who might catch a couple of small "pumpkin seed" perch or kill a duck or chicken and make a gumbo or some other dish sufficient, along with rice, to feed the family. Many families hand-ground their own dark roasted coffee which was served with dessert and demitasse between meals.

South of New Iberia were Avery Island and Jefferson Island, not really islands completely surrounded by water, but uplifts of terrain created by huge salt domes partly surrounded by sea. I was privileged to go down about 500 feet below sea level in the salt mine in each of these. I rode the electric mine train used to bring the blasted salt to the elevator a few hundred yards away. They excavated by "floors," leaving support columns in street and avenue fashion. The similar mine in Jefferson Island used large trucks instead of the train, their parts having been lowered by the piece by elevator and assembled underground.

Years after we were away, a drilling rig was at work in Lake Pigneur on the Vermilion River and adjoining Jefferson Island. There was a historic "oops!" for they had drilled into the mine! That shut down both the rig and the mine for the day – and forever! All workers had sufficient time to escape.

Avery Island was owned by the Avery family with son-in-law McIlhenny later developing their industry. You have McIlhenny's Tobasco sauce in you kitchen, no doubt – maybe salt also from there. At that time at least, all the peppers were grown and processed on the Island. We were shown wooden barrels of the sauce in the four-year aging process. With an egret sanctuary over an alligator infested lagoon and the growing of many oriental plants, a Jungle Garden with a real Buddha shrine was oxotically scenic.

Only by following strict rules, such as having no drilling rigs operating in egret season, was drilling allowed. They drilled and produced oil while maintaining the pristine nature of the island.

The small congregation was rather new being composed mostly of transplants, but the fascinating history of Churches of Christ in the area dated back to 1915. Evariste Hebert (pronounced *a' bear*) was born in Vermilion Parish in 1886 and, after finishing high school in Crowley, entered a seminary to study for the priesthood. After three years he had to drop out to provide for his family. In his eagerness to serve he was permitted to do "missions." Doing one in a school house south of Mermentau, an attending Methodist preacher asked him to prove this teaching from the Bible – a book which he had never held in his hands. That set this humble 28-year old man on a life-changing search. His own most fascinating account of his conversion may be read in FR 176, "*The Conversion of Evariste Hebert.*" He was a man of strong mind and commanding presence. After months of being self-taught, he began preaching what he had learned being sponsored by no one. In response to his first sermon, "*What Must I Do To Be Saved?*" forty-eight persons were baptized the same hour of the night. After his second sermon, there were eleven more, and that night sixteen more! At the time my source was written, he had converted over 6,000 people in the area.

As time passed, churches in the Midwest began to "help" them while introducing divisive issues. It is unforgivable that, when my dear friend, Dan Woodroof, came to work in Crowley and I was invited for a meeting, there were four churches of that movement in Crowley with neither in fellowship with the others. As members from these churches moved about and came into our congregation, I welcomed them as fellow disciples without asking which group they were from.

We were greatly influenced in our decision to move to New Iberia by our regard for Susan Dabney Cogdell. She was a dorm mother at ACC and was working on her degree so that she, her son Gaston, and I were in the same graduating class. She had taken over the operation of the bus station café from her older son. Being an industrious and astute business woman of dignity and culture, she offered much stability to the little group and gave Lea and me enthusiastic encouragement. We occupied one of her apartments across the street from the court house. In the middle of the street in front of the house, ran the Missouri-Pacific Railroad with its tremendous steam engines that almost made the houses dance on that gumbo soil. The train that whistled and roared through the first night woke Sol but after that night they never bothered us. About midway through our stay in New Iberia, a three bedroom brick house was built beside the church building.

Evidently, the earliest meetings began in one of Susan's houses. Foy E. Wallace, Sr. served with them briefly, then for a number of years Kenneth Badgett commuted from Port Arthur. Local members like Lewis Nelson and Ray Lewis, a high school student, brought many lessons. A 40' x 60' concrete block building was erected on Ann Street in 1950.

In order to have a rotation of free radio time, I began meeting with the Ministerial Alliance, which sort of thing was always a no-no because it seemed so compromising. I quickly learned that the few other members were equally as scrupulous as I was and they carefully respected each other. Soon a second radio station was begun and we got a Sunday morning broadcast. Then the station made us a tremendous offer for fifteen minutes additional time at high noon Monday through Saturday. A church in Alabama

helped us pay for it. So, very soon I found myself doing eleven radio, class, and pulpit lessons each week. Lea and I met each Thursday evening with a group of devoted sisters in a community hall on Anderson Street. As was true during those horrid times of segregation, they were welcome to attend our gospel meetings if they sat on the back seats. They were labeled “colored” instead of the current “black.” Lea’s singing with and teaching of the numerous children was enjoyed by us adults also. Eventually, those ladies with little help or leadership from men saved frugally to build a small block building putting me in charge of the construction. In our eight years there, we missed very few Thursday meetings with them.

We usually had two “gospel meetings” each year using preachers who were supplied by other congregations as mission efforts. Some of the preachers that I remember were Jack Exum, Thomas B. Warren, Dan Woodroof, Bill Crews, Luther Blackmon, Elmer Moore, Leonard Johnson, George Thompson, Robert Lyles, Walter Calvert, and Glen Purdy. We had known Tom Warren while he taught school in Liberty, Texas. Dan Woodroof became one of our dearest friends. In his meeting with us 21 persons were added by baptism. It was my joy to baptize seventy converts in New Iberia, a number of them having been reached through the radio program. By the time we left, the congregation had grown to around 120 members after about twenty becoming charter members in a new church in Franklin.

Even though it was no part of a work agreement, in addition to my eleven lessons each week, I was “allowed” to mow the lawn, do janitor and repair work, wax the floor, deal with all beggars with no resources supplied, visit all the sick, newcomers, and delinquents, and to hold a few out-of-town meetings.

By this time Lea was a seasoned teacher of both the ladies and kids and was an organizer of projects such as Vacation Bible School. She loved doing those things but resented people expecting her to do their work because she was the preacher’s wife. Our inexperienced song leaders depended heavily on her clear voice to help with the singing from her seat. Too, we were trying for a second child but the Lord seemed not to be cooperating.

In about three years the congregation became fully self-supported due to the loyalty and self-denial of the members. Being excited by the outreach and growth, they willingly, without complaint, sat in straight-backed, cane-bottomed chairs. We never had elders in the group but got along better than in most of the congregations I served where we had them. It was exciting that people were being brought in. Looking back, I can cringe at some of the simplistic and narrowed concepts I taught, but basically I was preaching the saving gospel in simple terms. Continued responses kept an air of expectancy alive in the group.

Is there a sense of expectancy where you attend? When that is lost, it indicates that we have abandoned our mission and we turn inward. With vision focused inwardly, a group tends to raise tedious, divisive issues and to want things that make their meetings more comfortable and less boring, with things designed to be less embarrassing when visitors come. But visitors do not come for soft seats and artistic decor; what they want is the answer to their real needs. Others are more impressed with people excited about their message who unselfishly give up conveniences. Crowded buildings carry a message lost in a spaced-out audience. The great people in our congregation kept that zeal alive for years. And we grew! Groups that become more grace-oriented are vulnerable to turning

inward and losing their zeal to convert. Continued lessons promoting spiritual growth may have reverse effect in making sanctification seem complicated and unattainable. The listener may interpret the messages to mean his faith is too weak and that he can never trust, learn, grow, give, pray and do enough to reach the high goals demanded.

In our second year a 64-year old man, in his first visit, asked to be baptized. He explained that he lived in Loreauville, a neighboring town and had been listening to our broadcasts. Much we learned about this courageous man later. Many years before, his wife had left him for another man. Upon his remarriage his church rejected him. He lived years with that injustice but then began a search by listening to all sorts of radio preachers. Earnest Pitrie was illiterate but intelligent. In spite of extreme opposition he had come that morning. Now he had an impelling ambition – that of learning to read the Bible! His age, poor eyesight, and illiteracy made it seem impossible. I bought for him a record player, a recording of the New Testament, and an extra-large print New Testament. By the age of seventy he had worn out the records so that I had gotten another set and he had followed along the printed page while listening until he could proudly read the text. I have hardly given you the flavor of the story here, but reading Chapter 6, “*You Are My People Now*,” in “Free To Accept” will bring tears of admiration for Earnest Pitrie who gave up all to serve Christ. He was one of the most memorable men I have known.

When I arrived at the building one Sunday morning, two men were standing outside waiting to ask a question I had never been asked before. They wanted to know if it would be all right for them and their family to worship with us. They explained that they had been listening to my broadcast and also to those of a French-speaking brother in Crowley. They had gone to him for baptism; he had taught them how to have family worship in their home in St. Martinville; they had been doing that for a long time, and now would it be permissible for them to meet with us. Who could but welcome such inspirational people? They began attending and were welcomed gladly. It was two weeks or more before Lea and I drove over to visit with them. Enjoying the hospitality of this intelligent family, a strange awakening came upon us. They were “colored!” -- not by complexion but by remote ancestors. I came to learn that those gentle people lived in a social vacuum – rejected by both white and black! I was happy that they were being loved in the congregation in that time of the great civil rights movement.

After a long time, maybe two years, I was blindsided in a business meeting with the men. Evidently, they had discussed it in a private session without me and, in view of rumblings from the community, had decided to rescind their welcome. Being stunned, I ask which one of them would go out and give them that news. Then I volunteered, for I wanted them to hear it from someone who loved them. When Lea and I went to them and told of the matter, that dear brother reacted so humbly that I wished I could slip out under the back door like a cockroach. I promised to meet with them each Sunday after my early broadcast. Usually taking a high school boy with me, I did that for the rest of my tenure there. What was another lesson added to the eleven I already had each week! They continued to express love for the congregation, and years later were invited back where some are still serving.

The radio station stood by me even when a delegation once came trying to put me off the air and another time when kin of Earnest Pitrie mounted a call-in protest. Later, wanting to adjust their schedule which would slightly change my time spot, the station offered to give us a second broadcast free later each afternoon Mondays through Saturdays! So for

the next fifteen months I had eighteen lessons per week. I cannot remember what I did in my spare time.

One time I figured that we had 2,340 consecutive days of broadcasting and 2,800 broadcasts, some being done by guest speakers during our meetings. My count also indicated that during my more than eight years in New Iberia, I taught over 4,000 lessons from pulpit, radio, and classroom. Because the church supplied no recorder or tapes, most of the broadcasts were made live from the station. With the cooperation of the station, I did make a number of recordings which I used when out of town. In later years I led singing for a meeting in Lafayette and Winn Hawkins gave me \$100 with which I bought a recorder, but I still went to the studio much of the time making the outreach more personal. On days when Lea taught the ladies' class, five-year-old Sol would sit in the studio with me quite as a mouse while I spoke. Many times I began speaking into a defective microphone and had to start over. In one case I shifted to the other studio where that microphone failed also and I finally did the broadcast from the control room in the announcer's seat. I still have three worn out ten inch vinyl records of the ACC A Cappella Chorus' rendition of "*A Wonderful Savior*" used as the theme to begin and end about 2,800 broadcasts.

Only two medium-sized buildings served the 15,000 / 20,000 Catholics in New Iberia by their scheduling masses at two-hour intervals beginning a 4:00 a.m. They did not feel that they should all meet at the same time like we have done at great expense. Many devout parishioners went to mass every morning, and the radio stations broadcasted the rosary at 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. daily for recitation in their homes.

I have many happy memories of the great people in New Iberia, one being our volleyball games. We were volleyball freaks. Mixed choose-up teams played even in winter when we wore gloves to protect our hands and when the outdoor court was like a "slip and slide." A number of men who first came for that family fun were led to obedience to the gospel and later grew to be leaders in the church.

During those years a handsome and eloquent Baptist preacher my age with the boyish name of Billy was beginning to gain popularity. Ever hear of him? Another handsome fellow, a newscaster my age also, was honored guest at the Sugar Cane Festival in New Iberia. As he rode in the parade he spotted Lea standing close by, fixed his gaze on her with a mischievous grin, and gave her a wink. He had an eye for beauty! Lea always remembered Paul Harvey's flirtatious wink with delight! []

(Cecil Hook: May 2006)