Scattered to the Winds

By William J. Thibodeaux

My name is William J. Thibodeaux, and I am one of five children, the second to oldest born to Wilson (a WWII army combat infantryman in the West Pacific Theatre) and the former Rose Mae Menard. My parents, grandparents, and all my ancestors were Acadians, who later became known as Cajuns. My ancestors had been living in Acadie also known as New France (now Nova Scotia) since the 1630s. My great, great, great, great grandfather, Pierre, was the first Thibodeau (without the x at the end of his name) to set foot on North American soil. He was the progenitor of the Thibodeau family. After more than a hundred years, the Acadians were exiled from their land by the British. It was called "*Le Grand Derangement*," the great upheaval. The great sailing ships arrived for loading on September 10, 1755. The scene was mass confusion and despair. The women, children, and elderly were forced to pull carts with their household effects, while the men and young boys were loaded at gunpoint onto other crowded ships. They were intentionally kept separated. Their personal and household items were deliberately left on shore for the English to take and do as they please. Their homes and fields were burnt to the ground, and their livestock slaughtered. This was the beginning of the greatest example of ethnic cleansing of white people in North America, and perhaps where Sherman got the idea of scorched earth policy.

Let me be clear, the great sailing ships they were loaded onto were not British, but American ships from New England! Once on board the large sailing ships, not only were the Acadians packed like sardines, there was no place to sit comfortably and the food supply was inadequate. The French speaking exiles had to remain below deck, and only six at a time were allowed topside for a few minutes each day. The weather at the time of the deportation was especially severe. Many died during the voyage and were simply tossed overboard unceremoniously. An estimated 14,000 to 18,000 French Acadians were deported between 1755 and 1763. Historians estimate that approximately half of all the Acadians died as a direct result of the deportation, primarily due to shipwrecks, disease, and exposure. It was one of the most horrific episodes of inhumane treatment of people in North American history.

Many of the French Acadians were sent to Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Georgia, the Carolinas or Virginia. However, wherever they went, it was always the same; they were unwanted, they were teased and laughed at because of their strange language, and they were treated like the plague. They did not have proper clothing and what they did have was dirty, threadbare, and tattered. They were literally starving while New Englanders stood by and watched. Some were barely surviving on acorns gathered in the nearby woods, while others were reduced to eating shoe leather, carrion, and even animal dung. While the Acadians were exiled to many parts of the world, the English were busy resettling Acadie with English-speaking, Protestant colonists, and English loyalists from the New England states. Ces maudits Anglais!

Check out *Acadie, Then and Now* by fellow authors Warren Perrin, his wife Mary, and Phil Comeau published in 2014 by Andrepont Publishing, and another excellent book titled: *A Great and Noble Scheme* published in 2005 by John Mack Faragher. Note Phil Comeau who is from Canada does not have the X at the end of his name. More on that subject shortly. The following is an excerpt from my study of Acadian genealogy: "The French speaking Acadians believed they were being separated for only a few days, but they were wrong. They were so widely dispersed that most would never meet again; they were scattered to the winds. The families were intentionally separated to eradicate the Acadians and to destroy them as people. The taking of their rich and fertile land was the main reason for their exile from Canada and it had little to do with the fact

the Acadians were Catholics rather than Protestants. Their story inspired the most popular American poet of the 19th century, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who wrote, Evangeline, *A Tale of Acadie* in early 1847. Longfellow had heard the story from Edward Simon of St. Martinville, Louisiana, one of Longfellow's students at the time. Simon was never credited for his contribution to Longfellow's poem and, instead, Longfellow credited one of his friends. Edward Simon had heard the story numerous times while growing up in the Attakapas country as the area around St. Martinville was known. Simon later became one of Louisiana's greatest judges and, subsequently, a Louisiana Supreme Court justice."

When the New England planters arrived on the property that previously belonged to the Acadians, they were immediately confronted with the problem of repairing the dikes. The dikes were in such disrepair that the fields were inundated with salt water. The Acadians possessed the important skills and essential knowledge about the province's agricultural system and waterways. The Acadians were known for their hard work and especially at building and maintaining the dikes and reclaiming land. Many of the new property owners asked the governor to please encourage the Acadians to remain to assist them. Governor Charles Lawrence made arrangements to release the Acadians from prison, who had managed to escape the British army during the roundup, so that they could teach and assist the new landowners. Charles Lawrence became Governor Lawrence in 1756, when Governor Hobson resigned the post. Lawrence served as governor until his death in 1760. *A vrai Fils d'putain!*

Some of the Acadians were sent to England, where they were placed in prisons until after *La Guerre de Sept Ans*, (the Seven Years War) was over. In France, the Acadians were too far out of step and out of time with the French, and they lived in poverty. Their future was bleak. Some of the French Acadians were sent to the French Caribbean and French Guiana, and some sought refuge in the Falkland Islands, all to no avail. Most returned to France penniless. The Acadians arrived in Louisiana between the years 1763 and 1785, and well before the Louisiana Purchase and before Louisiana became a state. Back then, the French and later the Spanish ruled Louisiana. One of the first things most Acadians did whose names ended with "eau" was to add an X behind it. There are a couple of explanations as to why, but the most logical one was to differentiate themselves from their cousins in old Acadie.

The Acadians were agrarian farmers in old Acadie, and most became agrarian farmers in Louisiana. Some of the Acadians became American cowboys. The first cattle drives were not from Texas to Kansas, as many of us were led to believe. They went east from Texas to New Orleans. The following is a short excerpt from my good friend and fellow author Tom Linton of San Antonio: "The story of the original cowboys of the Gulf Coast salt-grass prairies began long before Stephen F. Austin established a colony in the area and invited settlers to join him. It began with dispossessed farmers and nomadic cattle herders from as far away as Scotland, Nova Scotia, and Africa."

These cowboys and cattlemen lived a life far removed from the glamorous accounts that Hollywood would have us believe. Originally, their trail drives took them east to New Orleans during the Civil War years, and later north along trails with names like Chisolm. It has even been said that the mystique of the cowboy of the wild, wild, west owes its existence to these cowboys of the wild, wild east. *Mais, pense donc*.

Back when Charles Lawrence was lieutenant governor of Nova Scotia, he was responsible for writing the Acadian deportation order. The following misbegotten scoundrels were the most responsible for the atrocities perpetrated on the Acadians: William Shirley, Governor of Massachusetts; Charles Lawrence, the Governor of Nova Scotia; Jonathan Belcher, the Chief Justice of

Nova Scotia; Edward Boscawen, Vice Admiral of the Royal Navy; Savage Mostyn, Rear-Admiral of the Royal Navy; Charles Morris, Justice of the Peace at Halifax; Robert Monckton, Colonel of the British Army; John Winslow, Colonel of the British Army; all of the members of the Nova Scotia Council; and John Handfield who was appointed Counsel of Nova Scotia and later, after deporting many of his Acadian in-laws, was appointed Lieutenant Colonel in the British Army.

There are now well over two million Acadian descendants worldwide, with the largest concentration, more than 800,000, in Louisiana. In December 2003, the Queen of England announced, "in a carefully worded Royal Proclamation," an official acknowledgement of responsibility and designated July 28th of each year as a day to commemorate the Great Upheaval, which began in 2005. My good friend, author, historian, and attorney Warren Perrin was responsible for his unending pursuit toward obtaining the royal proclamation.

My parents and grandparents grew up in a French speaking community known as *Marais Bouleur* in northeastern Acadia Parish, east of my hometown of Rayne, Louisiana. My grandparents on both sides never attended school. The Acadian French language is a spoken language, not a written one. My mother was a high school graduate. Back then there was no twelfth grade, only the eleventh. My father went up to the fifth grade. He had to drop out of school to work and help support his family who were sharecroppers. When my mother and father attended school, they were forbidden to speak French on the school grounds. A 1916 mandate provided that they could be severely punished if they were caught. Barry Ancelet, professor emeritus at our local university in Lafayette often said it caused a lot of students to wet their pants because they could not ask in English to go to the rest room.

What were the students to do? The only language most of them knew how to speak was French. The following is a short excerpt from *Mon Cher Camarade*, published by my friend Pat Mire: "During World War II, hundreds of French-speaking Cajun men from South Louisiana enlisted in the U.S. military. Their linguistic skills and French heritage had been denigrated for decades in South Louisiana and was ridiculed as well by American officers in the processing centers at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and Fort Polk, Louisiana. Remarkably, these same men found that their ability to speak French became of vital importance to the American war effort in French North Africa and in France and Belgium. French-speaking Cajuns not only worked with the French resistance after D-Day, but they also provided the U.S. Army's most effective means of communication with local authorities and the civilian population, which, in turn, provided critical support and intelligence to the American army. Indeed, Cajun translators were as important to the American war effort as the much acclaimed Native American 'Code Talkers,' yet, the Cajun translators' contributions in this regard have been largely ignored until now."

Between 1962-1967 there was a television program aired by ABC titled Combat! Vic Morrow, Rick Jason, Jack Hogan and Pierre Jalbert, a Canadian who played as "Caje" (short of Cajun) starred in the program. In the movie series, Caje was supposed to be "a Cajun from New Orleans" of all places. First, there are very few actual Cajuns that willingly choose to live in New Orleans. Second, Caje spoke Canadian French, there is a difference, which is the main reason why Cajuns were chosen as French interpreters during WWII. Germans during WWII knew full well what a true Frenchmen from France sounded like. Cajuns from Louisiana sounded more authentic than their cousins from Canada. Now back to Combat! I remember watching the TV series and hearing Caje speak. But for the life of me, I couldn't understand everything he was saying. I would catch a word or two but that was it. Why didn't Hollywood have an actual French speaking Cajun? Did Hollywood perhaps unwittingly discriminate against the Acadians? Probably not. I bear no animosity toward Mr. Pierre Jalbert, he was just doing what he was paid to do. Hollywood, that's

another thing. There were plenty of Cajun actors that would have gladly played the part. The insults just don't quit.

In the early 1970s, there was a movement afoot to bring back the French language and the Cajun culture and one result was the creation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), an organization paid in part by the French government as well as the state of Louisiana. CODOFIL brought French teachers from France, Belgium, and Canada. The age-old question does the government ever do anything right comes to mind. The children learned French but unfortunately it was standard French, not Cajun French. The children spoke French, but their grandparents could not understand what was said. The reason for this is that when the first French settlers came to North America in the early 1600s, they spoke the language of their mother country. However, they were now separated from their countrymen by thousands of miles. New words and phrases from the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet Indians were added to the Acadian language. When the Acadians came to Louisiana, new words from the local Attakapas and many other Indian tribes as well as words and phrases from African Americans were also added to the Acadian language. So, the Cajun language evolved from their original French or Parisian language. The Parisian dialect also changed over the years. There were many inventions that were developed over the years that the Acadians of old Acadie and Louisiana had no names for, e.g., automobiles, computers, aircraft, to name a few. They were isolated people and they just wanted to be left alone.

Barry Ancelet, who I mentioned previously, said if they truly wanted to conserve a French language, why not conserve our Cajun language that was spoken here at the time (1972). No, that's not what happened. They hired French teachers from everywhere but here. As mentioned earlier, the Cajun French language is not a written language, it's a spoken language. The French speaking educators from Louisiana could have learned and standardized the Cajun French words and phrases. A group of five men organized CODOFIL, none of which were Cajuns. There was one Canadian out of the five, the others were English speakers.

I must explain what Acadiana is. It is the official name of the French speaking parishes. Of the 64 parishes in Louisiana, twenty-two of those parishes make up Acadiana. Lafayette is in the heart of Cajun country. I digressed a bit to explain Acadiana, now back to my biography. When we were kids, most parents in the Acadiana area taught their children to speak French. For many of us, it was our primary language, and in Louisiana, it was the language used to conduct business transactions, probably until the 1930s. The language is still alive and well today, spoken by a good bit of people, especially people of my age and older. When I went to school, I failed the first grade because I did not speak English well enough. I was not alone. I know several others that were held back. In addition, each year during the summer break from school, beginning around the 15th of August when the cotton crop was ready for picking, my brothers and I, and some of our neighbors, would pick cotton from sunup to about four o'clock in the afternoon. We were probably ten or eleven years of age back then, and we were paid two cents a pound. Times were different back then. I would pick around a hundred pounds of cotton each day. We used the money to purchase school supplies, shoes, and clothes. It was hard work, especially in the Louisiana heat and humidity. Unfortunately, when school began, a good deal of the cotton crop was still in the field. Each year we would miss the first two or three weeks of schools and sometimes perhaps more. We were not the only ones; a lot of my school mates also missed school for that very reason.

The unfortunate thing about missing school, you were behind and at that age, we were intimidated by the school teachers. We were afraid to ask questions in an effort of trying to catch up. I was always interested in getting a job and making money. And when you are a kid, you think about

William Thibodeaux while serving in the United States Navy.

all those other kids graduating from school and competing with you for jobs. I needed an edge. I am sorry to say that I dropped out of school in the tenth grade. That was stupid. I regret it and think about that every day. As long as I can remember, I had always wanted to join the United States Navy. The Vietnam war raging at that time. I had planned that my parents would sign allowing me to join the military. However, because of Vietnam, they would not sign. I guess they were hoping that I would go back to school. Wrong. I got a job working for a sheet metal company for one year until I turned eighteen and then I signed to join the Navy. As stated previously, I quit school. However, I never stopped learning. While at sea, most sailors read. Someone handed me a copy of Von Ryan's Express. My love for books and learning evolved at that point. Back then and after leaving the military, I continued reading. However, I usually read non-fiction. As I would read and when I came across words I didn't understand, I had my trusty dictionary handy. I would write the word followed by its definition. I still have the note book where these words were written in along with books I have read. I still read every day. And the definition of words, thanks to the age of digital electronics, it is a snap to lookup a word. They're built into the reader. And just in case, I carry four library cards with me.

I returned home from the Navy after serving from 1967 to 1969 on board the U.S.S. O'Bannon DD-450, a WWII steam driven destroyer. It was the most decorated ship in the navy during WWII behind the U.S.S. Enterprise. Strange as it may sound, during WWII, the O'Bannon actually sunk a Japanese submarine when a few scullery guys began throwing Irish potatoes at it. Of course, the crew of the sub, thought grenades were being lobbed their way. The sub dove under while hatches were still open. When I came aboard some twenty years later, the plaque honoring the sailors was still firmed affixed to the starboard side of the bridge of the ship.

I hired out with Southern Pacific in August 1970 — during the hottest month of the year. I was a track laborer and I was first assigned to work with a crossing gang in Devers, Texas, west of Beaumont. Most of the work was done by hand using picks and shovels. I later became a track foreman and then a production supervisor. I got married in 1977 and we did not have any children. In 1984, I became roadmaster on the Schriever, Louisiana district, between New Orleans and Lafayette. All throughout my railroading days, I worked between New Orleans and Houston. At about the same time that I became roadmaster, there was much discussion about computers being on the horizon and that clerks were on the way out. Before then, I did not know how to use a typewriter or a computer. So, unbeknownst to my superiors at Southern Pacific, I enrolled in evening classes at the local vocational-technical school. I took data word processing, computer programming, and typewriting. I had also purchased a secondhand typewriter to assist me. So, when computerization came, I was ready. One day, while in my office at Schriever, one of my superiors from Houston entered the office while I was typing. He was amazed to see me writing on the computer while holding a conversation. He always brought that up when we'd meet.

Superintendent Jack Jenkins, on left, recognizing William Thibodeaux's outstanding achievement for safety on the Lafayette Division in 1986.

I am proud to say that in 1986, Southern Pacific won the prestigious Harriman Award among all the U. S. Class 1 railroads. That was the first time Southern Pacific had won this respected award since 1928. And also, 1986 was the year the Lafayette Division was first in safety under the leadership of Superintendent Jack Jenkins. I am equally proud to say that my M/W District (Schriever) was first in safety over the other maintenance of

way districts — nationwide!   Southern Pacific went on to win the Harriman Award the next year and the following year. Southern Pacific ran a tight ship at that time.

Sometime before the finalization of the Southern Pacific/Union Pacific merger, and after the Lafayette Division became a part of the Houston Division, I made a hyrail trip over my district with a couple of engineering supervisors from Houston, whose names will remain anonymous. As usual, I had my track chart and every now and again, they (the two dudes from Houston) would point out a certain grade crossing and instruct me to remove it. They believed there were too many private road crossings over Southern Pacific's trackage. Once we reached the end of my territory, they again repeated their demands about removing the crossings before their next visit. They even went so far as saying if anyone complained, those people could call them at the telephone numbers they left with me. Aye aye, sir!

At about this same time, Southern Pacific had a road crossing removal program in place. For each crossing removed, Southern Pacific would give one railroad approved wristwatch. My crews began removing crossings, probably about 23 of them, which were mostly farm crossings. Before and after photos of each crossing were taken with the mile post location. They were sent to a Mr. Johnston out of Kansas. Within a few weeks, all of the crossings were removed, and the track was nicely resurfaced. The railroad wristwatches had also been delivered for my distribution. Meantime, I had received several complaints. No problem. I sympathized with the farmers and gladly gave them the telephone numbers the dudes from Houston had provided. This was during the height of sugarcane grinding season, and as mentioned above, this was just before the Southern Pacific/Union Pacific merger. Southern Pacific management in Denver did not want any surprises.

A restored private road crossing.

When the farmers called Houston, they were told "how the cow had eaten the cabbage" as one of the dudes liked saying. Well, it was not long before Southern Pacific's chief engineer, who will also remain anonymous, called and asked what was going on. I informed the chief about the hyrail trip and the instructions (demands) I was given. The chief informed me about the merger negotiations and about the many phone calls he was receiving from senators and congressmen ranting about their constituent's crossing complaints. I was told to put the crossings back in service as soon as possible. We did install the crossings and by years' end, every employee on my district who did not have an injury, received a railroad wristwatch. We were injury free that year too, I might add.

One of my favorite required duties was riding a train over my assigned territory twice each month. It was an inspection trip and I always learned from it. It also allowed me the opportunity to visit with different train and engine crews while inspecting the railroad. And I am proud to say that during my time as roadmaster for Southern Pacific, there was never a track caused derailment on the main track. Never! Sometime after the merger, I placed a bid to become manager of track maintenance for the Union Pacific's Livonia Maintenance of Way District (a part of the Livonia Service Unit), a territory which I had not seen. My bid was approved, and I stayed in that position until I developed Blepharospasm, a rare bilateral eye disorder. It is an uncontrollable closing of both eyes. The affliction usually strikes individuals while in their fifties. It is also a hereditary ailment, normally passed from parent to child and usually from female to male or vice versa. In my case, my mother had it and passed it on to me. I get Botox injections, or a synthetic equivalent of it every three months, which attaches to the nerve endings near the eyes and temporarily stops the eye closures. It is ironic that I was affected by this condition, as I can honestly say that I never filed a personal injury report.

When I retired, I joined a "life writing" group sponsored by our local university. I would write stories; some were about the people, events, and other subjects related to Southern Pacific that I heard about during my railroad years. I was asked to submit some of the stories to the local newspapers for publication. I kept attending the writing group and I also attended non-accredited classes at the university. I chose classes that I enjoyed, e.g., history, anthropology, and folklore. I would often view old newspaper articles of long, long ago from the university's micro-film collection. I began writing articles using information from those old newspapers. I was soon writing stories for two and sometimes three newspapers. My articles at one time appeared in the local newspaper each week — sometimes with two stories in the same newspaper. Once, the local paper published three of my articles in the same edition. I was excited. One of my folklore classes was actually titled: *Heroes and Outlaws* with Professor Barry Ancelet. I enjoyed his class. He encouraged me to continue writing. Today, I write articles for two local newspapers, and I submit similar stories to local historical societies for publication for their members. Over the years I've been invited to speak to numerous organizations about Southern Pacific and Cajun history and culture.

While taking classes at the university, I also attended French table gatherings that are usually sponsored by local cafés, coffee shop, and often times at the local library. After doing that for a while, and probably during the BP oil spill crises, I was asked to lead a French table in my hometown. I would write perhaps twenty-five or thirty Cajun French words/phrases for our Saturday morning gatherings. Each French word or phrase was followed by the English definition of the word or phrase. Each French table is structured differently. I liked using the words and phrases, while other groups do not. At some point, I sometimes invited guests to speak about an aspect of Cajun culture. In the beginning, I audio taped our sessions and sometime later a good friend brought his camera and we began audio/videoing the sessions. In 2011, my then wife and I divorced after 34 years of marriage. Despite the divorce, I continued writing and leading the French table. I continued with invited guests, probably monthly. Two years later, 2013 I married Judy, a country lady from the duck capital of the world — Gueydan, Louisiana.

William J. Thibodeaux, author and fervent supporter of Cajun history and culture.

In addition to the French table and writing articles, I interview interesting people, which in turn, are highlighted in new articles that I write, and I also conduct a two-hour, monthly history talk, which has grown over the years. That is until the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the routines we used to take for normal. I would use some of my articles as the topic for the monthly talk and sometimes guests with interesting stories were invited to participate during the talk. I was doing the history talk for more than five years. The year 2019 was a great for my involvement in all things regarding Acadiana and Cajun. In February 2019, I was inducted into the *Order of Living Legends* for my work with the French table, local news stories, and for the history talks pertaining to Cajun culture and local history. My first book appeared on newsstands, Amazon.com, and elsewhere in July 2019. The title of the book is: *Hidden History of Acadiana*. It is a collection of short stories of people, places, and events of long ago in Acadiana. I am currently working towards completion of my second book. I love doing what I do. I am an avid reader and writing articles keeps me chasing after new stories. I continued with the French table gatherings and the history talks until the Covid-19 pandemic arrived. Both are on hold until Covid-19 is behind us. I continue writing my newspaper articles. And of all the things I am involved with, there is not a day, not a single day goes by that I do not think of the time when I dropped out of school. I count my blessings every day that I was employed by

Southern Pacific. My life might have gone awry if I hadn't. I was truly fortunate to work for Southern Pacific, which is something that I acknowledge regularly.

In closing, the author Daniel Wallace once wrote: "When a man's stories are remembered, then he is immortal." My stories are my legacy.