

Rednecks, Roughnecks and the Bosco Stomp: The Arrival of the Oil Industry in the Marais Bouleur

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Oil was discovered in a *bassière* or low spot just north of Jennings, Louisiana, in 1900. This discovery, made by drillers and developers spilling over from the field on the East Texas prairie called Spindletop, led to the establishment of the Evangeline Oil Field. Almost immediately, speculators began looking for other low spots on the prairies to sink their wells. One their next attempts, in a low spot between Mire and Cankton, proved unsuccessful. Subsequent drilling, in 1927, brought in a single producer near Bristol. However, all other drilling in that area turned up dry. Five years later, in 1932, Superior Oil Company made a discovery on Ophy Hernandez's land near Bosco. Soon after, wells on Isrenhausen, Larcade, and Melancon lands in the same area came in. These were the forerunners of the Bosco Oil Field, the development of which had a major impact on the lives and culture of the people, especially the Cajuns, living in the area.

The Bosco Oil Field was located in a region traditionally called the *Marais Bouleur*, a Cajun French expression meaning "marsh bully." According to local tradition, Bosco is from *boscoyo* or "cypress knee," which was supposedly the nickname of a humpbacked resident of the area. Like most communities, the *Marais Bouleur* had its share of ordinary law-abiding citizens, but as its name implies, the area was better known for some of its residents who were reputed for their toughness and love of fighting, and in particular for their prowess at knife fighting. Descriptions of these fighters sound like the popular idea of wild west outlaws. According to popular lore, they were easily recognized, usually dressed in long black coats, with tall dark hats on their heads and red handkerchiefs or bandanas around their necks. They are said to have hung their coats and hats on their knives, which they stuck in the walls and support posts upon entering buildings.

The region's oral tradition teems with stories of memorable duels and feuds. A fierce (stubborn) sense of frontier pride was at the base of most scraps, and most legendary fighters were described as "not having a reverse gear." The motto of the Venable family, for example, was "die, maybe, back never." And they didn't have to bump into much to get things going. Many fights began with as little as one person accidentally stepping on another's toes or one couple bumping into another on the dance floor. As dance hall Ellis Richard put it, "Anything, man, anything. If someone walked on your toes, you didn't walk on his. You punched him, right there, and then the fight started." House dances and dance halls in the area were plagued with gangs of ruffians whose amusement consisted of breaking up such social engagements by starting fights with other participants. And if they found no takers among the locals, they fought among themselves. Anything to disrupt the

evening. The goal was to cause enough trouble to force the owner of the house or the hall to call off the dance. This was called *casser le bal* and was considered the crowning achievement of a night out for the *Marais Bouleur* ruffians. For a time, they were so successful that the closest dance halls that were able to stay open were as far away as Esta Hébert's in Ossun and Gérard Forrestier's east of Vatican. Sully Babineaux opened his hall in Mire when he could.

One of the aspects of frontier life was a strong macho character. Although women carried their fair share of the workload, and even more, often working in the fields as well as in the homes, men usually performed the high visibility chores. Men also performed socially. Being visibly tough and independent was an important part of being a man on the frontier. Public displays of physical prowess had two basic forms, which were closely related. One obviously involved successfully beating up others. The other involved receiving a licking with honor, which meant simply that a third party must intervene to save a fighter from being killed, since he would not retreat of his own accord.

Not all fighters shared the same sense of honor, nor were all men tough (in this way). Tough men need either worthy or numerous opponents. Stories about the *Marais Bouleur* man who beat up dozens of men at a time are only possible because there were dozens of less tough men around to beat up. Some of these sought and exacted revenge in a way that is just as characteristic of frontier cultures. Like Lapin, the amoral Louisiana French trickster, some smaller men fought back with a wily though ruthless sense of frontier justice. Ogé Guilbeau was small but famous for his unerring aim with an empty bottle. His son Oscar was as small, but he managed to escape a sound beating by Harold "Pionc" Leger during one arranged *grand rond* confrontation flanked by witnesses from the community by plucking one of his adversary's eyes out and tossing it to the ground, announcing that the fight was now over. Another known troublemaker is said to have avoided direct confrontations by slitting his enemies' stomachs as he walked quietly past them in a crowd.

The relationship between tough men and their women was an important part of the social structure of the *Marais Bouleur*. As Darwin noticed, the survival of the fittest factors into courtship in an important way. According to Ellis Richard: "Those were the days when men were men and women loved them for it." Until modern concerns such as education and money began to figure into the equation, older concerns such as strength and the ability to survive tended to remain important. As with the heroes of Golden Age Greece or the Knights of the Round Table, the rule was that the man who won the war won the woman. Typically, upon entering a house dance or dance hall, a *Marais Bouleur* man might exclaim, "*Je sus le meilleur homme dans la place*" (I'm the best man in the place) and then set about in his own to prove it to any who might express disagreement or doubt.

Some of the most impressive stories describe what was called la *bataille aux mouchoirs*, in which one would take a corner of his handkerchief or bandana, sometimes in his teeth, and offer the opposite corner to his opponent. If the opponent accepted the challenge, he took the corner, and they each pulled out knives or batons and set to carving or wailing on each other without letting go of the handkerchief or bandana until one gave up or gave out.

Sometimes it was impossible to fight immediately, because of the presence of a strong constable or bouncer like Martin Weber in Ossun or Joe Hanks in Bosco, or because the owner of the dance hall was himself tougher than the would-be fighters and was interested in keeping the peace. In those cases, a *rendez-vous* could be arranged, usually for Sunday after mass. In good dueling tradition, those involved in the altercation would meet with their seconds and any friends who cared to serve as witness and they would settle their scores with bare knuckles, knives, sticks or even pistols. Sometimes individual fights became family affairs. Family feuds occasionally resulted in full-blown battles, like the one between the Bearbs, the Duplechins, and the Higginbothams, who all met at Maurice Richard's race track one day and fought it out with black powder rifles. According to Ellis Richard, they had to stop shooting at one point because there was so much smoke, they could no longer see each other enough to shoot.

An important factor in the social structure of the *Marais Bouleur* was the protection of turf, a trait common in many traditional societies from New York's West Side to San Francisco's Chinatown, especially in the affairs of courtship and marriage. As far back as primitive times, societies have applied pressure to try to keep outsiders out so that insiders might court uncontested the women of their area. Some residents of the *Marais Bouleur* apparently took it upon themselves to keep out interlopers from neighboring regions. Informants point to frequent fights between the *Marais Bouleurs* and visitors primarily from nearby *Pointe Noire*, Sunset, *Coulée Croche*, Ossun, Scott, and Rayne. As Ellis Richard put it, "When the people from the *Marais Bouleur* met up with the people from *Coulée Croche*, man, the ground was covered with hair."

Another factor was isolation. Stories about the *Marais Bouleur* coincide with many other general descriptions of late nineteenth century frontier life. The region was on the edge of the prairies and life on the prairies could be hard. Most residents spent their time trying to coax a meager living out of the low-lying grazing land and by growing cotton, corn, and sweet potatoes as cash crops. They remained relatively isolated from modern conveniences and civilizing influences associated with more urban settlements. Churches were few and far between. Public education, though ostensibly available and even mandatory beginning in 1916, was often ignored when parents needed their children to help in the fields. Even dance halls and other such informal socializing influences were hard pressed to take root in the hostile conditions described above. When asked why in the

world they would do such things, Felix Richard answered simply, "Because they like that. There wasn't much to do in those days. No radio. No television. the only fun you had was what you made for yourself. And theirs was fighting. They liked that."

This, then, is the situation into which the oil industry arrived in 1932. It is also important to remember that, until very recently, oilfield workers were exclusively men. Like workers in some other adventure-oriented, male-only occupations (cowboys, sailors, miners, explorers), they were characterized by expressive machismo. They were tough and liked to prove it. Furthermore, workers who developed the Bosco oilfield were Anglo-Americans primarily from Texas and Oklahoma, and they didn't speak French. The problem created by the injection of this foreign element into an environment that did not even tolerate neighboring fellow Cajuns is apparent. As Clence Ancelet put it, "Men who liked to drink and fight arrived in an area full of men who already liked to drink and fight and hated outsiders on top of the bargain. You would have thought it would be like adding plenty of sparks to plenty of gas. But it really wasn't too bad." Oddly enough, most informants agree.

There were some clashes at first. Some fights broke out in the boom town line of bars and houses of ill-repute that sprouted along the region's main road. As Alcée Thibodeaux remarked, "Those people from outside were pretty tough... pretty tough, but those old Cajuns from around here... You had to be careful. Nobody could walk on their toes." Felix Richard and Clence Ancelet corroborated this impression with the same expression, "At first, it was *pic-et-poc*." Yet as Mrs. Thibodeaux insisted, "Nobody really go hurt. They were just trying out each other."

Occasional clashes between the industry itself and the people also sprang up. None of the residents had ever seen an oil well or any of the support equipment, so it was a while before they learned their way around. The oil workers also had to learn their way around the Marais. In one instance, when one of the first wells came in, neighbors stopped by one Sunday after mass to take a look. The oil workers saw an opening for a little practical joke and sprayed the ladies with some of the sludge from the top of the derrick. They did not anticipate the reaction of the husbands who climbed the derrick and beat them soundly on their own turf.

Another widely told story is about Onezime Melançon, a landowner who leased his land to a local grocery store owner turned landman from nearby Cankton. Although Zim was uneducated, he was neither stupid nor timid. When he showed his lease papers to one of his children, proudly declaring that he had negotiated a lease for his land, the child commented, "Yes, but according to this, you signed away all of your share royalties for any oil that might be found on your land." "Oh, no, I didn't," Zim shot back. He visited the landman with a loaded shotgun and was thus able to negotiate a revision of the lease, which according to some accounts even included a bonus of \$750.

Although there were occasional scraps, the full-blown war one might have fairly anticipated never materialized. Interviews with some of the people who lived through those tough times render solid reasons why such a war never came about. First, the outsiders presented little real threat to courtship. The Anglo oil workers were described as "hard drinkers, but no dancers." Furthermore, many of them were already married, and most of those who did seek female companionship were not interested in anything permanent. Instead, they took advantage of the facilities along the boom town row. More importantly, the positive financial impact on the area went a long way toward tempering what might otherwise have been a delicate situation.

The most obvious influx of money was to the landowners. Unlike in some other countries, Americans own the rights to minerals on or under their lands. Landowners were able to lease the use of their lands for a negotiable fee. Later, if oil was found, they also received royalties, provided they had not signed away their rights in the lease. Landmen worked as intermediaries between the oil companies and the landowners. They leased rights for a fee and were in a position to encourage the company to drill on the lands they controlled. The game was to give a landman enough to interest him in working for you, while retaining some rights for yourself in case the company struck oil. Many of the people in the *Marais Bouleur* were subsistence farmers. The little money they saw came once a year when they sold their crops. They immediately spent it all paying the bills they had accumulated during the year and then went back into debt until the following year. With successful wells on their lands, some families became rich literally overnight.

Many farmers had lost their lands by over-borrowing and had become sharecropper, giving one-third of their earnings to the landowners if they owned their own mules and tools, or as much as half if equipment and stock were provided. With the arrival of the oilfields, these hard workers were able to make a regular salary for the first time in their lives. Though the first supervisors, drillers and crews were Anglo-Americans from the outside, Superior Oil Company soon began hiring local workers for what Armany Sonnier called "the rough work." Even those who had made a little extra money before as day laborers (picking cotton or digging potatoes) were shocked at the money that was paid in the oilfield. As a young man, Clence Ancelet had made ten cents an hour working in the Ossun potato kiln. Then he got a job in Bosco digging pipeline by shovel for thirty-five cents an hour. He commented, "I didn't know what to do with all that money." Louis Prejean and Simon Gilbert, who got jobs as roustabouts, found themselves earning seventy-five cents an hour. While these salaries seem impossibly small today, it should be remembered that this was 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression.

Soon enough, the hardest workers impressed their bosses and rose in the company. Though a lack of education prevented some from attaining supervisory positions, a few overcame even the looming obstacle of illiteracy to become crew foremen. Born in 1912,

Alcée Thibodeaux was a young man when the oilfield was first developed. He had no formal education at all and bore traces of his *Marais Bouleur* ancestry. "I didn't look for trouble," he explained, "but if you looked for me, you found me." He first broke into the oilfield working at a mud plant for twenty-five cents an hour. He was later hired by Superior as a roustabout and eventually worked his way up to become a roughneck and even a driller. "It was tough," he said, "I had to fight it. I had no education, so I had to learn everything by heart."

Though salaries were relatively good, conditions were sometimes less than ideal. Informants invariably described the work as hard. Mr. Thibodeaux described working outside all day, no matter what the weather. "If you were sent out on a job, they dropped you off and that was it. You didn't know when they would come back to pick you up, rain or shine. You had to take your lunch bucket with you and tie it to a fence to keep the ants out. And you had half an hour for lunch. If it was cold, you would eat your little sandwich against one of the trees, out of the wind. If it rained, you had to wear your slicker suit, if you had one, and eat your sandwich in the rain." The work was also dangerous. Some lost limbs and even their lives when they were caught in the machinery they were trying to control. Yet the road through Bosco was filled each morning as crew foremen picked up day laborers.

Some of the benefits of the oil industry were indirect. Superior was apparently good to its employees and hosts alike. The company often built houses for its principal workers. It also provided free natural gas for workers and landowners. (In those days, natural gas pressure was sometimes used to drive well pumps. It was otherwise burned off or given away. The company was also good for the general economy. Service industries, including specialized work crews such as board roaders and concrete gangs, as well as support industries, such as grocery stores, bars and restaurants, emerged as a result of the money that flowed in the area. When oil companies began looking for oil in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Louisiana, they drafted many of the workers who had learned how to make wells work on land. Those workers helped re-invent the industry to make it work offshore.

In time, life became a little easier. Men who got jobs in the oilfield were able for the first time to buy their wives a few modern conveniences, such as sewing machines and ringer washers. Many families were able to buy their first radios, refrigerators and automobiles. And as they acquired the trappings of modern society, the former fighters of the *Marais Bouleur* began to lower their dukes. No longer required to work in the fields, children were able to stay in school, and the education they received seemed to rebound upwards towards their parents, acting as a socializing factor. Entering the mainstream was not entirely without its drawbacks. The French language, for example, was one of the early casualties as children of the first generation to go to school regularly were often unable to speak to their own grandparents. Nor did everything change overnight. Remnants of old habits persist even today. (Present-day residents of the *Marais Bouleur* do not have to announce their neighborhood watch policy with signs.) Yet, for better or worse, the *Marais*

Bouleur, bypassing much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, wandered into the twentieth century in 1932, when the oil industry helped to break the feudal system called sharecropping.

There were other mitigating circumstances that began to open South Louisiana in general and along with it the *Marais Bouleur* about the same time. Free textbooks began to make education viable in the region. Roosevelt's CCC camps and later the draft brought many young Cajuns out into the rest of the country and the world. Cars and paved roads allowed traffic into and out of South Louisiana. Radio and later television provided a connection to the outside. But much of this activity was also fueled by the oil that flowed from places like the *Marais Bouleur*.