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The Germans of Roberts Cove, Louisiana: German Rice Cultivation and the Making of a German-American Community in Acadia Parish, 1881-1917

Lydia Soileau
University of New Orleans

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The Germans of Roberts Cove, Louisiana: German Rice Cultivation and the Making of a
German-American Community in Acadia Parish, 1881-1917

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
History

By

Lydia Alicia Soileau

B.A. Louisiana State University, 2007

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ABSTRACT

The Germans of Geilenkirchen-Hengesburg region of Germany were convinced by relative and friend, Father Peter Leonard Thevis, of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, to emigrate to the United States for a number of reasons: political, religious, and economic. After establishing themselves on land previously used for grazing cattle, the Germans soon discovered rice could easily be cultivated in large amounts. Along with their success as rice farmers in Roberts Cove, Louisiana, these Germans soon involved themselves in politics and engaged one another and the surrounding community in numerous court cases. These court cases, overlooked by previous historians, demonstrate that the Germans of Roberts Cove had begun to assimilate, prior to World War I and the passage of anti-German legislation.

Keywords: German, immigration, Roberts Cove, assimilation, civil cases, rice agriculture, rice, Acadia Parish, Prohibition, World War I

INTRODUCTION

The 1880s proved to be a crucial time for thirty-six families from the Geilenkirchen-Heinsberg region of Germany. All would be persuaded by Father Peter Leonard Thevis, a native of the Geilenkirchen region and a German priest in New Orleans, to sell their homes, all their possessions, keeping only clothing and small family keepsakes to begin a life in Southwest Louisiana.¹ The new settlers not only liquidated their holdings and arranged for passage, they also made a pilgrimage to ask for a safe journey across the sea. None of these Germans knew exactly what their new life would entail but once in America the Germans who settled in the area of Roberts Cove, Louisiana quickly connected with other inhabitants of St. Landry Parish through the farming of rice.² The cultivation of rice, in turn, transformed the small group of Germans in Roberts Cove into the founders of a thriving economic, political and social German-American community still in evidence today.

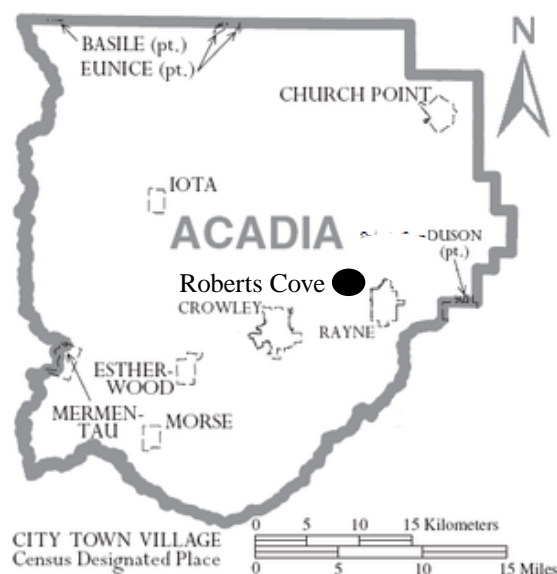


Figure 1: Map of Acadia Parish with the approximate location of Roberts Cove, Louisiana

¹ Oral history conducted by Kelly Frey with Mary Ann Leonards, summer 1997, Roberts Cove Museum, Roberts Cove, La. This oral history was found in a collection at the University of New Orleans Special Collections and was one of only two on the Germans of Roberts Cove.

² In 1887, St. Landry Parish was subdivided to form Acadia Parish.

The journey these families took to start a new life in America speaks to the lure of the American ideals such as freedom of religion and free enterprise. Due to the situation occurring in Germany in the 1870s numerous push and pull factors contributed to the formation of the German Catholic settlement of Roberts Cove, Louisiana. The difficulty Catholics faced during the decade of the 1870s in Germany plus the agricultural opportunities available in Louisiana drew German immigrants to Roberts Cove. With much ingenuity and agricultural prosperity, they changed the landscape of southwest Louisiana forever. Not only did the Germans of Roberts Cove quickly benefit economically from Louisiana's natural resources but Louisiana gained in turn from the enterprise and skill of this wave of immigrants.

BEGINNINGS OF GERMAN IMMIGRATION

Germans have immigrated to the United States in substantial numbers since the seventeenth century. In the postcolonial period German lands contributed more immigrants than did any other country: over 6.9 million arrived between 1820 and 1870, or some fifteen percent of the total immigration.³ Further, between 1850 and 1900, Germans were never less than a quarter of all the foreign-born in the United States, and between 1880 and 1920 they were the largest single group among first-generation immigrants. In addition, evidence shows in the last decades of the nineteenth century Germans reached their highest proportional share of the population and constituted over four percent of all United States residents.⁴ These Germans settled both in urban industrial areas such as New Orleans and agricultural regions of the United States such as Roberts Cove and prairies of Southwest Louisiana.⁵ Sadly, immigrant populations like these are often overlooked in studies of the New South since the dominant historical

³ Stephen Thernstrom, Ann Orlov and Oscar Handlin eds., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 406

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Significant groups of Germans can be found not only in Louisiana but also in Texas and Arkansas, coincidentally two other major rice producing regions.

narrative generally pertains to relations between African Americans and whites in former plantation regions and urban areas. In addition, much of the credit for agricultural innovation in the New South has been given to Midwestern farmers who immigrated into the southern states after the Civil War and not to the Germans already inhabiting Acadia Parish.⁶ Little is known, therefore, of the German presence in Louisiana.

Rice in this area of Louisiana had already been planted for subsistence for many decades by the earlier French inhabitants. Because of the ease at which rice could be cultivated, not only was rice the Germans' crop of choice, but they also diversified with the introduction of cattle, and prospered in various financial institutions used for but not limited to rice. Only with the anti-German legislation that accompanied the arrival of World War I did the community of Roberts Cove face a challenge both to their cultural traditions and their social standing in the region. Ironically, the anti-German legislation passed in 1917 confirms the significant advancement of the German element in Louisiana, especially in the rice-growing region.

Too often, industrial cities of the North and larger cities of the South have served as the model for understanding the process of assimilation by immigrant groups in the United States as a whole. The developments of rural ethnic enclaves, unlike urban immigrant communities, were shaped, largely, by available natural and agricultural resources as well as the immigrants' existing culture. However, sometimes similar business ventures and political leanings meant that urban communities may have fostered rural immigrant communities in nearby regions. At the time southwest Louisiana was receiving its first wave of German immigrants, for instance, New Orleans already boasted an extensive number of Germans. Coincidentally, the story of the Germans of Roberts Cove shares striking resemblance to those of the Germans in New Orleans.

⁶ For instance, Lawson Babineaux's master's thesis completely overlooks the importance of the Germans of Roberts Cove ingenuity on the rice crop in Louisiana by giving all credit, to Midwestern immigrants or Yankees.

Therefore, by examining how and why this group of Germans immigrated to America one gets a clearer picture of the significance they made to the state of Louisiana through their religion, politics and professions. Between 1881 and 1917, the Germans of Roberts Cove assimilated into southwest Louisiana fairly easily because of the rapid improvements occurring with commercial rice farming. After the Civil War, following the destruction of much of the South, southern agriculture looked to create more lucrative industries beyond cotton and sugar, which did not immediately rebound from the destruction. Historians have proposed some people settled in southwest Louisiana because of the socioeconomic turmoil of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In particular they assume it led many people to leave the eastern portion of the United States and seek their fortune on the prairies of Louisiana.⁷ Rice, the crop south Louisiana turned too, provided an easy alternative due to the ease of planting and cultivation.

For the Germans of Roberts Cove economic diversification started with rice, which led to participation in politics and appearances in multiple civil suits. All previous examples prove these Germans had begun to assimilate into American society well before World War I. In fact, they had already begun to assimilate as early as 1887 with the founding of Acadia Parish. Therefore this study aims to showcase that due to social and economic activity these Germans were fully assimilated by the turn of the century because of their contributions to Louisiana rice agriculture.

Recent studies of the Germans of Roberts Cove, Louisiana suggest that this group was forced to assimilate into south Louisiana culture with the arrival of World War I because anti-German legislation passed in the Louisiana Senate in 1917. Stanley McCord, who wrote

⁷ Rocky Sexton, "A Most Favorable Location": Northern Migration and Settlement in Southwest Louisiana, 1880-1900" in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History: A Refuge For All Ages: Immigration in Louisiana History*, Vol X. Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, pp. 551-564, here p. 553.

extensively on the historical background of the German Cove, suggested these Germans tried to retain their disappearing culture in 1909 by forming the *Deutsch Gesellschaft* but in 1917 and the passage of the anti-German legislation, their culture eroded. In addition, Reinhard Kondert, a recent leading authority on the Germans of Roberts Cove further maintains this point. Yet, he builds on McCord's argument by pointing out that in 1881, the first year of their arrival, some Germans of Roberts Cove began steps to naturalize due to their awareness "of the dynamics of American politics."⁸ The current study agrees with Kondert that naturalization suggests German assimilation preceded the formation of a *Deutsch Gesellschaft*, in 1909 and World War I anti-German legislation in 1917; however the current study's findings go beyond the surface. With the German influence in the surrounding communities plus their understanding of the dynamics of American politics, after these Germans began to naturalize they assimilated completely into the community as shown by their presence in civil cases of Acadia Parish.

Raimund Berchtold presents an interesting case study of how the Germans of New Orleans lost their ethnic identity due to assimilation from economic and social dispersion. His case study presents a fascinating parallel to the rural Germans of Roberts Cove. For instance, the Germans of New Orleans and Roberts Cove were similar for both areas possessed German bank directors and presidents, independent entrepreneurs, white collar business employees, and skilled craftsmen and workers.⁹ In addition, just like those in New Orleans, Roberts Cove ethnic leaders increasingly became "the vanguard of the assimilation process." For instance, when William Zaunbrecher, a Louisiana Senate Representative living in Roberts Cove voted for the anti-German legislation during World War I he was the link to the community's identity loss, as

⁸ Kondert, p. 29

⁹ Berchtold, 10. For a general discussion on ethnic leadership see John Higham, "Introduction: The Forms of Ethnic Leadership," in *Ethnic Leadership in America*, ed. By John Higham (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 1-18. PUT IN BIB. FULL TTIEL

Berchtold suggests. However, unlike those in New Orleans the Germans of Roberts Cove tied themselves to the agricultural roots of the Southern economy and distinguished themselves from urban German immigrants by creating and expanding rice production on which the region of Southwest Louisiana came to depend heavily. Through the farming of rice the Germans became part of the larger transformations occurring in the New South.

ORIGINS OF THE GERMANS OF ROBERTS COVE

According to Stanley McCord, “the causes of emigration of any person or group of persons are, except in the time of war or famine, so complex and personal that they are not always clear even in the minds of the emigrants.”¹⁰ The two decades following 1850 were a period of religious revival and renewal among German Catholics opening the door for the 1870s to evolve into a decade of contention between the Prussian State and the Catholic Papacy.¹¹ Since the establishment of the Catholic Centre party, Bismarck created many problems for Catholic citizens.¹² Politically, economically, and socially the 1870s saw drastic changes in Germany, which increased German immigration to the United States.¹³ The story of the Germans of Roberts Cove, Louisiana, which began across the Atlantic in an area of Germany marked with social, political and religious unrest, presents very clear motives for immigration. Immigration to the United States, for these particular Germans hinged on the situation Catholics

¹⁰ Stanley Joe McCord, “A Historical and Linguistic Study of the German Settlement at Roberts Cove, Louisiana.” (master’s thesis, Louisiana State University, 1969), p. 57

¹¹ Jonathan Sperber. “The Shaping of Political Catholicism in the Ruhr Basin, 1848-1881.” *Central European History*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Dec., 1983): p. 354

¹² Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 71. According to Gordon Craig, “...there would have been no reason for [Bismarck] to authorize an anti-papal campaign had it not been for the Centre party [which] it seemed to stand for allegiance to an authority other than the national state... justifying [his attack on the Centre party] as necessary to the security of the state.”

¹³ Richard A. Easterlin, “Economic and Social Characteristics of the Immigrants,” in *Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Series of Selections from the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephen Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982), 12; For a more accurate and in-depth discussion of the *Kulturkampf* see Gordon Craig, pp. 83-94; McCord, pp. 58-60

faced in Germany during the 1870s.¹⁴ The original immigrants who settled in Roberts Cove were natives of the district of Geilenkirchen-Heinsberg which is located in the westernmost part of Germany and lies in present day Selfkantkreis Geilenkirchen-Heinsberg, about seventy five kilometers west of Cologne.¹⁵ The general area is considered a part of the Rhineland.¹⁶

Father Peter Leonard Thevis was the most influential person in establishing the settlement of Roberts Cove because the chain of events that led to this settlement began immediately after the Thevis' arrival in New Orleans in 1867. Father Thevis born in Cologne, Germany came to New Orleans in 1867 after New Orleans Archbishop Jean-Marie Odin, made a trip to Europe to secure German priests for his diocese.¹⁷ This recruitment was necessary due to the influx of German immigrants. For instance, the number of German priests in the United States increased from 50 in 1843 to 1,169 in 1869.¹⁸ Soon Father Thevis became assistant pastor under Father Ignazius Scheck at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in New Orleans. After the yellow fever consumed Father Scheck, Thevis became pastor in 1867 where he remained for twenty-five years until his death in 1893.¹⁹

In 1878, during Father Thevis assignment in New Orleans, the city was struck by a serious yellow fever epidemic. Thevis prayed fervently to God that if all parishioners of Holy Trinity Church were spared, he would build a shrine to St. Roch the patron saint against

¹⁴ Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* was not the only factor playing a decisive role in the immigration of these Catholic Germans. For a deeper understand of economic factors from the United States and Europe see John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, ed. Harvey J. Graff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 1-3

¹⁵ McCord, p. 58. The name of this region is derived from the fusion of the earlier Kreis Geilenkirchen and Kreis Heinsberg with the area called the Selfkant. The Selfkant is the westernmost part of the Kresnet Kreis and ultimately derives its name from the Saeffelbach, a stream flowing from Langbroich westward into Holland.

¹⁶ Kondert, p. 1

¹⁷ The second Archbishop of New Orleans has two spellings, the French, Jean-Marie Odin or John-Mary Oden, in this paper, Jean-Marie Odin will be used.

¹⁸ James T. Fischer, *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 50-51.

¹⁹ Earl F. Niehaus, "Catholic Ethnicity in the Nineteenth Century Louisiana" in *Cross Crozier and Crucible: A Volume Celebrating the Bicentennial of a Catholic Diocese in Louisiana*, edited by, Glenn R. Conrad (Center for Louisiana Studies: Lafayette, La., 1993): p. 53

pestilence.²⁰ Although many were stricken, no parishioners died and Thevis kept his promise to God, and began the project of building the shrine. In order to build his shrine Father Thevis ventured back to Germany to obtain research. It has been assumed by previous Roberts Cove scholars that on his mission to study other shrines, he talked with his family about the prospect of moving to America for good.²¹ To help promote the United States and Louisiana it has been assumed Father Thevis brought some promotional literature from a local Louisiana realty company.²² It has been assumed the literature probably was given to Father Thevis by the New Orleans German Society, since that organization had traditionally been involved in the recruitment of German immigrants to Louisiana.²³ According to McCord, “Father Thevis was familiar with the prospects offered by the new railroad and had seen the advertisements of the Southwestern Company.”²⁴

Father Thevis, when persuading the Germans of Geilenkirchen to emigrate, emphasized religion in his recruitment effort as one of the oldest inhabitants of Roberts Cove later remembered; Father Thevis told them there was “no religion” in the region they would settle. To the colonists this meant they would have a free hand in providing for their spiritual sustenance, and be able to establish a Catholic Church to their liking, free from the persecution of the State as was occurring in Germany at the time.²⁵ There were other factors that inspired Germans to leave their homeland for a better life outside of the Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s control. By the 1880s, when they decided to leave, Germany’s Catholics were still suffering

²⁰ St. Roch is also the patron saint of many cities, professions, and diseases.

²¹ Oral history of Mary Ann Leonards; Niehaus, p. 53. Many devout in the city of New Orleans hold Thevis name in benediction as the builder of St. Roch’s mortuary chapel and shrine.

²² Since these Germans settled in Southwest Louisiana perhaps these advertisements were from W. W. Duson, a large landowner from the area. More than likely Father Thevis translated of the literature which followed him overseas. See, Kondert, p. 8;

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ McCord, p. 69

²⁵ Kondert, p. 9

from the negative repercussions of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, which weighed heavily on the minds of potential recruits therefore proving that European crisis, revolution, famine, or financial panic, increased the volume of emigration to the United States.²⁶

Not only were the residents of the Geilenkirchen region affected by religion but the region also suffered the effects of many wars in the course of modern history. Perhaps the war that left the greatest effect on the Germans who would immigrate to Roberts Cove was the French Revolution dating from 1790 until the fall of Napoleon in 1812. This war was pivotal due to the fact that military conscription in the modern sense was first introduced. Then about eighty years later Bismarck's forced conscription into the Prussian army actually caused some of the Germans of Geilenkirchen to emigrate.

The Germans of Geilenkirchen and Langbroich were also economically lured to the United States because of agricultural and economic opportunity following the rebuilding of the United States after the Civil War. Although people came to the United States for a variety of reasons, the primary impulse continued to be for economic betterment.²⁷ For example, in Germany the threat of the old practice of *Gavelkind*—began in 1704, to limit the influence of Catholics by dividing land among families in agricultural regions—weighed heavily on the minds of potential emigrants. Many farmers, whose families were large, were motivated to emigrate to seek sufficient land in America, or one or more brothers would emigrate in order to leave enough land intact for the remaining children to earn a living and keep the family land

²⁶ Ibid; Armand Liegeard, "Immigration into the United States." *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Sept., 1884): 499. To illustrate this point, from Germany alone, the decade of the 1870s saw every possible increase of immigration to the United States, whereas in New Orleans, the Yellow Fever outbreak of 1881 almost completely stopped all movement around the city and actually postponed the visit of some German immigrants from the region of Geilenkirchen.

²⁷ Easterlin, p. 6

together.²⁸ It has been suggested by some scholars that rural people were more likely to be realistic about facing widespread social and economic change occurring in their country.²⁹ Nevertheless, as distasteful or hard life in Germany may have been, more people would probably have remained home had political and religious pressures from Bismarck been less daunting.³⁰

MOVING TO AMERICA: ESTABLISHMENT OF ROBERTS COVE: ASSIMILATION THROUGH RELIGION

Benjamin Robert, the man who gave his name to Roberts Cove, was the original claimant of a sizeable tract of land located on the Bayou Wikoff.³¹ The first group to come to the United States and check out the area of southwest Louisiana was Peter Joseph Thevis, Gerhard Thevis, and Hermann Grein. The three prospective immigrants Peter Joseph Thevis, John Gerhard Thevis, brother and nephew of Father Thevis, with Hermann Grein had to remain in Milwaukee before being able to travel to New Orleans and view prospective lands for their families.³² Before being able to dock in New Orleans, these three men proceeded to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where they stayed with John B. Ohelnsforst, who had emigrated from the Geilenkirchen area a few years before.³³ In January 1880, the three men met Father Thevis in New Orleans.³⁴ On January 13, 1880, Father Thevis accompanied his two kinsmen and Hermann Grein to Rayne, Louisiana where they met W. W. Duson, a local realtor, surveyed the land and chose a site for their community only three miles from the brand new railway depot in Rayne.³⁵ Because of the

²⁸Jonathan James Wolfe, "Background of German Immigration." *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3, (1996), p. 252

²⁹ Bodnar, p. 48

³⁰ Wolfe, p. 253

³¹ Mary Alice and Paul B. Freeland, *Acadia Parish, Louisiana: Vol. 1 A History to 1900*. (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana), p.42

³² McCord, p. 67

³³ This was not the first time these emigrants visited Milwaukee. It has been documented they visited before in the 1860s, perhaps due to Father Thevis moving to New Orleans after being recruited by Archbishop Odin.

³⁴ McCord, pp. 66-68

³⁵ The literature brought over to Germany could have been that of W. W. Duson. For more information regarding the Duson brothers see Rocky Sexton, "Northern Migration and Settlement," p. 554; McCord, p. 69; Gene Thibodeaux,

availability of prairie land Roberts Cove is where the Germans settled. Later Peter Thevis and Gerhard Thevis went back to Geilenkirchen and prepared their families.

Upon their return to New Orleans Peter and Gerhard Thevis plus four others greeted Father Thevis and Anthony Frey, a member of the New Orleans German community who owned land in the vicinity of Roberts Cove.³⁶ After journeying to the cove the first small group of eight immigrants settled on the prairies of Louisiana more than a year after the site had been chosen.³⁷ Encouraged by the beginning of the settlement, Father Thevis traveled to Germany again in the summer of 1881 and met with the heads of several other families from the Geilenkirchen area. Once again he read them tracts and pamphlets describing southwest Louisiana and the opportunities awaiting them there.³⁸ Father Thevis deliberately recruited villagers from thirty-six different German villages, some of which were Geilenkirchen, Hastenrath, Kreuzrath, Nierstrass, Schierwaldenrath, Gangelt, Waldenrath, Langbroich, and Millen.³⁹ The group of people persuaded to emigrate by Father Thevis on this second visit was to comprise the bulk of the new colony.⁴⁰ This group's journey was very strenuous and time consuming considering immigrant families had to surmount the difficulties of travel and relocation to a foreign land for which a certain level of language competence is essential.⁴¹

According to a late 1997 interview of Mary Ann Leonards, the daughter of Lawrence Joseph Leonards and Elizabeth Augusta Zaunbrecher born in 1938, the actual trip consisted of many different stops. Mary Ann Leonards remembers being told:

Rice Railroads and Frogs: A History of Rayne, Louisiana, (Church Point, La.: Plaquemine Brulee Press, 2001), p. 90

³⁶ Kondert, pp. 94-95

³⁷ For a complete list of the first settlers, see McCord, 70.

³⁸ McCord, pp. 72-73.

³⁹ Kondert, p. 1

⁴⁰ McCord, p. 75

⁴¹ Easterlin, pp. 7-11

They traveled by train to [France, and] crossed by boat to England [where they] took the freighter at Liverpool [which then] picked up freight [bound for] Cuba. After discharging freight in Havana, the freighter docked in New Orleans and the voyagers set foot on their new country November 1881.⁴²

Once in New Orleans, some immigrants, such as the ones who came on November 17, 1881, immediately boarded a train to Rayne, Louisiana.⁴³ By the end of 1882, after two recruitment trips, There is a total of seventy nine persons settled in the area.⁴⁴ This increase in German speakers had significant impacts on nearby towns. For instance, Rayne, Louisiana was actually a tri-lingual town for after Roberts Cove began filling up with its new settlers, German was commonly heard in Rayne's streets along with French and English.⁴⁵ Roberts Cove never matured into a full-fledged town but remained a collection of farms and homes scattered over an area of several square miles throughout its existence.

As we have seen, many factors to emigrate existed among the German residents of Geilenkirchen, but the lack of religious freedom in Germany was the determining one.⁴⁶ Scholars of German immigration suggest the great majorities of German Catholics settling in the United States were quite clear in their desire to maintain the customs and language of their native land. Therefore the ethnic identities that immigrants created for themselves in their new country blended loyalty to ancient traditions with appreciation for the opportunities United States citizenship promised.⁴⁷ Proving this the Germans of Roberts Cove took advantage of religious freedom and began to immediately set up a Catholic Church and school.

⁴² Oral History of Mary Ann Leonards; McCord, pp. 77-79

⁴³ Kondert, p. 10; Leigard, pp. 501-502. The increase in European immigration between 1880 and 1884 to the United States must be ascribed to railroad development which connected the more important European centers with the principal maritime ports.

⁴⁴ Fontenot and Freeland, p.180

⁴⁵ Thibodeaux, p. 88

⁴⁶ Kondert, p. 9

⁴⁷ Fischer, pp. 50-51

It is important not to overlook the fact that although these Germans were Catholic, to be German Catholic and American Catholic were two different things. For instance, American Catholics have had a completely different perspective on the practice of its faith than that of practicing Catholics in Europe perhaps due to the United States beginning as a predominately Protestant nation. When the first Catholic missionaries came to the United States, and witnessed the different ethnicities moving about the continent, some priests attempted to structure the American Catholic church along *ethnic* lines. Father Thevis while pastor at Holy Trinity Catholic Church attempted this in the ethnically diverse city of New Orleans. Father Thevis wanted to found a new German church in a neighborhood which consisted of Germans but was served by nearby French churches. Although some French clergy opposed, the Archbishop of New Orleans eventually gave Father Thevis permission to found his church.⁴⁸

The Catholic faith dominated the Gulf Coast region of the United States, and more specifically Louisiana.⁴⁹ According to Edward Ayers, in his book, *The Promise of the New South*,

Religious faith and language appeared everywhere in the New South. It permeated public speech as well as private emotion. For many people, religion provided the measure of politics, the power behind law and reform...People viewed everything from courtship to child-rearing to their own deaths in religious terms.⁵⁰

Even those not particularly religious could not escape the images and the assumptions of faith.

With the importance of religion on these German Catholics lives, it is doubtful the German community would have survived as a social unit for many years without its church.⁵¹

⁴⁸ McCord, pp. 64-65. The church thus was named for St. Boniface. The desire to blend old and new led Germans to want to establish "national" church parishes. While parishes normally include all Catholics of a certain territory, national parishes were designed to minister to the members of a particular ethnic group.

⁴⁹ Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 161

⁵⁰ Ayers, p.161

⁵¹ Oral history of Mary Ann Leonards

The formation of a Catholic Church and school in Roberts Cove, although inevitable, was one of coincidence. Concerned about its future, in Germany following the Jesuit expulsion in 1872, the Benedictine monastery of St. Boniface in Munich sent one of its monks, Father Aegidius Hennemann, to the United States to establish a proper site for relocation. On his first stop Father Hennemann went to the Swiss Benedictine Abbey of St. Meinrad in Indiana. However he was unsuccessful in finding land on which to relocate the Munich monastery. Then in 1878 he traveled to Arkansas where he remained for five years before moving on to New Orleans in 1883. Once in New Orleans he discovered Roberts Cove from Father Thevis, who was at the time stationed at Holy Trinity Catholic Church. Inadvertently, as a result of Thevis efforts to promote the Roberts Cove settlement Hennemann was able to find perfect place for the relocation of his Benedictine monastery.

Father Hennemann soon and met with south Louisiana realtor W. W. Duson and purchased 640 acres of land for \$2,500.⁵² However, upon returning to New Orleans, he was informed that the Benedictine monastery in Germany would not be relocating; the German courts successfully intervened for the Benedictines and they would be allowed to remain in Germany. Father Hennemann died in 1883 from tuberculosis contracted during his stay in Arkansas, and left his purchased property to Father Thevis. Thevis then contacted the Abbey of St. Meinard's in Indiana because it had previously hosted Hennemann to see if its leader, Abbot Finton would still develop the German Catholic community.⁵³ After further discussions and a visit to the Cove, Abbott Finton became impressed with the settlement and in 1884 relieved Thesis of his debt by purchasing the land. By 1885 Abbott Finton sent two fluent German speaking priests to

⁵² Thibodeaux, p. 91; Kondert, p. 21. Already on the land purchased were buildings which could easily be converted to a church, school and rectory.

⁵³ Kondert, pp. 20-22; Niehaus, p. 53

serve the growing community of Roberts Cove.⁵⁴ With the establishment of the Catholic Church St. Leo IV in 1885 following so closely behind the founding of the settlement in 1881 and 1882, the Germans began very quickly to establish a presence in Acadia Parish. In the beginning of its existence most everything in the community of Roberts Cove revolved around the new school and Catholic Church.⁵⁵ Essentially, the church was a principal factor in the preservation of the German heritage.⁵⁶ The importance of the Catholic Faith in the Germans of Roberts Cove daily lives undoubtedly gave them a kinship with their French Catholic neighbors. Eventually, parish officials created a Roberts Cove Ward and placed election polls in the school of St. Leo's.

LIFE IN THE COVE

Wanting to start a new life, these new immigrants would not have been persuaded to leave their homeland unless they knew of opportunity in the United States. At about the same time that the first train whistles echoed across the vast prairie region in the early 1880s, a new agricultural industry developed that would forever become associated with Rayne and the Germans of Roberts Cove.⁵⁷ Because of German ingenuity and hard work Roberts Cove soon became a reasonably prosperous section with its wealth built upon barrels of rice.⁵⁸

Roberts Cove was not the only German settlement in Louisiana or Acadia Parish. In Acadia Parish, towns boasting significant German numbers included Crowley, Tribly, Cartville, Jennings, Iota, Frey and Fabacher. The communities of Fabacher and Roberts Cove even had some intermarrying. Interestingly, all of these settlements rested somewhere on the railroad line

⁵⁴ Kondert, p. 22. In the meantime, the property previously owned by Hennemann was placed temporarily at the disposal of the German colonists. This murky ownership would later cause an interesting property dispute amongst the Germans of Roberts Cove.

⁵⁵ Oral history of Mary Ann Leonards; For a more detailed description of the Germans and their religion see Fischer, p. 50-51.

⁵⁶ McCord, p. 166

⁵⁷ Thibodeaux, p. 88

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 91

of the Southern Pacific Railroad, and all contained rice mills.⁵⁹ In 1880, a new railroad through the southwestern part of Louisiana was nearing completion. The Southern Pacific Line connected New Orleans directly with Texas for the first time and provided transportation for the prairie region of Louisiana and provided a means to carry agricultural and industrial products to market.⁶⁰ Although the railroad company placed stations five miles apart, hoping towns would grow, some grew and some didn't.⁶¹ According to Edward Ayers, "in places lucky enough to have a railroad, the station often became the more prominent feature of the landscape."⁶² Two railroad towns in particular that did prosper were the cities of Crowley and Rayne located in between Roberts Cove slightly to the South. Within the first two decades of the establishment of the cove there were indeed signs that the process of Americanization was advancing within the German community. For example, as early as 1899 one sermon per month at the Catholic Church, St. Leo's was given in English, indicating that at least some of the congregation was more conversant with English than with German.⁶³

Even though these Germans were busy creating their rice farms the world they entered in south Louisiana was a completely different place than their homeland. For instance, on May 19, 1888 the Crowley *Daily Signal* posted a transcript of an address delivered by Mr. J. B. Wilkenson, Jr. to the convention of the Louisiana States Press Association. Wilkenson discussed 'The Relations of the Press to Immigration' and suggested support of immigration was important because the economy of Louisiana needed immigration to fill the gap in farming. More importantly, later in the speech, Mr. Wilkenson states that:

⁵⁹ Ellen C. Merrill, *Germans of Louisiana*, (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2005), pp. 93-95

⁶⁰ McCord, p. 68

⁶¹ Thibodeaux, p. 72

⁶² Ayers, p. 11

⁶³ McCord, 140-141; Crowley *Daily Signal*, April 8, 1899

...immigration offers the only satisfactory solution of the race problem...in the increase of the white population by immigration the Caucasian element would soon preponderate numerically; and with *white supremacy* and *civilization no longer in jeopardy*, we may restore and maintain in its integrity and purity the heritage from our fathers—the ballot box that bulwark of our liberties.⁶⁴

This article portrays the addition of these Germans in the context of life in the New South through its enthusiasm for white workers throughout the region.⁶⁵ Furthermore European German immigrants were targets for immigration because settlers from the adjacent southern states, which were still recovering from the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction, were looked upon as “paupers.”⁶⁶ Not only did their race provide a method by which the Germans were welcomed into society but their Catholic faith perhaps helped them ease into South Louisiana. However, less than ten years later the same newspaper would publish a story discussing the frustration at foreign speakers.

A story in the Crowley *Daily Signal* published on March 23, 1895 suggests that there may have been a rising anti-immigrant sentiment in the region of Acadia Parish:

A New York judge a couple of weeks ago very *wisely* refused to naturalize some recently arrived foreigners on the grounds that they could not understand English, and a few days later two St. Louis judges adopted similar rulings against the naturalization of persons unable to speak English. This course ought to be followed by every judge in the United States. If foreigners wish to become *useful* citizens they can do no less than acquire a speaking knowledge of the language of our country before they attempt to exercise the privilege of the ballot upon questions about which they will of necessity remain ignorant until they know something of the tongue of the people and press of our country. No foreigner ought to be given his naturalization papers in the United States until he is about to speak the English language fairly well.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Crowley *Signal*, May 19, 1888. Italics mine.

⁶⁵ For a better understanding on the effects of race and immigration into Louisiana see, J. Carlyle Sitterson, “Importation of Chinese and European Laborers, 1869-1874,” *A Refuge For All Ages; Immigration in Louisiana History*, Vol X. of *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History*, (Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1996) pp. 521-523

⁶⁶ Sexton, 557

⁶⁷ Crowley *Daily Signal*, March 23, 1885. Emphasis mine

While this story originated in St. Louis its publication in a southwest Louisiana newspaper suggests that local attitudes towards immigrant were not always positive. The ambivalence this position caused the Germans of Roberts Cove is apparent. Whereas they were welcomed and considered better than Negro farmers, they were resisted when large numbers of Germans appeared in the region.

The inhabitants of Roberts Cove produced many Germans who established businesses in the nearby towns of Rayne and Crowley. In the second half of the nineteenth century, helped by the railroad, which transported the crop to New Orleans, the area surrounding Roberts Cove began to participate in the commercial rice production.⁶⁸ Eventually the networking between Germans of Roberts Cove and the surrounding area, through rice and various financial interests, proves that although there were instances of discrimination against Germans these instances did not hold them back during the pioneering stages. In spite of Louisiana's anti-German legislation during World War I due to the social mingling occurring in the parish, it is hard to find large-scale genuine anti-German elements in this area. Initially, most discrimination which occurred against these Germans happened within the community of Roberts Cove. For example, in the early years, it was almost unthinkable to marry someone from outside the Roberts Cove community. On the rare occasion, when it occurred, the newlywed couples were frequently ostracized by the other Germans settlers. For instance, Joseph Dischler suffered severe isolation for marrying a French girl. Another early inhabitant of the settlement indicated that there was also considerable pressure placed on the young people against dating non-Catholics.⁶⁹ These instances of ostracism however do not mean German immigrants were completely isolated.

⁶⁸ USA Rice Federation, "Louisiana Rice," <http://www.usarice.com/doclib/188/219/3677.PDF> (accessed March 3, 2010); herein after referred to as USA Rice Federation

⁶⁹ Kondert, 27; Another German to marry outside of the community would be August Leonards who married a woman from Grand Cocteau.

Some of the immigrants embraced the benefits of Americanization within five years of their arrival in Roberts Cove; twenty German immigrants had completed the naturalization process.⁷⁰

RICE FARMING: ASSIMILATION THROUGH AGRICULTURE

Rice production in Louisiana is almost as old as Louisiana itself, but it had never been grown on the same scale as it would be grown during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ Some historians have suggested that rice traveled to Louisiana from the Carolinas with the movement of ostracized French Roman Catholic Acadian settlers in their attempt to find a home along the Eastern seaboard. These early Acadians originally grew rice for home consumption by using areas of prairies that could not be plowed. Farmers tossed rice into the wetlands or nearby bayous or ponds.⁷² What grew from this casual method was termed as “providence rice” by its thankful harvesters. Around the late 1860s in Louisiana, rice was planted in small crops by hand, harvested by hand, and milled or hulled by hand or horse power on a farm.⁷³ Because of the Acadians casual rice farming method, during the early years of the Roberts Cove settlement, no established rice agriculture existed and therefore German farmers had no example to follow. Although they came to America as farmers the Germans of Roberts Cove had not previously farmed rice in their homeland.

⁷⁰ McCord, pp. 100-101

⁷¹ Thibodeaux, p. 88

⁷² USA Rice Federation

⁷³ University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Louisiana Reading Room Special Collections, Collection 33: Rice Millers Association, Box 1, Folder 3, Fred W. Rickert, “History of Rice Farming in Louisiana,” June 18, 1929. Herein referred to as Rickert, “History of Rice Farming in Louisiana.”



Figure 2: Primitive rice milling equipment.
Freeland Archives. Acadia Parish Public
Library, Crowley, La.

The development of the rice industry in the United States at first centered on the southern colonies of the United States—namely, coastal Georgia, and South Carolina—in the mid-1700s. Before the 1860s the only production of rice outside of the Carolinas and Georgia occurred on the lower Mississippi river, below New Orleans. Louisiana eventually became a central hub of the rice industry and the shift from Georgia and the Carolinas to Louisiana happened just as Germans came to Louisiana. After 1880 the center of rice production completely shifted to the prairies of southwestern Louisiana, parts of Arkansas and southeastern Texas.⁷⁴ Historians have proposed the socioeconomic turmoil of the Civil War and Reconstruction led many people to leave the eastern portion of Louisiana and seek their fortune on the prairies.⁷⁵ The rice culture of Louisiana parallels the advancement of Roberts Cove in its transformation for Louisiana

⁷⁴ Ayres, pp. 193-195. Rice production in Georgia, after peaking at more than 51 million pounds in 1859, fell to about 21.6 million pounds in 1879 and to just over 8.9 million pounds by 1899. By 1919 more than 99 percent of U.S. rice production came from Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas.

⁷⁵ Sexton, p. 553

experienced a rice revolution which coincided with the most prosperous years of Roberts Cove, 1900 to 1917.⁷⁶

Initially the Germans of Roberts Cove tried but failed to produce regional crops such as corn and cotton because the prairie on which they settled was not conducive to such agriculture. Many of the German men had to work in salt mines at Avery Island during the winter months because of these crop failures.⁷⁷ Because of the initial lack of growth, the farms established in the beginning of the Roberts Cove settlement were simply family farms although eventually blacks did work on Germans farms as day laborers. As late as 1883 the geographical area of Louisiana located between the Atchafalaya and Sabine rivers had a large amount of unsettled prairie land. Mainly populated by Acadian French expelled from Canada in 1755, the residents farmed sugarcane, cotton and beef cattle.⁷⁸ In 1885 when the Southern Pacific Railroad Company took over the entire line from Louisiana to the Pacific Coast German immigrant wheat farmers moved south and helped with the settlement.⁷⁹

With the railroad arriving in Louisiana in 1881, Midwest land speculators and farmers ventured into Louisiana to use the methods of wheat agriculture to produce rice. However the transformation was not immediately successful. Although the prairie uplands allowed farmers to flood vast fields, efficient pumping systems needed to be put into place to get water from nearby streams and wells and then drain the fields so actual harvesting of the rice could begin. However, areas such as Roberts Cove could not be reached by canals.⁸⁰ Although not all rice farming land was able to benefit from canals, within a short period of time the lands being

⁷⁶ Henry Dethloff, "The Early Rice Industry," in *Agriculture and Economic Development in Louisiana*, Vol. XVI of *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History* ed. Thomas Becnel (Lafayette, La.: Center for Louisiana Studies, ULL, 1997): p. 380

⁷⁷ McCord, p. 83

⁷⁸ Babineaux

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ McCord, p. 86

converted to rice farming but too distant to be served economically by rice canals discovered a reliable source of groundwater.⁸¹ A layer of gravel underlay the entire prairie region at a depth of approximately 125 to 200 feet which could be easily tapped by shallow wells and pumps thus allowing thousands of acres of lands to be used for rice planting.⁸²



**Figure 3: Deep well in operation. Wells used for irrigation vary in depth from 300-400 feet.
Freeland Archive: Rice Production 12, Acadia Parish Public Library, Crowley, La.**

The early process of rice farming was extremely time consuming and difficult. Before the farmer planted rice, he needed to make sure his land could be serviced by either an irrigation canal or deep well. Once the farmer picked an appropriate water source, he then needed to build levees and reservoirs in which to retain the water. Only after successful levees were built could he then plant his rice.

⁸¹ Dethloff, p. 378

⁸² Ibid; Babineaux



Figure 4: Two men create a levee with a pusher. Freeland Archive: Rice production 6, Acadia Parish Public Library, Crowley, La.



Figure 5: The application of irrigation water to a field of young rice. Freeland Archives: Rice Production 12, Acadia Parish Public Library. Crowley, La

After planting rice, the ponds were then flooded. After the rice grew, these ponds were drained. Threshing began after the rice stalks were cut and dried. In order to dry the rice stalks, the farmer would place the stalks in bundles, these bundles were then grouped to form “shocks.” With the rice seed heads at the top of the shocks, the bundles were left in the field for about three weeks, as the hot, tropical Louisiana sun dried them. These shocks were strategically placed so that if it rained, the rain water would slide down the shocks rather than rewetting the rice stalks.



Figure 6: Two men constructing rice shocks. Freeland Archive: Rice Production 22, Acadia Parish Public Library, Crowley, La.

The dried shocks were then transported to a thresher, which separated the seed from the stalk, and the resulting loose grain was sacked for transport.⁸³

⁸³ Thibodeaux, p. 89



Figure 7: In this photo, the rice shocks have been gathered from the fields and placed onto horse drawn wagons which would line up next to the threshing machine. The man on the far right is placing the dried rice stalks onto the conveyor belt of the thresher. The rice stalks move through this machine which separates the grains from stalks. The loose rice grains fall into the sack, which the sixth man from the left is holding while the stalks shoot out another spout into a large heap. The sacks of rice were then woven closed with a large needle and thread, and placed back on the wagons for transport. Freeland Archives: Acadia Parish Public Library. Crowley, La.

In 1888, 6,582 sacks were shipped from the Rayne depot. The next year, the total was 21,376 sacks, followed by 34,775 in 1890, in 1891 a total of 39,460 and in 1892, an unprecedented 115,841 sacks.⁸⁴ Coupled with the ingenuity of the Germans of Roberts Cove, rice became a very prosperous venture for anyone entering agriculture at this time.

Initially the Midwestern wheat machines were too heavy and would be bogged down in the mud. However the wheat farmers combined with earlier innovations by Louisiana French and German farmers and helped to revolutionize rice agriculture in Southwest Louisiana.⁸⁵ Soon farmers adopted improved seeds, steam engines, gang plows, seeders, and twine binders.⁸⁶ In 1884, an immigrant from the Midwest, Maurice Brien, successfully utilized his wheat harvesting

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Sexton, p. 562.

⁸⁶ Ayers, p. 193

twine binder for rice harvesting.⁸⁷ Brien made available the large cultivation of rice when he perfected his machine in 1886, approximately five years after the establishment of Roberts Cove.⁸⁸ The rapidity of the expansion of rice cultivation in Acadia Parish is indicated by the fact that there were a thousand of these machines in use in the parish within six years.⁸⁹ Later, when pumps and deep-wells were sunk in the prairies in 1887, inventive Roberts Cove farmers dammed streams during the wet winter months forming reservoirs with which they flooded some of their higher felids.⁹⁰



Figure 8: Early rice field cutting with multiple twine binders. Freeland Archive: Rice Production 21, Acadia Parish Public Library, Crowley, La.

Being blessed with myriad bayous and waterways, the surrounding region was soon crisscrossed by canals leading from stream bank pumping plants. By 1889 Louisiana was the

⁸⁷ Babineaux. Georgia ceased as a major rice producer for two reasons. One being the destruction of Georgia during the Civil War and secondly successive hurricanes pummeled Georgia's coast ruining the crop. Rice production then moved to the Louisiana parishes along the western border of the state of Mississippi. As Louisiana declined in sugar production following the Civil War it made up for losses through rice and Georgia's rice decline. For instance, rice production skyrocketed in Plaquemines Parish in the 1880s. Although it will decline in Plaquemines when sugar makes a comeback a decade later, the rice industry did not suffer major setbacks as it was becoming popular further west in southwest Louisiana.

⁸⁸ Babineaux

⁸⁹ McCord, p. 87

⁹⁰ Thibodeaux, p. 88; McCord, p. 88. Credit is given to W.W. Duson for introducing the Stamm pump.

leading rice producer –the only crop to gain in production following the Civil War.⁹¹

Landholders, capitalists, immigrants, laborers, and large planters rushed into new areas.⁹² In

1894, A. D. McFarland and C. L. Shaw organized a private irrigation and canal company near

Jennings and the first irrigation canals of this area went into operation in the same year.⁹³

Within four years of the introduction of canals, by 1898, some 150 miles of canals had been built

in Acadia Parish alone which served about 55,000 acres of rice lands. The experiments on these

lands and the ultimate production of rice were so successful that southwest Louisiana rapidly

increased its land value from 25 cents and 50 cents in about 1890 to \$50.00 per acre within a few

years of the sinking of the first wells.⁹⁴ By 1900, there were twenty-five canal companies

operating in Southwest Louisiana. From the 1880s when the settlers of Roberts Cove first

arrived to the beginning of World War I, rice production in Southwest Louisiana experienced a

dramatic transformation.

By the mid 1890s the success of these rice farmers was able to attract the attention of the

president of the German Immigration Society of New Orleans, which was responsible for the

recruitment of Germans into the state. In May of 1895, a letter from the President of the

German Immigration Society of New Orleans, replicated in the Crowley *Daily Signal*, reported

on the Germans of Roberts Cove. The letter discusses the health of inhabitants, the cost of land

and also the opening of the Midland Branch of the Southern Pacific Railroad. More importantly,

the letter showcases the success of Germans in the area, particularly when it states:

...Many of the most prosperous inhabitants in this section came here almost without a cent of their own and today are respected citizens living at their ease and own considerable property...Rice...is the most important article of this section...in fact this is the largest rice producing district in the world, it requires no working or

⁹¹ Babineaux

⁹² Ayers, p. 193

⁹³ Dethloff, p. 378

⁹⁴ Rickert, "History of Rice Farming in Louisiana"; Dethloff, p. 380

fertilizing; all that is necessary is water and [the] right moment... Independent of the railroad service there are many other advantages, such as churches... especially the Roman Catholic...⁹⁵

This glowing letter of the conditions of the settlement of Roberts Cove emphasized how simple and productive the farming of rice was and the availability of cheap land. This letter confirmed Germans were making a tremendous impact on the economy of southwest Louisiana through rice farming but also includes the Catholic faith, which again was the main form of German cohesion.

RICE MILLING REVOLUTION: ASSMILIATION THROUGH ECONOMIC AND AGRICULTURAL DIVERSIFICATION

With the introduction of the railroad, Maurice Brien's twine binder, irrigation canals and the sinking of pumps and deep wells the first two decades in Roberts Cove proved to be very successful. But in order to turn a profit these farmers were completely reliant on New Orleans for rice milling facilities. Up to 1895, outside of the Carolinas and Georgia, New Orleans served as the only location that provided rice milling in the United States.⁹⁶ When the rice industry started up on the prairies of Acadia Parish, the grain had to be shipped to New Orleans for milling.

The German colonists who were farmers came into Acadia Parish during a very favorable time of economic and agricultural experiment. The Germans quickly became experts in the irrigation and mechanization of rice and one of them, Nicholas Zaunbrecher, is credited with being the first rice farmer to effect an improvement in growing "providence" rice and also sending the first trainloads of rice to New Orleans. Not only did he construct a pond to hold the rain for watering his rice land, he also built a bridge to make transportation of rice from his field

⁹⁵ The Crowley *Daily Signal*, May 23, 1895

⁹⁶ Rickert, "History of Rice Farming in Louisiana"

to New Orleans easier.⁹⁷ Before this bridge, the rice was brought to Bayou Plaquemine Brulee by wagon, loaded on a boat, and then reloaded on wagons for the remainder of the trip to the railroad.⁹⁸



Figure 9: Hauling rice to Crowley. Freeland Archive: Acadia Parish Public Library, Crowley, La.



Figure 10: Wagons waiting to unload at American Rice Mill, Crowley, Louisiana, on the Southern Pacific Railroad Line. Freeland Archive: Acadia Parish Public Library, Crowley, La.

In Acadia Parish, where no competition among alternative modes of transport or milling companies existed, farmers like Nicholas Zaunbrecher were highly vulnerable to rate

⁹⁷ Fontenot and Freeland, p. 184. Rice from the Nicholas Zaunbrecher farm at Roberts Cove was the first shipped by rail to New Orleans.

⁹⁸ Ibid.; McCord, p. 90

manipulation of the rice brokers in New Orleans.⁹⁹ This situation changed when the Rayne Rice Mill and Manufacturing Company came into existence in 1887 and was completed in the summer of 1888. With the operation of the Rayne Rice Mill, no longer could the rice mills in New Orleans charge heavy prices for the milling of the rice coming from southwest Louisiana. The building of rice mills spread rapidly, and by 1900 there were ten incorporated mills in Acadia Parish alone. In fact, according to the Rice Millers Association Roster, from about 1911 to 1913 Louisiana had at least thirty-seven mills.¹⁰⁰

Although there was general prosperity in southwest Louisiana there were also signs that the rapid expansion of the rice industry was slowing by the early 1900s due to overproduction, rice brokers and toll milling. Overproduction caused the slowing of the market but outside forces such as rice brokers contributed to the decline as well. For example, by 1893, only five years after the Rayne Rice Mill was finished, rice brokers caused the price of rice to drop so abruptly that many Rayne rice farmers switched to growing sugar cane.¹⁰¹ Also, toll milling, the chief way to mill rice, was coming under pressure from the more financially stable mills in New Orleans. Some of the first mills in New Orleans were operated strictly as toll mills which functioned at a fixed charge per barrel of rough rice.¹⁰² These mills then would undertake the milling and distribution of the finished product.¹⁰³ Ironically, there was a down side to this agricultural explosion in rice. With the quick success of rice milling in the area of southwest Louisiana, a decline in the price and quality of rice appeared due to the need for experienced rice mill operators. Also, the initial lack of warehouses on the prairies forced farmers to sell their

⁹⁹ Peter Alexis Gourevitch, "International Trade, Domestic Coalitions, and Liberty: Comparative Responses to the Crisis of 1873-1896," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Autumn, 1977): p. 300

¹⁰⁰ Babineaux; University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Louisiana Reading Room Special Collections, Collection 33: Rice Millers Association, Box 1, Folder 11.

¹⁰¹ Thibodeaux, p. 89

¹⁰² Each barrel contained of 162 lbs. of rough rice which was brought to the mill from the farmer. With the advancement in rice farming, barrels turned to sacks but were still termed "barrels."

¹⁰³ Rickert, "History of Rice Milling in Louisiana."

rice quickly to New Orleans mills so the farmer would not incur more payment for things such as insurance for storage in New Orleans. After decades of rice production in southwest Louisiana, New Orleans was still the hub of rice milling and during the early 1900s toll milling was held partly responsible for the financial difficulties which occurred in the rice market.¹⁰⁴

New Orleans held the advantage of rice milling because it had developed milling facilities for the state long before rice became a commercial crop in southwest Louisiana.¹⁰⁵ While many farmers became wealthy planting rice, success was not assured because rice brokers in New Orleans controlled the price of rice. Therefore the New Orleans rice mills were more influential than ones in Acadia Parish because they were able to buy both rough and clean rice on a cash basis. Under the toll system of milling, immediately after harvesting, rice had to be shipped to New Orleans where it was cleaned and polished by city millers, and then bid upon by rice brokers and the farmer's commission men. Therefore with the lack of facilities in Acadia Parish, and the benefits of getting cash for their crop quickly, most rice farmers turned to New Orleans for business. However, the farmers may not have been getting the true value of their crop. For instance, sometimes the prices for the estimated rice crop came from the practice of "window shopping." Under this method, brokers and millers from New Orleans, Crowley, and Lake Charles traveled through the rice belt via the Southern Pacific railroad obtaining estimates of the crop from the window of the train. The men, who participated in window shopping, used their reputation and published the estimate in various newspapers. These estimates then went on to be used by millers and brokers who adjusted market prices to the possibility of a surplus in the crop. The leading rice belt newspapers, the *Lake Charles American*, the *Crowley Signal*, the *Welsh Rice Belt Journal*, and the *New Orleans Times Picayune* were the chief sources of this

¹⁰⁴ Dethloff, p. 381

¹⁰⁵ Babineaux

statistical information and published the crop estimates and predictions of the season's prices.¹⁰⁶ Because of this, the price of the farmer's rice was unknown until it reached the city, was milled, and sold although later statisticians in the United States Agriculture department would attempt more accurate form of crop estimates.¹⁰⁷

Eventually Acadia Parish was scattered with mills and warehouses for rice but the building of these facilities did not begin until somewhat later because the rapid transformation of the prairie into a rice belt created a lag between production and processing. Although when facilities were complete, gradually, the toll system of milling was abolished as country millers built their own mills and warehouses to increase profits.¹⁰⁸ In 1888 when Rayne built its own mill, New Orleans ceased in dominating rice. Country mills began buying rough rice directly from the farmer, and then marketing it to retail buyers. Hence, the rice millers became sellers of clean rice, in direct competition with brokers from New Orleans. Nevertheless even the local mills took unfair advantage of the farmers which perhaps caused some Germans of Roberts Cove to get on the board of their local mills. For instance, in early 1900 Nicholas Zaunbrecher and Joseph Leonards joined with six non-German businessmen to found a rice milling company.¹⁰⁹

Hence, a tremendous growth in the rice industry occurred between 1890 and 1900 and peaked around 1905, when improvements in irrigation, harvesting and the construction of rice mills occurred throughout Acadia Parish.¹¹⁰ Due to the success the Germans were having in

¹⁰⁶ Babineaux. The fact that rice crop estimates were printed in these newspapers furthers the argument that some of the Germans of Roberts Cove were literate.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ McCord, p. 136; Crowley *Daily Signal*, May 5, 1900; According to *Index to Civil District Court Cases Vol. 1, Acadia Parish 1887-1924*, six mills applied for certificate on November 7-10, 1900 as follows; Union Rice Mill, American Rice Mill, Star Rice Mill, White Swan Rice Mill, Crowley Rice Mill, Eureka Rice Mill

¹¹⁰ City of Crowley, "Community History," <http://www.crowley-la.com/COMMhistory.html> (date accessed March 25, 2010)

south Louisiana, by late 1905 articles appeared in the Crowley *Daily Signal* calling for more German immigration to America. The article reads:

...A convention [should] be held in the Crescent City for the purpose of determining the steps that may be taken to encourage immigration of the right kind to Louisiana... We urge special encouragement to Germans... These people are steady, dependable and make good citizens...

The article then states that if the commissioner of immigration tried hard to attract Germans he will be helping the state of Louisiana by furnishing the south “with workers which it so greatly needs.”¹¹¹ During the rice boom, the state of Louisiana was tremendously influential in the rice market which caused the overproduction of the crop.

Rice in Acadia Parish began to do very well with the building of rice mills. With this great success of rice milling in Acadia Parish, competition between New Orleans and “country mills” became increasingly acute after 1900. In the early part of the 1907 season, the antagonism between millers and brokers from New Orleans and those of Southwestern Louisiana reached new heights when the largest rice crop ever produced in Louisiana until that time made it evident that prices were going to be low. Due to the dramatic fluctuations in rice prices, in 1907 rice farmers of Louisiana and Texas organized the Southern Rice Growers Association. Membership being limited to planters only, its primary objectives was to promote the interests of local rice producers by securing their cooperation in on rice acreage and production in Louisiana.¹¹²

Later, in May of 1910, many Germans of Roberts Cove and the surrounding area formed the Southwest Louisiana Rice Farmers’ Union, grown from the *Deutsche Gesellschaft* of Acadia Parish with William Zaunbrecher as president. The plan for this organization was to have rice grown by its members milled and sold directly to consumers in German communities of

¹¹¹ Crowley *Daily Signal*, December 2, 1905

¹¹² Babineaux

Chicago, St. Louis and Milwaukee.¹¹³ However, this organization was not successful, since two years later the president of the Southwest Louisiana Farmers' Union, William Zaunbrecher, became a member of the board of directors of the Southern Rice Growers' Association. Further, another German from the Cove, William Heinen became the regional manager of the Southern Rice Growers Association.¹¹⁴

Perhaps from the farming of rice, the numbers of the German population of southwest Louisiana grew rapidly. In fact it had grown so much that the Germans of Roberts Cove were encouraged to form a German Society or *Deutsch Gesellschaft*. On November 27, 1909, the *Crowley Daily Signal* posted the following ad in the paper:

German Society: Will be organized to Encourage Immigration of Germans
The Germans of Acadia Parish have started a movement to organize a German society of the parish for the purpose of encouraging the immigration of Germans; protecting the interest of German immigration and German citizens; keeping alive interest in the German language and literature and encouraging social intercourse among our American citizens of German extraction.¹¹⁵

Ads such as this prove that assimilation was so prevalent they needed to unite in order to remain uniquely German.¹¹⁶ *Deutsch Gesellschaft* membership only went to those conversant in the German languages even though one sympathetic to the objectives of the *Gesellschaft* could become honorary member. Although the society did not survive, one positive effect of the organization was the increased contact between other Germans of the area, in particular those

¹¹³ McCord, p. 137; *Crowley Daily Signal* March 3, 1907; Members of the association coming from Roberts Cove pledged to hold their grain rather than sell below the set price, or simply allowed the association to market rice for them.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 139; For biographies on William Heinen see Ellis David Arthur, ed., *The Historical Encyclopedia of Louisiana*. (Louisiana: Louisiana Historical Bureau, n.d.): p. 922-23

¹¹⁵ Ibid, November 27, 1909; This add was later repeated on December 2, 1909 then printed in German on December 12, 1909.; Berchtold, 4-5. Improvements were constantly being made in steam navigation in the eighteenth century although only one German steamship line called at New Orleans after 1874. This caused the German influx to shrivel to an average of about 1,200 a year and by 1882, the last German liner called at New Orleans, so Germans who still wanted to come to New Orleans had to travel on foreign, mostly French, ships.

¹¹⁶ Kondert, p. 37

who had come from Louisiana in the Midwest in the early years of the rice boom.¹¹⁷ However, with the introduction of World War I this organization disappeared.

The year 1907 was a crucial time for the Germans of Roberts Cove. Not only did the area experience the formation and disappearance of the German rice growers association, but it was also losing hold of its school. The Benedictine sisters gave up control of the school at Roberts Cove because of a shortage of personnel, and the Pastor, Father Placidus Zarn, was recalled to St. Josephs Abbey located in Covington, Louisiana.¹¹⁸ Some members of the Roberts Cove settlement, including Joseph Heinen, thought the Benedictine Sisters leaving was due to a lack of administrative interest on the part of the new priests.¹¹⁹ Joseph Heinen also complained at this time to the St. Joseph Abbey about the rice situation.¹²⁰ In the first decade of the twentieth century when the Germans pushed by society, they push back by standing up for themselves and taking advantage of the law.

CIVIL CASES: ASSIMILATION THROUGH LEGAL SYSTEM

At the turn of the century, the Germans of Roberts Cove not only assimilated through the use of the English language and also business success the rice boom facilitated assimilation on an economic level. In addition their business and financial lives created conflict within the community. In order to settle these disputes these Germans relied on the legal system and partisan allies from the community. The Germans of Roberts Cove and the surrounding area took an active role in their society enjoying the success of rice farming. This success promoted many of the Germans to positions in local politics.¹²¹ As soon as the Germans became involved

¹¹⁷ McCord, p. 143

¹¹⁸ McCord, p. 122

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.123

¹²⁰ Kondert, p. 24

¹²¹ McCord, pp. 140-141; Crowley *Daily Signal*, April 8, 1899. Berchtold expressed the same opinion when documenting the behavior of Germans in New Orleans. For a description of the members of Roberts Cove who held key positions in local politics see Kondert, 24.

in the American legal system they were losing traces of themselves. Simultaneously, the Germans of this area, in particular, Nicholas Zaunbrecher, Gerald Hoffpauir, Joseph Fabacher, Henry Habetz, Joseph Heinen, Theodore Heinen, Jacob Thevis, August Leonards and Ferdinand Olinger were involved in alleged acts of sabotage against their neighbors were indebted to each other, or possibly fraud by rice brokers. In fact, of roughly 6,300 cases filed in Acadia Parish between the years 1887 and 1920, approximately 600 of them involve plaintiffs and 215 defendants with German names.¹²²

Not only were the original Roberts Cove families challenging one another through civil cases, but Germans like George H. Stein, and Jack Frankel also pursued legal actions. For example, George H. Stein, in January 1888, sued Rayne Rice Mill and Manufacturing Company on the grounds that the company owed him \$1800.00 for his services of superintending the operation of the mill.¹²³ Jack Frankel, after coming to America in 1878 later located to Crowley in 1887 and started a general merchandise store. In 1899, Frankel organized the Bank of Acadia and became its first president, being one of the youngest bank presidents in the state at that time. In May 1893 he organized with others, the Crowley Building and Loan Association and served as president. He was also the first postmaster of Crowley and served as treasurer of Acadia Parish for ten years after it was organized. At various times he served as a member of the city council and was a director of the Chamber of Commerce. Later in 1911 Mr. Frankel in association with Frank Godchaux and others, organized the Louisiana State Rice Mill Company, becoming vice-president of the corporation.¹²⁴ The examples of Stein and Frankel illustrate that

¹²² *Index to Civil District Court Cases, Acadia Parish: 1887- 1924*, (Waco, Tx.: Hill Printing and Stationary Co., n.d.)

¹²³ George H. Stein vs. Rayne Rice Mill and Manufacturing Co. *Index to Civil District Court Cases: Vol. 1 Acadia Parish 1887-1924*. No. 42, 13th Judicial District Court, Acadia Parish, Louisiana. 20 Apr. 1888.

¹²⁴ Ellis David Arthur, ed., *The Historical Encyclopedia of Louisiana*. (Louisiana: Louisiana Historical Bureau, n.d.) p. 710

Germans not specifically from the Roberts Cove community integrated into the region of southwest Louisiana through economic diversification.

The civil cases involving Germans of Roberts Cove in particular, deal with a wide variety of activities from monetary debt to acts of sabotage. Some of the earlier docket numbers boast German plaintiffs and defendants. These German cases span from 1888, one year after the formation of Acadia Parish until 1920.¹²⁵ The diversity in these cases parallels the Germans assimilation within the community. For instance in the case, *A. R. McMurtry vs. L. H. Habetz*, Heinrich Leonard Habetz was sued in November of 1896 for a debt to plaintiff Alexander R. McMurtry of Indiana for a promissory note in the amount of \$170.00. Although, evidence dated April 9, 1896 seems to show Habetz to have previously paid the plaintiff, on March 26, 1897 judgment was given to McMurtry in the amount of \$170.00 dollars.¹²⁶

The case, *J. & B. Schutten vs. August Leonards* involved monies owned to Joseph and Ben Schutten of the business J. & B. Schutten. At various dates between October 1896, and January 1897, Schutten sold and delivered to August Leonards merchandise pertaining to rice farming, equaling \$739.90. Between October 1896 and March 1897, Leonards paid to Schutten six hundred dollars toward the debt but on March 25, 1897, Leonards still owed \$139.96. By 1898, J. B. Schutten alleged that in the fall of 1898 the company sold and delivered to Leonards rice sacks for which he agreed to pay \$85.05. This sum was not paid until the summer of 1899. Finally in July 1899, Leonards became indebted to J & B Schutten again for \$121.03 for storage of rice. Eventually the demands of J.B. Schutten were satisfied in full in the fall of 1899 and by

¹²⁵ Earlier cases could be possibly be found in the court records of St. Landry for there was about a five year overlap from the coming of the Germans to Roberts Cove, to the formation of Acadia Parish in 1887.

¹²⁶ *A. R. McMurtry vs. L. H. Habetz. Index to Civil District Court Cases, Vol. 1 Acadia Parish: 1887-1924.* No. 856, 11th District Court of Acadia Parish, Louisiana. 26 Mar. 1897. For a biography of Habetz see Arthur, p. 896.

January 1900, the suit was dismissed at Schutten's costs.¹²⁷ This case not only illustrates the constant indebtedness of a farmer, but also the capital needed to endure in the rice trade. It further serves as an example of how the Germans involved the legal system after unsuccessfully trying to solve their financial disputes themselves. This case also reiterates how active August Leonards was in the community for not only did he have to deal with his own affairs in farming, but he, as the next case illustrates, was also busy making enemies within his community.

The case of Joseph Schaffhausen vs. August Leonards solidifies the claim that Roberts cove community was well on the path to assimilation. August Leonards was sued for defamation by Joseph Schaffhausen in the years 1899 and 1900. The court records suggest since 1887, Schaffhausen was a saloon owner in Rayne, Louisiana where he purportedly had a prosperous business, good reputation, plus the esteem and confidence of the social world for "honesty, truth, and fair dealing."¹²⁸ However, Schaffhausen's reputation in the town of Rayne and elsewhere in the Parish changed in 1888 when on various occasions August Leonard called Schaffhausen "a thief", "a cheat", a "low born fellow", a "scoundrel" and a "liar unworthy of belief." According to the court record these words were uttered in German as well as in the English. Schaffhausen claimed he suffered financial loss in the sum of \$2500.00, by the slanderous words mentioned and given circulation by August Leonard. He sued for an additional \$2500.00 for damages, "caused to his reputation, social standing and integrity, and for the mental anguish and mortification to the feelings and sensibility which brought upon him the ridicule of his fellow citizens."¹²⁹

¹²⁷ J. & B. Schutten vs. August Leonards, *Index to Civil District Court Cases, Vol. 1, Acadia Parish: 1887-1924*. No. 1511, 11th District Court, Acadia Parish, Louisiana. 11 Jan. 1900.

¹²⁸ Joseph Schaffhausen vs. August Leonards, *Index to Civil District Court Cases, Vol. 1, Acadia Parish: 1887-1924*. No. 1156, 11th Judicial District Court, Parish of Acadia. 4 Oct. 1899.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

This case proves two points regarding the social standing of the Germans in Roberts Cove. First, that the German language was heard in Rayne in 1888, five years after the establishment of the Cove shows that although Germans were benefitting from assimilation as we saw earlier, the German language was still vibrant in the Parish. Second, for August Leonards' opinion to carry so much weight provides evidence of assimilation of these Germans and the absorption into their surrounding community..

Jacob Thevis, a relative of the pioneer priest, Father Thevis was another successful German rice farmer from Roberts Cove who became well known. In fact he was a leading rice grower of Acadia Parish for many years.¹³⁰ The civil case of St. Meinard's Abbey vs. Jacob Thevis & Al. was filed on March 24, 1903. St. Meinard's Abbey of Indiana sued Jacob Thevis and Hubert Theunisson for a dispute over the property purchased from Father Thevis by the Abbey after the death of Father Hennemann. Reverend Finton Mundwiler, of Roberts Cove, then purchased a piece of the land from Father Thevis in 1884 which he sold to W. W. Duson in 1886.¹³¹ Jacob Thevis and Hubert Theunisson "unlawfully and tortuously" took possession of about thirty acres of land which St. Meinard's Abbey had been in possession of in order to produced rice. The Abbey wanted judgment against the Thevis and Theunisson in the sum of \$150.00 and for the further sum of \$150.00 yearly that the defendants continue to possess the land until they returned the land to the Abbey.¹³² Jacob Thevis and Hubert Theunisson denied all the allegations and persisted in holding the property against St. Meinrads Abbey, although requested to cease. Supposedly up to 1903 the land had been held by the Abbey since 1893 although Jacob Thevis acquired a certain lot containing 132 acres under the Homestead Law

¹³⁰ Arthur, p. 1267

¹³¹ For a detailed outline of previous ownership of the property see *Conveyance book "Q" No. 2, Acadia Parish Court, Crowley, Louisiana*, p. 548.

¹³² St. Meinard's Abbey vs. Jacob Thevis & Al. *Index to Civil District Court Cases, Vol. 1, Acadia Parish: 1887-1924*. No. 1684, 18th District Court, Acadia Parish, Louisiana. 10 Sept. 1903.

from the United States on March 1, 1892. With the land obtained from the Homestead Act, Jacob Thevis then sold fifty acres of the lot to William Joseph Vondenstein who on the same day sold the fifty acres to Hubert Theunisson, who up until 1903, supposedly, was still the owner. Both acts were recorded in the conveyance records of Acadia Parish.

With all the confusion of whom the rightful owner truly was, Thevis and Vondenstein had the boundary lines between their lands and that of St. Meinard's Abbey surveyed. This surveyor, appointed by the courts, determined that St. Meinard's Abbey, in fact, was the true and lawful owner of the land except for the part which was sold to W. W. Duson by Reverend Finton Mundwiler on August 23, 1886. This case touches on multiple aspects of assimilation for it involves not only residents of Louisiana but those of Indiana as well. Further this case highlights the use of the court system even when amicable requests to desist were disregarded. This demonstrates that although these Germans were all connected through the bond of Catholicism they were industrious and competitive. Although Thevis and Theunisson could have actually assumed they were the rightful owners of the property other acts of competitive sabotage were more malicious.

One German in particular who was extremely defensive of rice farming was Joseph Heinen. Heinen goes to great lengths to protect the price of the rice crop, even if it means destroying a fellow German's livelihood. Nicholas Zaunbrecher was one of the wealthiest German immigrant rice farmers and epitomized the thrift and industry of the German population.



Figure 11: House of Nicholas Zaunbrecher with family which depicts how successful he became. Roberts Cove Museum, Roberts Cove, Louisiana.

By farming rice, he acquired five pieces of property totaling 1,232 acres valued at \$40,000 to \$50,000. In fact, Nicholas Zaunbrecher's four elder sons William Joseph, Lawrence, Henry, and Carl all maintained the farming tradition becoming successful rice farmers. In the year 1898 Zaunbrecher was given the right by St. Meinrads Abbey to dam a gully and to use the water stored behind the dam for the purpose of irrigating a piece of his rice land for five years. Zaunbrecher erected a dam on the gully then constructed a canal leading from the gully to his property for irrigation.

In 1903, Zaunbrecher rented fifty acres of his land to Henry Heuzel & Son for rice cultivation. Zaunbrecher's contract for the lease was that the Heuzel's were to do all the work to plant, grow, cultivate, harvest and thresh the rice. Henry Heuzel & Son thus plowed and prepared the land for planting and were ready to continue with the contract when on March 16, 1903, Joseph Heinen, "for the purpose of annoying and harassing" approached Henry Heuzel's sons, John and Henry, and pretended to own the property of the Abbey. Heinen then convinced the boys by his false pretenses and statements to raise the flood gates situated on the dam.

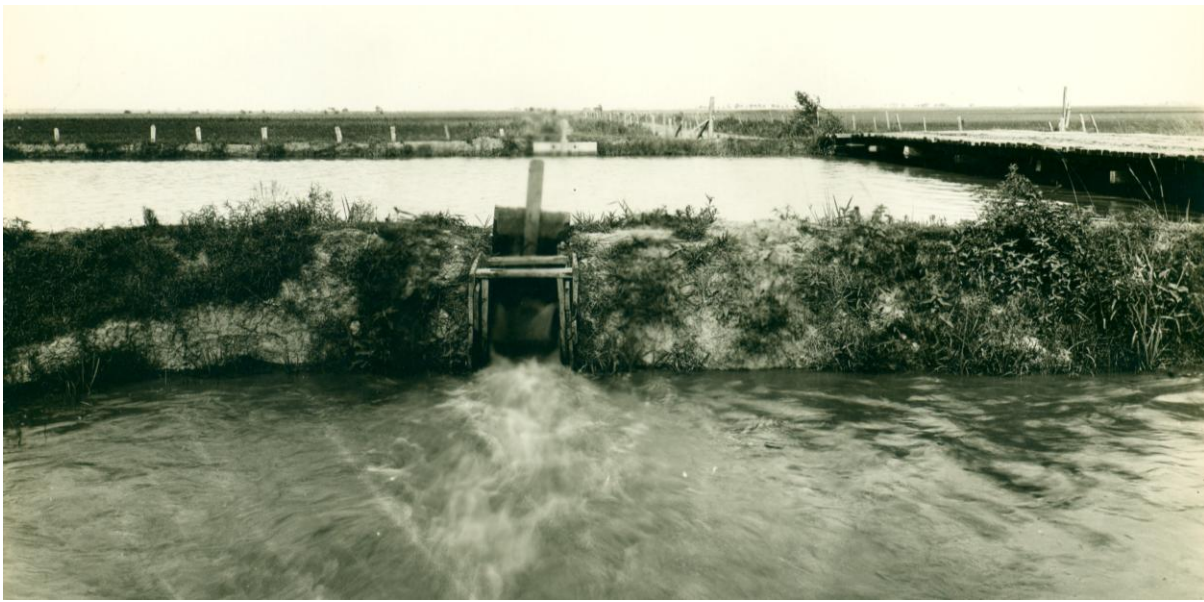


Figure 12: This picture is an example of a typical flood gate which was used for irrigation water to pass from main canal into laterals or smaller canals. Freeland Archives: Rice production 11, Acadia Parish Public Library, Crowley, La.

By raising the gates, the boys allowed all the water, which Zaunbrecher had accumulated behind the dam, to escape into the connected Bayou. After all the water had receded, it was alleged that Heinen further notified the boys that no crops could be raised by them. Heuzel and sons subsequently refused to comply with their contract with Zaunbrecher for they had no water in which to irrigate their rice crop. It is stated in the court record that Joseph Heinen, "...well knew that he was depriving Zaunbrecher of his rights under his contract [with Heuzel & Son.]" Heinen by "his unlawful, tortuous and illegal action" caused Zaunbrecher to lose his water, an absolute necessity to raise his crop of rice and thus was responsible to [Zaunbrecher], in damages totaling \$1120.00."¹³³

The case was ordered in favor of Nicholas Zaunbrecher on April 6th 1904.¹³⁴ Joseph Heinen actually ruining 50 acres of Zaunbrecher's crops is critical in the fact that although the Germans of Roberts Cove were socially cohesive, they also fought and sabotaged each other

¹³³Nicholas Zaunbrecher vs. Joseph Heinen. *Index to Civil District Court Cases, Vol. 1, Acadia Parish: 1887-1924*. No. 1953, 18th District Court, Acadia Parish, Louisiana. 6 Apr. 1904

¹³⁴ Ibid.

commercially. Zaunbrecher's farm was only one aggravation for this competitive farmer. Later in 1905 Joseph Heinen complained that the abundant rice crop had so lowered the price of the grain that it was rumored the "Americans" would no longer grow rice.¹³⁵ This instance of sabotage illustrates how much was at stake with rice crops and that the industry was central to relations within the community.

The previously mentioned cases not only show the particulars of life in Roberts Cove in regards to land disputes but they also provide an indication of how the Germans interacted in the community. Through the Germans participation in court cases one can also assume the ability to communicate in the English language existed. Although these cases focus on the early years of the existence of Roberts Cove and the turn of the century, other cases dating from the years right before World War One, demonstrate how the Germans of this area were fully invested in society.

The case of Gerald Hoffpauir vs. Standard Rice Milling Company gives specific examples of the assimilation within the Roberts Cove community and that of the surrounding area, while also showing through testimony how Germans were supported by the community. By 1913, Gerald Hoffpauir sued the Standard Milling Company on account of William Wright, a dishonest rice buyer. As we have previously seen with toll milling, brokers sometimes went out of their way to secure rice deals. This case deals with the sequestration of six hundred and thirty-seven sacks of rice, appraised by the Sheriff at a total value of approximately \$2,300.00. Gerald Hoffpauir alleged that Standard Milling Company bought from him, rice which was in a warehouse and was to be weighed and delivered. Evidence from testimony shows that William Wright the mill's broker went to Hoffpauir's store between five and seven o'clock on the evening of October 1, 1913 and made different offers for Hoffpauir's rice. Eventually, the offer of \$3.25 per sack barrel was accepted, upon the condition the rice be taken out of the warehouse

¹³⁵ McCord, p. 137.

that evening, or early next morning, and loaded on two cars which were then standing on the siding at the train station. These were the only available cars in the station.

In order to secure transport for the rice, Wright had to then see Ellis Hoffpauir, who had control of both train cars. Ellis Hoffpauir told Wright one of the cars was leaking and that he could have it, but that the railroad agent he would not sign the bill of shipment for the car. As to the second car, Hoffpauir said he would not be able to let Wright know whether he could have it until the afternoon of the following day (and as it turned out, he was not then able to accommodate him). Wright, however, without telling Ellis Hoffpauir what he intended to do with both cars, went back to Gerald Hoffpauir's store and said to the defendant "Well, I have got the cars and I got the rice" (or words to that effect), to which defendant replied; "Provided you load the rice out the first thing in the morning." After this short conversation, Wright suggested they shake hands; Hoffpauir said "it is no use shaking hands unless you get the cars." Whereupon, however, they shook hands sealing the deal in Wright's mind. There were several disinterested witnesses who were present at Gerald Hoffpauir's and who gave the same testimony concerning the negotiations referred to in the court records.

The final decision of this case was that there was no sale of rice because the defendant, Gerald Hoffpauir, did not receive payment for his rice according to the contract which stated the rice be picked up early the next morning. Since Wright, the buyer for the Standard Rice Mill, did not secure wagons, the sale was not final.¹³⁶ Testimony from Gerald Hoffpauir, Ellis Hoffpauir and several men who were in the store at the time Wright tried to purchase the rice, testify Wright was dishonest in his dealings with the German rice farmer. This case represents the fact that as of 1913, the Germans were very active in all areas of rice farming. From owning the rice

¹³⁶Standard Rice Milling Company vs. Gerald Hoffpauir. *Index to Civil District Court Cases, Vol. 1, Acadia Parish: 1887- 1924*. No. 4090, 18th District Court, Acadia Parish, Louisiana. 16 July 1915.

to working in the shipment of rice, the industry had truly transformed the region of southwest Louisiana while also transforming the business ventures of the settlers of Roberts Cove.

Finally, the case of Henry Habetz vs. Ferdinand Olinger provides another indication of sabotage occurring in Acadia Parish between the Germans of Roberts Cove. However this act was much more direct. The deposition taken on May 5, 1913 claimed that Henry Habetz was engaged in raising rice. In 1907, for cultivation purposes Habetz constructed a canal with multiple levees running from his pumping plant, thru the property of a neighbor with whom he had the consent, and a vacant lot.¹³⁷



Figure 13: Typical canal waterway of Acadia Parish. The canal constructed by Habetz was likely much smaller. Freeland Archives: Rice Production13, Acadia Parish Public Library, Crowley, La.

Habetz maintained he had the use and possession of the canal since 1907. Therefore, since 1907 Habetz alleged he owned “in quiet and undisturbed possession” the land occupied by the canal and levees when on May 2, 1913, Ferdinand Olinger disturbed him in the “peaceable possession of the strip of land.” On this day, Olinger “unlawfully, maliciously and willfully” trespassed on Henry Habetz property and plowed down one of the levees belonging to the canal.

¹³⁷ R. T. Clark was his neighbor while the other ran just north of Herman Grein property. The canal crosses the vacant tract for a distance of about 225 feet more or less and the said canal with its levees occupies a space of about fifteen or twenty feet in width.

Supposedly Olinger even threaten to oust Henry Habetz and prevent him from the use and control of the strip of land. Further Habetz assumed that if Olinger was permitted to trespasses on his property it will cause him “irreparable loss and damage.” Nonetheless, it was ordered on May 5, 1913 that a writ of injunction be issued upon Habetz furnishing bond in the sum of \$250.00.¹³⁸ This case furthers the fact that the residents of Roberts Cove reached out to the American legal system to settle their disputes.

The previously stated court cases dealing with irrigation of land for rice cultivation, the buying and selling of rice, or the basic day-to-day interaction with various Germans paints a picture of not only the different personalities of these particular Germans but also shows how they asserted themselves into the landscape of south Louisiana and the Americans around them. Every one of these cases speaks to a new period of time in the Cove and a pattern emerges. The battle of August Leonards with Joseph Schaffhausen in 1898 and 1899 was individual but as the years go by, the Germans of Roberts Cove became involved in cases dealing with large companies and even the railroad. However civil cases are only one way to trace the assimilation of Roberts Cove Germans. By looking at Prohibition in Acadia Parish in the early 20th century we see the Germans disapproving of the act and later going on to help repeal it. Nationwide fervor for Prohibition in the early years of the twentieth century clearly showcases the ethnic boundaries in regards to Acadia Parish.

GERMANS AND PROHIBITION: ASSIMILATION THROUGH VOTING

In the late decades of the nineteenth century, consumption of both beer and ale rose dramatically due to the simple fact the between 1873 and 1893, the population in U.S. cities

¹³⁸ Henry Habetz vs. Ferdinand Olinger. *Index to Civil District Court Cases, Vol. 1, Acadia Parish: 1887- 1924*. No. 4043, 18th Judicial District Court, Acadia Parish, Louisiana. 5 May 1913. A Writ of Injunction is a court order which commands an act that the court regards as essential to justice, or it prohibits an act that is deemed to be contrary to good conscience. It is reserved for special circumstances in which the temporary preservation of the status quo is necessary. The writ of injunction was signed by August Habetz, Joseph Ohelnforst and Henry Habetz.

doubled, while German immigration increased rapidly.¹³⁹ Prohibition of alcohol threatened the customary German–American way of life.¹⁴⁰ Within ten years of the settlement of Roberts Cove Acadia Parish was inundated with calls for temperance. For instance, in 1895 a group called Our Own Temperance Society of Acadia Parish invited all citizens who “favor the restraint of the traffic in intoxicating liquors” to meet the following month at the court house in Crowley. The purpose of meeting was to take action in bringing about an election in the parish which would grant or withhold licenses from drinking houses and shops within the limits of the parish of Acadia.¹⁴¹ Temperance movements around the nation were causing huge alarm among brewers and distillers of alcohol. For instance in 1896, as Prohibition activities intensified, U.S. Brewers Association president Leo Ebert stated, “In our efforts to produce an absolutely healthful beverage we have availed ourselves of all mechanical improvements and the results of scientific research...” Because of adding such advanced technologies he further made the point that beer should be “entirely [exempt] from any of the restrictions now applied to intoxicants.”¹⁴²

Later, in 1908, Acadia Parish became one of the first parishes in Louisiana to vote on Prohibition. The cities of Rayne and Crowley, both with large German populations, were the centers of debate for the prohibition question. William Zaunbrecher, whose attitude toward prohibition was undoubtedly a product of his German background, served on the Police Jury of Acadia Parish when it had tried local prohibition for one year.¹⁴³ The Roberts Cove Ward in 1908 actually voted against prohibition by a margin of twelve for and twenty-six against. Acadia

¹³⁹ Winship, “The Evolution of North American Beer”

¹⁴⁰ G. A. Dobbert, “German-Americans between New and Old Fatherland, 1870-1914.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (winter, 1967): p. 663.

¹⁴¹ Crowley *Daily Signal*, May 25, 1895

¹⁴² Winship, “The Evolution of Beer”

¹⁴³ Kondert, p. 32

Parish went dry largely due to the agitation of women in Crowley.¹⁴⁴ Almost immediately following the proposal of prohibition in Acadia Parish an advertising war ensued in the local newspapers. During the early years of Acadia Parish's prohibition fight multiple Crowley *Daily Signal* newspaper ads were placed urging how one must "assert your manhood" because "every vote cast for Prohibition is an advertisement to the world that our people are moral weaklings and need the law to protect them."¹⁴⁵

Since rice is a key ingredient in producing beer, Prohibition affected not only the Germans customs but also their main source of income.¹⁴⁶ Newspapers covering the prohibition question in the vicinity of Roberts Cove ran articles stating, "...Prohibition means lower prices for your Rice, higher Taxes, High Assessments and business depression."¹⁴⁷ The cause of the business depression would be attributed to Acadia Parish being surrounded by four "wet" parishes, in which various businesses would drift away and Acadia Parish would receive no revenues.¹⁴⁸ One example of the loss of revenue can be seen when the new saloon license went into effect, January 2, 1905, in the town of Crowley. As a result, eight of the twelve saloons in the city closed their doors.¹⁴⁹ This general shaking up among the liquor dealers was the result of the October 1904 city council decision to raise the retail license from \$1,000 to \$2,000 a year.¹⁵⁰

Prohibition should be recognized as another way for the Germans of this area to get involved in the local community since rice crops were influenced by its passage. In 1910, Prohibition in the parish was repealed by a majority of seventy votes in a total of 2,200 cast. Half

¹⁴⁴ Crowley *Daily Signal*, April 22, 1908

¹⁴⁵ Crowley *Daily Signal*, April 6, 1908. This was only many aggressive articles posted daily from the end of 1907 until the vote in April of 1908.

¹⁴⁶ For a detailed discussion in rice in beer production see Stanley Wade Baron, *Brewed in America: A History of Beer and Ale in the United States*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1962).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, April 3, 1908;

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. January 7, 1905

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

of the margin was supplied by an overwhelming thirty-nine to four vote in favor of repeal in the Roberts Cove ward.¹⁵¹ Later when Prohibition would become more prevalent, frustration over the question can be seen in the Cove community through its state representative William Zaunbrecher. In 1916, clearly showing his German origins, he planned to introduce a bill requiring all prohibitionists in the state of Louisiana to register with the clerks of the district courts and the registrar of voters in the parish of Orleans. The bill would have prohibited a prohibitionist from buying, receiving, or drinking intoxicating liquor, and liquor dealers or saloonkeepers would have been prohibited from selling intoxicating drinks to all prohibitionists. Violation of the act would have been made a misdemeanor, punishable by fine or imprisonment in the parish jail.¹⁵² However, the act was never introduced.

WORLD WAR I: GERMANS CONTINUE PARTICIPATION IN ACADIA PARISH

Between the years 1914-1918 laws provoking Germans to lose all traces of their ethnicity were enacted in Louisiana. These laws did not dramatically alter the Germans of Roberts Cove. Considering the economic ties already made to the surrounding community through rice, German participation in numerous civil cases and Prohibition of the early twentieth century, one can conclude the Germans were already assimilated.¹⁵³

Although the Germans assimilated economically, socially, and politically the war did highlight stereotypes of Germans through Acadia Parish. The area of Crowley must have been aware of stereotypes of Germans due to the fact that the newspaper published stories from as far away as Berlin. For instance, one story mocked the amount of societies Germans join. The

¹⁵¹ McCord, p. 129; Crowley, *Daily Signal*, May 28, 1910

¹⁵² Crowley *Daily Signal*, May 27, 1916

¹⁵³ In fact some Germans continued to hold onto their old-world views of war and conscription. For instance, in the presidential election year of 1916, the Germans of Roberts Cove although traditionally democratic voters voted for the Republican candidate Charles Evans Hughes as opposed to Woodrow Wilson who was considered the "War President." Therefore, while the rest of Acadia Parish voted Democratic, Roberts Cove ward was the only to go Republican; see Crowley *Daily Signal*, November 16, 1916; McCord, pp. 147-148; Kondert, p. 41

article points out the name of clubs such as “Society for the promotion of Good Manner among the Poor,” while one has for qualifications of membership the detention in an asylum for six months and finally a third has for its membership all Germans who wear painted beards. The article then points out “the little town of Wildau, with only 2,000 inhabitants boasts of 22 different societies.”¹⁵⁴

Being a German-American Catholic played a factor in discrimination against the Germans of Roberts Cove.¹⁵⁵ Two basic themes dominated Catholic opinion during the period of neutrality: the preservation of American neutrality and the restoration of peace to Europe.¹⁵⁶ The Germans of Roberts Cove were not shy to demonstrate their feelings about the war. When Germany entered the war against France, the Germans of Roberts Cove actually raised \$150.00 for the Red Cross in support of Germany while two residents Ferdinand Olinger and Joseph Schaffhausen were jailed for their opinions on the war. Olinger was questioned and detained after having expressed doubts about the reasons for the United States entrance in the war, while Schaffhausen complained about compulsory military conscription. After a short detention both men were released on bail. Olinger purchased \$1000.00 in War Savings Stamps to “correct” the error of his ways.¹⁵⁷ By raising money and being outspoken the Germans of this area were comfortable with their surroundings showing a large amount of assimilation had occurred prior to the war. Another bold example of the influence Germans were asserting on this area of Louisiana appeared in a statement from the sheriff of Acadia Parish in 1917. Wrapped up in a mixture of patriotic and xenophobic fervor the sheriff issued a warning against the areas

¹⁵⁴ Crowley *Daily Signal*, January 3, 1914. Joining organizations is not foreign to Germans; they even have a term for this insatiable habit, *Verinsmeierei* meaning ‘social joiners.’

¹⁵⁵ Edward Cuddy’s essay deals with the alleged pro-Germanism within the church and contributes a broader understanding of the complex Catholic response to the European conflict prior to the American entry into World War I. See Edward Cuddy, “Pro-Germanism and American Catholicism,” *Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (1968): 427-454. Here p. 428.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 428.

¹⁵⁷ Kondert, p. 45; Crowley *Daily Signal*, July 13, 1918; McCord, pp.154-155.

Germans by publishing a list of instructions on how to catch spies, implying spies were abundant in Acadia Parish. He cautioned citizens not to trust any of the areas foreign-born Germans because “prominent persons in the community” were often spies.¹⁵⁸

During this time in Roberts Cove one sees how the ideas of neutrality impacted Louisiana. As the United States entered World War I, the Louisiana General Assembly enacted five laws in 1917 in attempts to hinder German participation in the war. Three of the five acts specifically impacted Roberts Cove: Senate Act No. 42 made it unlawful for anyone to use the language of a nation at war with the United States in public or discussion of the United States entrance and role into the war; Senate Act No. 175 prohibiting the selling of anything made in Germany or advertised in German, distribute anything printed in German or which favored Germany; and finally, House Act No. 259 forbade the teaching of the German language in all public and private schools from the elementary to the university level.¹⁵⁹ Oddly enough, Representative William J. Zaunbrecher, a resident of Roberts Cove with extensive German heritage, voted in favor of all acts passed.¹⁶⁰

Even though William Zaunbrecher voted in favor of the legislation, one must not be surprised due to the transformation of the rice industry and the Germans influence on Acadia Parish. Also, when the Benedictine monastery left Roberts Cove in 1907, German language institutions had already been abandoned in schools. Kondert assumed “It is, of course, possible that the representative from Roberts Cove voted his convictions. It does not however, seem likely.” Furthermore, Kondert emphasizes that Zaunbrecher voted in favor of the legislation,

¹⁵⁸ Kondert, p. 44

¹⁵⁹ The two other acts that did not specifically affect the Germans of Roberts Cove are: House Act No. 20 requiring the registration of all aliens; House Act No. 14 making it illegal for aliens of enemy lands to own explosives or firearms.

¹⁶⁰ McCord, pp. 126-127, Crowley *Daily Signal*, February 5, 1916

“with full knowledge that he was restricting the freedoms of his German constituents.”¹⁶¹

William Zaunbrecher would only serve as a onetime representative from Acadia parish from 1916 to 1918. Perhaps Zaunbrecher was bullied into the way he voted. Perhaps he was protecting his friends and relatives from further harassment. However, more likely, the Germans of Acadia Parish were already economically, socially and politically assimilated and thus were not affected by the legislation or simply did not want to deal with the discrimination which they faced previously while in Bismarck’s Germany.

Court cases after the United States had entered the war indicate the Germans of Roberts Cove did not hesitate to use the American legal system. For instance only seven months after the United States declared war on November 6, 1917, Heinen & Co. sued Colbert Barousse. Then in August of 1919 Leon H. Habetz sued the Director General of the railroad and in October of the same year, William Heinen took action against Bayou Plaquemine in Acadia Parish. A year later, in May 1920, Lawrence Zaunbrecher sued the Louisiana Western Railroad Company and following him in 1921 Karl Zaunbrecher filed a suit against the Robinson Oil Company.¹⁶² These last few examples of civil suits confirm the point that World War I neither intimidated nor denied these Germans the freedom they previously enjoyed in Roberts Cove but rather validates the assumption that it was business as usual. Their culture was disintegrating and had been since their naturalization beginning in 1881. But these cases demonstrate how the Germans of Roberts Cove were still as vibrant as before. By reviewing the court records we have seen that even after the start of the war the Germans were still active participants in their community as they had

¹⁶¹ Kondert, p. 47

¹⁶² Heinen & Co. vs. Colbert Barousse, et al. No. 4086, filed 6 Nov. 1917; Leon H. Habetz vs. Director General of the Railroad, No. 5122, filed 4 Aug. 1919; William Heinen vs. Bayou Plaquemine Acadia Parish Louisiana, No. 5149, filed, 25 Oct. 1919; Lawrence Zaunbrecher vs. Louisiana Western Railroad Co. No. 5261, filed 11 May 1920; Karl Zaunbrecher vs. Robinson Oil Co., et als., No. 5632, filed, 10 Oct. 1921. All cases were recorded in *Index to Civil District Court Cases, Vol. 1, Acadia Parish: 1887- 1924*, District Court, Acadia Parish, Louisiana.

been previously. The current study shows that by reviewing civil records one obtains a more holistic view of the current society these Germans participated in.

CONCLUSION

Most of Acadia Parish at one time was considered fit for nothing but cattle grazing as nothing could be successfully grown or produced on it except grass or hay. After settling the area in 1881 the first German pioneers in Roberts Cove planted rice on their lowest acres and soon, with their ingenuity in irrigation, mechanization and transportation caused an exponential growth in the areas rice farms. Soon rice production developed dramatically and although the Germans were numerically dominated by the surrounding French influence in south Louisiana, they easily participated in their neighboring communities due to their sharing of the Catholic faith. In previously mentioned articles, books and dissertations pertaining to the assimilation of the Germans of Roberts Cove, assimilation into southwest Louisiana culture hinged on immediate naturalization and later the passage of the anti-German legislation in 1917. However, prior to World War I, as we have seen, the Germans were already well assimilated into this region of Louisiana through their obvious contribution in agriculture ventures, establishment of businesses in the surrounding towns of Rayne and Crowley and significance in local and state politics. However what truly solidified them as members of Acadia Parish was their significant involvement in civil cases dating from 1887-1924. As a result the Germans economic, political and social participation within the parish caused them to assimilate into Louisiana almost immediately after they settled on the prairies.

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Vita

Lydia Alicia Soileau was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and raised in Slidell, on the north shore. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in history, with a secondary education concentration, from Louisiana State University in the fall of 2007. Before pursuing her masters, she taught American History at Abbeville High School, in Abbeville, Louisiana where she rediscovered her love for the "Cajun Country." She then joined the University of New Orleans graduate program in the fall of 2008 to pursue a Masters in history. While at the University of New Orleans she received the John E. Altazan Ambassador Award for her summer study abroad program in 2009. While in Innsbruck, Austria she reaffirmed her love of the German lands and on her return to UNO, in the fall of 2009, she combined both her interests into studying the Germans in Louisiana. Through her research she was ecstatic to discover a German settlement in the middle of Cajun Country. She is currently teaching at St. Rita Catholic School in Harahan, Louisiana, where she hopes to impart upon her current and future students the knowledge and importance of this community to Louisiana's history.