

CAJUNS, CREOLES, PIRATES AND PLANTERS

Your New Louisiana Ancestors Format

Volume 1, Number 52

By Damon Veach

TANTE HUPPE: Louisiana is rich in history, and with this history comes the revealing stories of early families who moved into the area. Regardless of where you go, there is something outstanding awaiting you, and the past comes alive with new life as we enjoy our heritage through a number of sources. This column completes a full year of formats under the original title used when it first started in The Daily Iberian back in the 1970s. It was at this time too that I learned to tell family histories through interviews much like I had done with my personal genealogical roots. One of the first I did was in historic Natchitoches, the oldest town in the Louisiana Purchase Territory. It was founded by the French in 1714 and still remains as a museum city containing an Old World charm. Historic buildings of French, Spanish, and early American architectural styles still line the streets of the Historic District.

I cannot think of the Tante Huppe House without thinking of my friend Robert “Bobby” DeBlieux. He was 77 years old when he passed away on Sunday, January 31, 2010 at Our Lady of the Lake in Baton Rouge. The funeral service was held in his beloved Natchitoches at the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church. He was born on January 26, 1933 in Natchitoches and was a historian, preservationist, painter, author, and businessman. He served in the United States Army from 1956-1958 and was stationed in Germany. He was mayor of Natchitoches from 1976-1980 and was instrumental in founding the Natchitoches Historic District. He was appointed by Governor David Treen as Assistant Secretary of the Office of Cultural Development, and he continued in the same position under Governor Edwin W. Edwards. He is credited with creating forty-two National Register Districts in Louisiana and also served as Chief Executive Officer of the Garden Club in Natchez, Mississippi. His historic preservation endeavors include his establishment of Museum Contents, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the history of Natchitoches. He was also president and a board member of the Natchitoches Historic Foundation. He loved researching his ancestry as well as other families in the Natchitoches area and contacted his French relatives which resulted in the organizing of a reunion in Alpes de Haute Provence, France with over 150 French and American cousins.

My friendship and respect for Bobby covered all his years he was involved in local and state government and even followed his career when he returned to Natchitoches. In fact, he was the first individual I turned to for advice when deciding what to do with my massive genealogical book collection which ended up in neighboring DeSoto Parish with the DeSoto Parish Historical Society and the Mansfield Female College Museum. Since both of us loved learning of our ancestors, it was only natural that I decided to start telling these stories along with

my regular genealogy formats. He inspired me, and that is how I came to know and love the Tante Huppe House.

The Tante Huppe House is located on Jefferson Street in downtown Natchitoches, and it has played an important role in the lives of many pioneer families. It was lovingly restored by my friend and stands as an example of why it is so important to become involved in historic preservation. A member of a prominent French family built the Tante Huppe House in 1830, and today it still portrays those Creole aristocrats who lived in the home for generations.

This two-story structure was built for Suzette Prudhomme, Tante Huppe, after she married for the third time in 1827. Suzette, daughter of Antoine Prudhomme, married Dr. Bernard Theophile Lafon and later John Baptist Lecomte and Jean Baptist Huppe. Thrice she was widowed. Her only child, Bernadine Lafon, died in 1835 in Pointe Coupee Parish.

Until her death in 1861, Suzette lived alone in the house. However, the house was used by her many cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces as a town house, the place to stay while in town from the plantation. Servants brought up from the country had ample accommodations in the slave quarters in the rear wing. The house contains eighteen rooms. Walls are of cypress timbers with bricks between. Originally the exterior was covered with a red oxide, with white mortar lines stenciled on top to make bricks appear larger. Floors are of red pine, and the house plan has never been altered in any manner. Even the patio is the original.

The house has nine fireplaces and eleven outside doors. All the locks and keys are the original ones as are the curtain rods and glass panes. Every piece of furniture is from the original house or from other old Natchitoches homes. In the hall, there is a card table signed by Tante Huppe. The portraits are of Madame Pierre Emmanuel Prudhomme, aunt of Tante Huppe, and of Madame E.V. DeBlieux. Other items found here are a church wall hanging, a picture of Tante Huppe's horse, Lady, and boy Picayune, by Edward Troy. The olive oil jar lends elegance, and the light fixture was found in the attic and restored.

Every part of this home relates the story of early Louisiana and the people who lived here. The library dates to 1760 with all the books dating to the old Natchitoches families. The bookcase armoire is from Willow Plantation, Grand Ecore. The 1835 map by Mason (of Mason-Dixon Line fame) was brought to Natchitoches by Tante Huppe's brother, Lestan Prudhomme. There are two portraits of Camille and Dene DeBlieux, a Queen Ann colonial table, ca1780, and the Santo, from the Cathedral of Barcelona, Spain.

The girls' bedroom contains a small blue Windsor chair (1794), inherited by Tante Huppe from her first husband's estate. Also accenting this room is a rare Louisiana armoire (ca1800) from the Tauzin family, and twin beds of cypress, part of the original furnishings from Lemee House. The coal grate in the fireplace was installed

about 1850. Over the mantel is a picture painted over print by Mrs. DeBlieux. The oval plaster cast is of the Virgin and Child and dates to 1851.

The master bedroom contains a solid walnut king-size bed (1835) and made in New Orleans for Madame Ben Metoyer. The small colonial stool is from the St. Amant family. The armoire is a colonial Louisiana piece, ca1800, from Willow Plantation and the commode dates to 1870. The front bedroom has a solid mahogany bed with posts from the Sompayrac House. The painting is of St. Bartholomew and Christ (1835), and the chest of drawers with mirror is from the Palette Plantation House. The rug has been in place for more than a hundred years. The clock on the piano is from Breda Plantation House and the teapot is Sevres porcelain, 1870.

The dining room and den area contains a collection of antique bottles over the door. Over the mantel is a collage-over-photo of Herman Melville's passport (by Bobby DeBlieux). The original watercolor is by Millet, and an interesting piece is the family tree of the owners of the house. Other items of interest are the land grant to Felix Metoyer and a Confederate War Bond issued in Shreveport, capital of Louisiana during the last stages of the war. The original Duncan Phyfe sideboard came to Natchitoches in 1815. The kitchen has a small colonial chair from the Lafon family, and the cabinet has a spool chest built into it. The upstairs area is untouched and still contains the previous owner's antiques as well as wall-to-wall and ceiling-to-ceiling collector's items and antiques.

The patio reflects all the charm of a French Quarter patio minus the closeness of surrounding walls. It opens into a full-sized back yard, a charming location for parties and group meetings. Just having the invitation to visit the Tante Huppe House was an honor, and little has changed over the years except for the addition of an adjacent structure which serves as a bed and breakfast with parking. Bobby DeBlieux took his preservation goals and skills into the restoration of his own home. It is a perfect example of what life on old Cane River was like. The Tante Huppe House is a part of another period brought into the present with charm and grace.

It is all due to the interest of a fellow preservationist and good friend. I am very thankful for the opportunity to have known and worked with someone as talented as Bobby DeBlieux. You are remembered – and missed. Rest in peace.