

CAJUNS, CREOLES, PIRATES AND PLANTERS

Your New Louisiana Ancestors Format

Volume 2, Number 1

By Damon Veach

RUPLE STORE: The old Ruple Store and Post Office has been closed since 1945, but some of the merchandise is still there. The price tags are the most astonishing things to see here, such as ladies leather shoes for \$2 and cigars, two for five cents. The building that is now standing was rebuilt in 1912 after “the big cyclone,” as it was called by local residents. Tin was a rarity of the times, and the Ruple Store could claim this luxury as well as the old Ruple home, a house classified as a large dogtrot with a nearby potato curing building or shed. The three structures sit on a hill in northwestern Claiborne Parish, near Blackburn, west of Homer and south of Haynesville.

Not only do old buildings tell the story of early Louisiana life, but talking with descendants brings it all back to life. “My grandfather homesteaded this land in 1854 when James Buchanan was president,” says Byron Ruple with pride. “He was named Emanuel Ruple, and he was born in North Carolina. He married in Mississippi, and my grandmother, Aseneth Evans Ruple, helped him to start a new life in these hills.”

“You know it’s peaceful out here,” Ruple continued. “You’d think that after deer season, there wouldn’t be any deer left, but four or five have been coming in my yard regularly, looking for acorns and grazing. They don’t seem too scared either.”

“My grandfather died in 1875 and is buried over in Lebanon Cemetery. The Lebanon Church and Cemetery is located about a mile from the Ruple Store, and many Claiborne Parish pioneers are buried there. It’s a peaceful setting, carved out of the forest and nestled in the curve of the old country road that leads off the main highway.”

Byron Ruple remembered the tornado of 1912 vividly. “The store was completely lost and the house was knocked off its foundation, but we all survived. Colquit is some 16 miles away, and some of the tin from the store was found there. People kept everything they could and didn’t bother to return it.”

Ruple’s uncle wasn’t like those Colquit people who kept everything they found. He found a letter near the store that was from Bossier City, nearly 40 miles away. He returned it to the man because it had something to do with his insurance policy.

Ruple described the large oak trees as being small trees when the tornado struck. The big ones at that time were downed and used as firewood. The store was rebuilt from pieces salvaged in the community, and fences were made from the felled

cedars. The family members, including five children, were all in the house, but the only injury was to one of the horses, and it was only minor.

“We didn’t have filling stations when the store was built, so we used gasoline drums which were stored on one end of the building,” he recalled. “Later, we had one of those pumps where you could see the gas in the top.”

Besides being the general store for the community, this landmark also served as the post office. Mail would come from Leton (in Webster Parish), and the distribution was made at Ruple. There was no rural delivery, and the general store served as the focal point of community activities.

A typical scene was the gatherings at the “carving bench” where the old-timers would come to whittle and talk about the crops, politics, and the good old days. It still sits on the porch of the Ruple store, holding countless tales of happiness and sorrow within its grasp.

Byron Ruple’s knowledge of the area was amazing. However, when the Claiborne Parish histories were compiled many years ago, he was not consulted, and the story of Ruple was omitted. He stated that he knew where there were about fifteen Indian camps, but they are difficult to get to because of the underbrush. His collection of arrowheads and other artifacts are extensive, and he was familiar with these camps hidden away from the outside world.

The collection in the old store justified the man’s statement of his interest in these artifacts. It is perhaps one of the largest in the state of Louisiana with three cabinets of arrowheads and a great many pieces of pottery and stones which were used in the preparation of food. The arrowheads are of all sizes and colors and are arranged as if they were on constant display for visitors.

Ruple’s interest in the Indians of this region is most impressive and commendable. He recognizes the part they played in the history of Claiborne Parish and has studied their plight of mistreatment and lost lands.

The old store at one time had a unique banister, but this had been removed. The old building was in need of some repair work, but the inside doesn’t seem to have changed very much over the years. There are signs for tobacco, Coca-Cola, Vicks and other items such as wall maps. One counter is lined with moonshine jugs which tell a fantastic story in themselves. The cabinets and shelves still contain much of the standard merchandise of the 1940s. According to Ruple, the store was closed because people wouldn’t pay their bills. They always wanted credit, but the Ruple family could no longer bear the burden of non-payment. One of the signs in the store read “In God we trust, all others cash.” It apparently didn’t work out that way.

At the time I talked with Ruple, he commented that not many people liked to live in those old red clay hills. However, he said the land had been good to his family. He did comment that it was about all gone now that people had gone off to the cities to live.

Byron Ruple seemed to know all the minute details of the area. His knowledge of the people and the places was still as keen as in his youth. In addition to the tornado of 1912, his thoughts on the polio epidemics were vividly described in such a realistic way. Caring for an invalid wife, he managed to continue a lifestyle similar to what his grandfather had carved from this wilderness country. He was completely caught up in time, and his recollections are worthy of note even though those who compiled the parish histories failed to talk with him. A part of Louisiana history is gone except what you are reading here.

At the time I talked to him, he stated that he had to do some repair work on the store, but he also said that there were few who would care to do this. Only time will tell what will be preserved on this historic spot in Claiborne Parish. The last time I saw the store, house, and potato shed, it was as if I had stepped into the past. Things were unchanged and waiting for the end to come. With rusted tin tops and weathered boards, the area is unique and out-of-step with the times.

It was truly an experience to open the door of this old building and see the past revealed before my eyes. It is something that can never be forgotten. I've always appreciated this experience, and one of these days, I'll have to return. My family no longer owns the property a few miles from the Ruple Store, so I don't know what has happened recently, but I have recorded it through photographs. All I know is that if you want to write an article or learn about a family history, you need to ask, which is what I did in this case. With my notepad in hand, I stepped back in time.

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FAMILY HISTORY: As the family historian for much of the Veach, Foshee, Adams, Sinclair, McNeese, and Horn materials, I often take relatives to tour the areas where our ancestors lived. One of the places of my youth is Logan, Texas, with a sign on the main highway so small now that if you aren't looking for it, you pass it by completely. While taking my cousin on a tour of the East Texas/West Louisiana areas (Panola County and DeSoto Parish), I was able to re-trace scenes of my childhood.

The old church was still there with the adjacent cemetery, but only one or two houses were nearby. The roads were so narrow that two cars could barely pass each other. Yet I pictured and explained it differently to my cousin who was with me that day. It was a time to relive another Fourth of July celebration, the annual Adams Family Reunion. And the beauty of all this is that I saved all the family photographs, so in my mind and through these pictures, Logan is still a vibrant part of my past. For my cousin, it was a scene of almost isolation from the real world.

For our ancestors, it was a vibrant community for attending church, going to dances, and shopping at the local store.

There is so much more to family history than going to a library or archives facility and recording data. I realize it is impossible for many to go back to the places where their ancestors lived, but I've done so many trips – vacations based on my knowledge of my family's history. Whether it was touring Brandywine where Jean de Melet served our country or to the vast openness of Kansas to retrieve a stone from my great grandfather's homestead, the experience of reconnecting with loved ones is there. You just have to want to experience it. Instilling this in children and grandchildren is important, or it is as I have said before – lost in time.

It is important to record as much as possible through interviews and photographs so that future generations can learn about the past. Otherwise, you only have a copy of a census record, maybe a notation in a book, some records hidden away in courthouses or church archives, or even a listing in a family Bible. This is why over the years of writing columns and articles, I have stressed the importance of doing interviews and jotting down notes that might have seemed minor at the time but of extreme importance later on. Oral history is important, but the actual recording of the data and checking it for accuracy is necessary.

As we move along into the second year of “Cajuns, Creoles, Pirates and Planters,” I hope to share with you these recordings and also the recordings of readers. Second year seems rather young in genealogical terms, but this is the oldest genealogical column in the United States, started with this original title back in the 1970s but featured in newspapers under various other titles over the years. Now in this exclusive format for the internet through Claitor's Publishing, the past will continue to be recorded.

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