

The Town of
Queydan



established
1899

WE SPEAK FRENCH HERE!



BEGINNINGS



Chapter One

BEGINNINGS

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.”

GUEYDAN IS BORN

If one dusts off the cover and looks deeply within the book called, “SELF”, it is critical not to merely scan its pages, but delve whole heartedly into the first chapter called, “BEGINNINGS.” For it is in the beginning season of our lives that light is shed on the secrets of our existence. Youth with its insatiable passions is classified as a time when the imagination runs wild, resulting in the acquisition of wisdom, desires, flavors and appetites that will surface as new found concepts in the distant lands of our adult lives.

Consequently, before detailing the sketches of compassion that formed our subject’s very fiber, the backdrop in which he spent the formative years of his life must be explored. Richard “Dick” O’ Neill Du Puis, born in Gueydan, Louisiana, as a mere child rambled at ease exploring the unexhausted landscape of colors and textures that so abundantly existed in this small town.

The town of Gueydan (Gey daw) established in 1899, became known as the “Holland of America” because of the Frenchman named Jean Pierre Gueydan’s magnificent vision. He, along with some Northern capitalists, concluded that it was possible to reclaim and put into cultivation what was known as the “wet prairies” of Louisiana. The invigorating salt breeze from the Gulf during the summer months accompanied by the rich black loam soil formed by decayed vegetation inspired them to develop a plan for a series of canals to be dug around and across the town that would drain the water from the area.

Thus, the cypress swamps and wet prairies around Gueydan, made ready for cultivation, are known today as a thriving town with an enormously rich heritage. Not only is the quaint town of Gueydan alive and well, but proclaims with pride the glories of all aspects of its flavor, making it the tourist attraction Jean Pierre Gueydan predicted back in early 1900. Those marshy lands once labeled as worthless, possessed the necessary natural ingredients that, over time, although once thought of as discordant, harmonized into one of the most fascinating backdrops on earth. Thousands of little mosses and fungi, overlooked by most, unsuspectingly turned into a thing of beauty.

Even today, the rhythm of God's universe is truly alive with graceful fragrant flowers and foliage in rich shades of peaceful green growing in great abundance. Thousands of birds can be heard ushering in the light of each glorious day that easily coexist with all types of wildlife.

Then, when the herbage becomes noticeably bleached by the hot summer sun, through experience, the locals are energized certain of the change that is in the air. Although the humid air of summer has appeared to lessen the vigor all around, new energy begins to stir among the hearts of the people. Local knowledge tells them that with the arrival of autumn cold fronts, tens of thousands of migrating ducks and geese will be circling in the skies above. This unchanged migratory pattern has brought over 150 species of birds to the rice fields in Gueydan since its beginnings causing it to become the duck hunting capitol of the world.

Additional excitement was created when water from the levees was released to provide moisture as irrigation to the rice fields. Not only was it interesting to observe, but provided a time for residents to gather the crayfish from the drainage ditches that were swept out in to the fields along with the water. At other times, Dick told of tying a chicken neck to a string and lowering it into the canal water with the hope of catching a crayfish for the dinner table. When he felt the pull on the string, his mouth watered in anticipation of the meal he would be consuming that evening.

Since this sophisticated canal system designed by Jean Pierre Gueydan and his associates not only surrounded the town, but contained cross canals that served as pumping establishments, it was a flume, a trough for conducting water, that provided Dick O'Neill Du Puis with his favorite safe swimming hole. Due to their design, they resembled a wooden swimming pool; a place the reptiles would not frequent. It was on hot summer days, when the older ladies could be seen cooling their lined faces with woven palm branch fans that Dick ran by them to enjoy a dip in the refreshing waters of the canal.

Another way to refresh the spirit on a hot summer day was by eating a slice of watermelon sold from a wagon being pulled by a horse right through the heart of town. Snapping turtles were also food products that were sold from a wagon in the same manner. Dick's task was to hold the stick the turtle was biting until his mother could kill it and prepare it properly for their meal.

Since rice was grown in abundance in the fields all around, the Republic Rice Mill located right across the street from Dick's home had an enormous place in the lifestyle of the residents. Since the old tin building had three floors, it sometimes offered a place of safety during a

flood. Also, if powerful threatening winds were approaching, the entire O Neill family would cross the street to the mill and crawl into an empty railroad car waiting to be loaded and take refuge from the storm. Rice from the mill was sold in burlap sacks, becoming a staple of the residents' daily diets. Dick recalls eating it every day at his noon and evening meal. It was so important to the O Neill family that Dick's mother taught him at a very young age how to prepare perfect rice; a recipe he used with his family and still enjoys today. The rice recipe is as follows:

1 ½ Cups Cold Water, 1 Cup Rice, 1 tsp. salt

Wash rice 5-6 times.

Dick's mother would say, "Sonny, take 1 ½ Cups of cold water to one cup of rice and place them in the pan together. Do not cover. Wait until the water boils high and reaches the level of the rice. Then, cover and turn the heat down as low as possible. (Simmer for about 20-30 minutes) Turn the fire off and let the rice rest for 20 minutes. Fluff with a fork and add salt.

CAJUN INFLUENCE

All these wondrous ingredients of beauty found in the bayous, marshes and prairies were such a powerful draw to the descendants of the Acadians, now called Cajuns, their migration to this area turned Vermilion Parish, to which Gueydan belongs, into truly the Cajun capitol of the world.

Consequently, due to the warm and wonderfully hospitable nature of these people, the air around Gueydan is thrillingly alive with the sounds and smells of their music and food. The dance halls ring and tremble as people stomp their feet to the rollicking tunes; a unique sound unequaled anywhere else in the universe.

Also to accompany this rich heritage of music and joy is their devotion toward preparing spicy wonderful food consisting of recipes only they can concoct; gumbo, sauce piquant, crawfish and jambalaya to name only a few. Even when locals move away, it is common for them to continue preparing their favorite Cajun recipes with those much appreciated spices enjoyed as a child.

In addition to the contribution of their music and food, one must never forget the impact of their colorful language on the people all around. When Dick was a young lad, Cajun French, a dialect of the French language, literally permeated almost every household in the Parish. In fact, as our subject grew up in Gueydan, both his grandparents and parents spoke French fluently. Unfortunately, many of the next generation entering into mainstream society did not continue this practice. Thus, it is much appreciated to witness, "We speak French here," on signs throughout the town of Gueydan, signifying the intent and effort of the locals to keep this romantic beautiful language alive.

Last, the writer would be remiss not to mention that these proud Americans even wave their own Cajun flag in honor of their highly regarded heritage. This show of unity serves as a model for all society to follow so that all races and colors of people that make up this country

called the United States are respected and honored everywhere. After all, it is truly the melting pot comprised of people from all over the world that make up our proud nation today.

Consequently, all the natural ingredients from Mother Nature combined with the magnificently seasoned music food and language of the Cajun people create the perfect recipe for the town call Gueydan to offer such unique attributes that they are unequaled anywhere in the world. For those residents living in this “Most Cajun Place on Earth,” they must frequently ask themselves the question, “When you have all this, what more do you need?”

PERFECT PALLET

Thus, this was the pallet of colors and textures that comprised the environment in which Richard “Dick” O Neill Du Puis spent his youth; causing him to fall deeply and passionately in love with every aspect of life. It was here that he developed compassion for his fellow man and wildlife as well. When this little fellow named Dick freely roamed the area, he was so busy letting his imagination and dreams go wild that not even the loud croaking of the toads and frogs disturbed his concentration. After all, his thoughts were those of a busy little boy at play. The peace he felt when being near the roots of the Cyprus reaching out of the water like inviting arms and the moss hanging from the trees waving to him as the Gulf breezes cooled his face let him know all was well in his little world.

Then, toward evening, stretched out on his back, with eyes focused toward the soft sky above, he learned a final lesson. His youthful notion that soft blue was the color of choice when painting the clouds was dramatically disrupted by a blazing fiery red sunset that lit the sky at the close of day. Abruptly standing at attention, this young boy bestowed upon himself the gift of soaking in 30 minutes of pure artistry.

Finally, this exquisite landscape was the backdrop that formed the very foundation of Dick’s life. Its vast and titanic features would be to him like an intoxicating perfume of which he would never tire. Repeatedly throughout his adult life, the colors textures and hues that he had so carefully stored in his mind as a youth would surface in just the right way and at the appropriate time. After all, he was Richard “Dick” O Neill Du Puis, a home grown southern boy from Gueydan, Louisiana.

References:

<http://www.gueydan.org/Hollanddisp.html>

<http://www.vermilion.org/towns>

<http://www.realcajunrecipes.com/heritage>



Flooded Rice Fields in Gueydan, Louisiana



(Above) Republic Rice Mill beside Canal in Gueydan Louisiana

MARAIS MICHEL FLUME (2-17-41)

(Courtesy of Donna Reese, Guydan, Louisiana)



GUEYDAN SCRAPBOOK



1940 FLOOD--It happened 29 years ago in the month of August and Mrs. Harris Miller is shown in the front of the boat that was needed to get around in the town of Gueydan. Hollis Gillintine loaned us this photo that marked the last time that Gueydan had to endure flooding like this.

(Craw fish boil in 1970, picture courtesy of Helen Gaspard Hayes)

