EVANGELINE'S TOWN, WHERE THE ACADEIAN LOVERS MET: THE TRUE STORY OF LONGFELLOW'S POETICAL ROMANCE; BY CAMPBELL MACLEOD

EVANGELINE is to the imaginative Acadian or “Cajun,” as he is more generally called, more than a dream maiden. The people believe she lived among them many years ago in the eden of Louisiana, a near and dear relative, in honor of whom eight out of ten girls of today in that section are named—and Gabriels are quite as plentiful among the village youths. The sad story of this Acadian maiden was told about rude hearthstones up and down the Bayou Teche long before Longfellow immortalized it in his sympathetic love poem. Indeed, the youth who told the story, as he had heard it at home, to Longfellow, is still living in St. Martinville today. Edward Simon, now Judge Simon, one of the leading jurists of Louisiana, was under Mr. Longfellow’s instruction at Harvard, and happened one day to tell him some of the tales that have been identified with the Teche country since it was first settled by its different bands of picturesque adventurers. Among these stories, that of Evangeline made the strongest impression upon the poet professor. From the same source he heard of the wonderful beauty of Louisiana prairie lands, the proper stage setting for a legend that offered to him wide scope for his romantic genius. Judge Simon, with the characteristic modesty of the true Creole, has steadily declined to write the story of this friendship with his instructor or to give himself any prominence as being the true inspiration of “Evangeline.”

The tale that Judge Simon told Longfellow was the one he had often heard from “Cajun” lips—the maiden in the case being called Emeline Labiche, and her lover, Louis Arceneaux. After the despoiling of Grande Prè, Emeline saw Louis wounded and borne away on a strange ship. She herself drifted to Maryland and then later to Louisiana, even as Longfellow describes, looking for her lover. At last she met him under an oak that still stands on the banks of the bayou near St. Martinville. Because of her gentleness and religious devotion she had been renamed in the meantime by her companions, “Evangeline,” which means “God’s little angel.” They still tell, the old “Cajun” grandes mères, how she almost died of joy at the sight of the lover for whom she had sought so long.

But Louis, the story goes, “manlike, had forgotten to grieve,” and when Evangeline ran to him, calling him “beloved,” his face went
white with anguish as he confessed his unworthiness and told her his heart now belonged to another. The shock unhinged the mind of the maiden, and although she lived for several years after that, she always fancied herself still a girl of sixteen, as she wandered up and down the banks of the shining bayou, plucking wild flowers and talking to herself of the happy day when she should find Louis. It was Judge Simon who described to Longfellow the eden of Louisiana so graphically that he was enabled to sketch pen pictures of it with a fidelity that makes it almost unbelievable that he had never seen the Teche, nor known the charm and mystery that brood over the prairie lands of Louisiana.

St. Martinville today repays a visit, for it is the quaintest, most picturesque of Louisiana's bayou towns, and, strangely enough, not one view of it has yet found a place on a souvenir postal card. You may buy postals of Niagara Falls and Atlantic City at the corner drug store, but when you ask if they haven’t one of the village itself the clerk opens wide his eyes with astonishment—the chances are that he is a stranger himself and hasn’t yet been told the lovely old town’s claims to distinction.

The sleepy little train reaches St. Martinville at two o'clock in the afternoon. As soon as you put foot forth on the platform you are surrounded by a horde of small negro boys beseeching in execrable French—for everybody in the place speaks French and only a few English—to let them show you the way to the hotel, to let them carry your bag, to let them hold your parasol, to please “for Gawd’s sake give them a nickel.” Then it is you begin to realize that this is Evangeline’s town. The hotel is called the Evangeline House, and you are piloted in the course of the afternoon to the grave of Evangeline under one corner of the church, and to the Evangeline oak, under which, tradition says, the meeting between the sainted maiden and her lover took place. This tree, by the way, looks too recent to be convincing, but the difficulty is explained by the legend that the original tree was blown down and that this one sprang from its roots. An unpatriotic citizen last year trimmed all the lower branches away because it interfered with his view of the people crossing the bridge further down the bayou!

The land lying along this part of the stream has been bought by the Evangeline Literary Society for a park which will be called, of course, the Evangeline Park. At this point the bayou is so narrow that smokestacks of the steamboats sometimes get tangle
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hanging trees and shrubbery. Just up the bank rests the Evangeline Inn, now converted into a convent. It is a quaint old building and within its portals many distinguished guests have been entertained by “Madame Louise,” the fame of whose omelettes and citron preserves has gone abroad. Madame has many grievances against the writing profession. She almost weeps when she tells how Charles Dudley Warner misrepresented her hostelry. “He say, dat Mr. Warner,” she wrung her plump hands twenty years after he had said it in helpless wrath at him, “zat we had red calico curtains for doors, and sanded floors. Observe ze magnificence of ze portal,” pointing to a really handsome old entrance, “and only ze floors of ze kitchen bare.”

The City Hall is a tiny building set at the end of a group of typical country stores. Before these is a long rack at which the shoppers always hitch their horses. The mansion of the mayor of the village quite eclipses all the other residences in size and stateliness. It is just opposite the first opera house built in America. And next to that is the original building of the old Fort of the Attakapas.

Much of the interest of the town centers about the old church, which for nearly half a century was under the gentle rule of Father Jean, to whom a beautiful statue has been erected in the churchyard. The priest’s house sits dozing away the years in a quiet, sun-flecked garden nearby. If the hour is near five in the afternoon, you will see the velvet-eyed Creole girls and the madonna-faced matrons quietly taking their way churchward. And here, as the worshipers slip forth in the twilight in their pale pink and blue frocks, like so many flowers of the field, one realizes that it is the old-time piety, the reverence and childish devotion untouched by modern unbelief and agnosticism.

The church records preserved in the original French and Spanish for nearly two hundred years embalm many a romance, many a story that if given to the world would be of more interest even than the strange, true stories that have come to light in Louisiana. For it was in and about St. Martinville that Cable collected the material for his wonderful stories of Creole life.

THE gentle priest, if he sees you are a stranger, will leave his books and join you, that he may point out Evangeline’s grave. The burying ground has been removed to the other side of the bayou, but her grave has been left untouched. Peace to her ashes if she rests here, or wherever she may rest! Her beauty, whether real or imaginary, has added to the poetry of the world—and done more.
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It has so permeated the Bayou Teche country that the people have embodied it in their lives. To them, she is no creature of a poet’s dream, but a true maiden of their race immortalized by a nature of rare fidelity. Even the most primitive “Cajuns,” far up the beautiful Vermilion Bayou, who weave even as their mères and grandes mères did in Nova Scotia, call the products of their looms after her. They weave Evangeline spreads and blankets, Evangeline cloth and Evangeline portières. The Evangeline colors have come to be recognized all over the state—pale blue and cream and white.

But St. Martinville, like fair Melrose, to be properly seen must be viewed by white moonlight. Then like a veil of enchantment falls an atmosphere of old world charm—a fairy-like glamour that even the tinkle of the telephone downstairs fails to shatter. Step forth from your room in the Evangeline Hotel to the tiny balcony that overlooks the winding street. What by day seemed commonplace enough takes on a peculiarly appealing beauty. The old church looms up in the half light of the stars and moon, a structure dignified, protecting, a refuge from the world. In the softened light, too, the features of Father Jean gleam with special benevolence. Under the wistful beauty of the slim new moon and the heavy fragrance from the old-fashioned rose garden below, the whole picture seems to melt away into a world of unreality.

Far down the bayou comes the faint refrain from the village band, practising rag time near Evangeline’s Oak. Chattering groups of girls go by, now and then a belated countryman, hurrying his horse homeward—and never a word of English. Across the way, in the quaint old house whose mistress didn’t understand when you stopped to ask a drink of water earlier in the day, some one is playing on an old piano a jangling French dancing school waltz. Then a chorus of childish voices join in the refrain, and the group of little ones dance, with the effervescent spirit of the Parisian infant, a ballet original and suggestive of the days when St. Martinville was “Le Petit Paris,” the center of the gay French Opera crowd that summered here and found in the aristocratic and highly educated families of the neighborhood most enthusiastic patrons and subscribers. And so Evangeline’s town sinks to slumber.