

Cajun Country during World War II

By JASON THERIOT*

From 1940 to 1942, as the world plunged into war, the United States began mobilizing its citizens, industries, and military branches for the unfolding global conflagration. South Louisiana's Cajuns joined in the resulting manpower and industrial build-up, helping to establish what Pres. Franklin Roosevelt called the great arsenal of democracy. Like all Americans, Cajuns on the home front sacrificed basic household and personal needs to provide materials and supplies to the military. They participated in rationing programs, scrap drives, and war-bond campaigns, while they willingly subjected their children to the Louisiana educational system's crusade to thoroughly Americanize local youths in preparation for a long-term conflict. More importantly, because of their geographical location, ingenuity, and adaptability, the people of south Louisiana made significant contributions to the American war effort in specialty areas that could not have been matched in other parts of the country. In a very short time, the local population mobilized a work force that served as the foundation for the region's essential war industries—sugarcane and rice, ship-building, and petroleum. "We must raise our sights all along the [war] production line," an editorial from a Breaux Bridge church bulletin, *L'Echo du Teche*, stated. "Let no man say it cannot be done. It must be done and we have undertaken to do it."¹

Caught up in the spirit of the times, the Cajuns of south Louisiana embraced war mobilization and adapted to the wartime shortages in their communities to meet the nation's needs. Rationing became a major component of these wartime adjustments. Each month every family received ration books and used coupons to purchase items, such as sugar, butter, meat, gasoline, and even shoes. Nelan LeBlanc, who worked at the Olivier Plantation store in Iberia Parish, recalled adapting to the wartime limitations: "We had a car to get around, but the tires were rationed. [Plantation owner]

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¹Kenneth P. Delcambre, *L'Echo du Teche Revisited* (Breaux Bridge, La., 2003), 30.

Howard Olivier took the tires off of his sugar wagon for us to drive our car."² More often, however, south Louisianians simply did without, as Dot Lapeyrouse, a teenager during the war, recalled.³ Many items disappeared from the marketplace altogether: including chewing gum and black pepper. Even seafood production, a major industry in south Louisiana, declined drastically during the war years.⁴ The liquor shortage, as one Lafayette newspaper reported in early 1944, was "a reality." This journalistic lament concluded that since 1942, no alcoholic beverages had been distilled on account of the military's pressing demands for alcohol in the making of explosives.⁵ A shortage of leather prompted a local football coach to comment, "We will play with rag-dolls if we can't get any footballs."⁶

Local Cajun communities contributed to nationwide scrap drives. For the country's first aluminum scrap drive during the summer of 1941, citizens of Lafayette, the largest city in Acadiana,⁷ gathered more than 16,000 pounds of scrap aluminum—12.5 percent of the state's total.⁸ In ten days during the spring of 1943, a scrap drive conducted in St. Martin Parish yielded 100 tons of scrap metal.⁹ Civic groups, Boy Scouts, 4-H clubs, and even individual schools throughout Cajun Country scrounged up old bed frames, pots, pans, and scrap iron that provided the U.S. military with much needed war materiel.

Cajuns contributed in many others ways, including blood drives, cigarette drives (for soldiers serving overseas), and scrap paper drives. They also purchased war bonds and war stamps, which were to be accumulated and redeemed for a \$25 war bond.

²Jason P. Theriot, *To Honor Our Veterans: An Oral History of World War II Veterans from the Bayou Country, Vol. II: The Mediterranean Campaign* (Baton Rouge: 2003), 115.

³Interview with Dot Lapeyrouse by Jason P. Theriot, February 2002, The Jason P. Theriot Oral History Collection, Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette; hereafter cited as the Theriot Collection.

⁴Jerry Purvis Sanson, *Louisiana during World War II: Politics and Society, 1939-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1999), 258. Sanson notes that a lack of fuel, crews, and spare boat parts curtailed the seafood industry's activities during the war.

⁵Jim Bradshaw, "The Home Front: 1944," *History of Acadiana* (a supplement to *Lafayette Daily Advertiser*), September 26, 2000, in Collection 246 Jim Bradshaw Papers, University Archives and Acadiana Manuscripts Collection, University of Louisiana at Lafayette; hereafter cited as Bradshaw Papers. The article also noted that the manufacturing of a single eighteen-inch artillery required 100 gallons of alcohol.

⁶Jim Bradshaw, "The Home Front: 1945," *History of Acadiana*, November 2000, Bradshaw Papers.

⁷A twenty-two parish area encompassing the rural French-speaking portion of Louisiana.

⁸Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 247.

⁹Delcambre, *L'Echo du Teche*, 104.

A Cajun GI's 1943 letter, sent from overseas and published in a local church bulletin, illustrated the enormous costs of the war and the importance placed on war bonds:

We boys overseas know that it is costing a world of money to run this war. Here is an example: This field at which I am stationed uses over 35,000 gallons of gasoline a day. Now if you will figure all trains, trucks, men, and machinery and boats that it takes to use this gas, you can see how much money it will amount to. When you think of the food, clothing, and so many other expenses, I am sure that it takes close to three quarters of a million to run this field alone for a week. . . . I'll say that one-third of the money the boys get here goes back to Uncle Sam in the form of War Bonds; so you see, we are doing our share. You people do the same.¹⁰

In April 1943, the *Lafayette Daily Advertiser* reported that Lafayette Parish raised \$592,242.99 through war bonds and war stamps. Less than a year later, that figure doubled. J. J. Davidson, Jr., the man in charge of Lafayette Parish's bond committee, boasted that his parish had met "every requirement asked by the United States Treasury Department."¹¹

In nearby St. Landry Parish, citizens of Sunset actually raised enough money through selling war bonds—\$347,200.00—to purchase a B-24 Liberator. The town christened the four-engine bomber *Miss Durio* in honor of Russell Durio, a Cajun Marine killed at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.¹²

With the coming of war, schools in Acadiana, and indeed throughout Louisiana, began mobilizing their students, parents, teachers, and administrators to make the "maximum [possible] contribution to the war emergency."¹³ State officials promoted these ideals through writings and lectures. Gov. Sam Jones, an advocate of vocational wartime training who understood the need for a young industrial labor force, stressed to the teachers that "it is more important for a young man in the coastal parishes to know how to build a boat than to know Latin."¹⁴ State Supt. of Public Education John E. Coxe called for curriculum improvements to better prepare students for future service in the military and professional jobs that supported the country's wartime needs. Instructions for implementing these educational changes emphasized vocational training in industries vital to national defense, indoc-

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 69.

¹¹Bradshaw, "The Home Front," No. 39, 7 and No. 40, 5. Bradshaw Papers.

¹²*Ibid.*, No. 40, 5.

¹³State Department of Education in Louisiana, "Statement of Fundamental Principals," *Wartime Education in Louisiana Schools*, bulletin 480 (February 1942), 9, Shane K. Bernard Collection, New Iberia, Louisiana; hereafter cited as SKBC.

¹⁴Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 176.

trination in the ideals of democratic principles, and the encouragement of habits of good American citizenship.¹⁵

The *Wartime Education* bulletins of the early 1940s outlined everything from methods of correcting certain speech patterns among French-speaking students to establishing and promoting good citizenship programs. Guidelines for the "High School Victory Corps" program included the following recommendations: place greater emphasis on mathematics and sciences; promote distribution of pamphlets with titles such as *Your Career in Agriculture*, *What a Citizen Should Know about the Army*, and *How Every Boy Can Prepare for Aviation*; emphasize key events in American history, such as the War for Independence;¹⁶ adopt weekly programs, such as a Bill of Rights Week; and instruct students in flag etiquette and first-aid techniques.¹⁷

While secondary and high schools instituted the recommended programs, college institutions, in particular Southwestern Louisiana Institute (SLI) in Lafayette (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette), established its own mobilization model. Acting with the blessing of the War Manpower Commission, SLI began offering specialized courses in engineering, science, management, and aviation. In the early 1940s, SLI purchased a small Piper Cub airplane for \$999, kept it parked at the local airfield, and offered a Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) course to its students. Bob Adams, a Houma native and pre-law student at SLI, took the elective course and later flew missions for the U.S. Navy in Europe, including two missions during the Normandy invasion.¹⁸ Col. Jefferson DeBlanc, a Marine fighter ace and a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient from St. Martinville, flew his first solo flight in SLI's CPT.¹⁹ By early 1943, more than 400 individuals—including forty-five women—had enrolled in defense and industry related courses.²⁰

¹⁵State Department of Education in Louisiana, "Some Efforts of the State Department of Education Relating to National Defense," *Wartime Education in Louisiana Schools*, bulletin 480 (February 1942), 26-29, 35-44, SKBC; State Department of Education in Louisiana, "Guidance into Critical Services and Occupations," *Wartime Education in Louisiana Schools*, bulletin 496 (December 1942), 9-11, SKBC.

¹⁶Many Cajuns did not celebrate Independence Day before the 1940s.

¹⁷See above, footnote 14.

¹⁸Jason P. Theriot, *To Honor Our Veterans: An Oral History of World War II Veterans from the Bayou Country, Vol. III: The European Theater* (Baton Rouge: 2005), 29-35.

¹⁹Jefferson J. DeBlanc, *The Guadalcanal Air War: Col. Jefferson DeBlanc's Story* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing, 2008), 16-18.

²⁰I. Bruce Turner, "Dear Southwesterners: World War II, Southwestern Louisiana Institute, and Joel L. Fletcher's Newsletter," *Le Chêne*, (Spring 1998), University Archives and Acadiana Manuscripts Collection, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

At the beginning of the war, Joel L. Fletcher, Jr., the college's president (1940-1965), lobbied the Federal government in Washington, D. C. to have SLI designated as a training site for U.S. naval and marine officers through the government-sponsored V-12 programs.²¹ Securing these additional military training programs quickly transformed this small school into a thriving institution that eventually produced hundreds of skilled military officers. "The coming of the V-12 meant total mobilization of Southwestern's facilities and manpower," an SLI committee report stated.²² The school fought through adversity to house, feed, and educate more than 600 servicemen each semester. Preparing facilities, renovating dorms, providing enough cafeteria space and food became a daunting wartime challenge, but one that proved beneficial. In sum, more than 1,300 students, mostly from the Acadiana parishes, received military training through these programs at SLI during the war.²³

Fletcher, a native of northern Louisiana who was educated at Louisiana Tech and Louisiana State University, came to SLI as a professor of agriculture in the 1920s. Over time, he developed a unique understanding and compassion for the Cajun students at his institution. Beginning in October 1942 until the war ended, Fletcher wrote, published, and mailed copies of a campus-wide newsletter, the *Vermilion*, to former students and faculty members serving abroad. His wartime newsletter series reached hundreds of men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces. Topics discussed in his publications included such local news as crop and industry conditions in Acadiana, campus life, and reports from the war front. The university president also included human interest stories along with photographs of female students, which the young GIs used as "pin-ups" to help boost their morale. More importantly, the personal stories and anecdotes found in Fletcher's newsletters kept the men and women in uniform attached to the university family life and provided a diversion from the never-ending hardships and loneliness of wartime service. As one Southwestern woman wrote to Fletcher, "Thank you for providing this bulwark in an uncertain world."²⁴

²¹The V-12 program included the V-5 and V-7 programs. These programs provided specialized college-level training for potential officers and aviators interested in various divisions of the Navy, Coast Guard, and Marines. The V-12 stood for the Naval College Training Program; V-7 for Naval Reservist Midshipmen's School; V-5 for Naval Aviation Preparatory Program. Additional information regarding these programs can be found at the following online resource:
<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/archives/findingaids/military_training_programs.pdf>

²²Turner, "Dear Southwesterners."

²³Ibid.

²⁴Letter from Mary Dichmann to Joel Fletcher, Joel L. Fletcher Presidential Papers, Archives and Special Collections, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Coll. A03, box 62, folder 6; hereafter cited as Fletcher Papers. It is not clear which branch of the military Dichman

From 1940 to 1946, hundreds of young men and women sent personal letters to Fletcher describing their experiences with many different cultures in many different locales. These letters—written by SLI alumni serving in such faraway places as Alaska, Australia, India, and Iraq—offer fascinating depictions of life in the service for Cajun service personnel. In nearly every letter, Fletcher's former students reported on their unique experiences in these new and exotic places, recapped their run-ins with other fellow SLI alumni, passed along best wishes to the college president and his wife, and expressed their desire to return to "ole Southwestern." They often asked for letters of recommendation from Fletcher, which he always obliged. He responded to every single letter with a short typed note thanking them for keeping him informed. The students, likewise, made it a point to thank Fletcher for being so supportive of their efforts. As one former Southwestern student wrote, "I can't help but say that there isn't a boy among the many who haven't profited from his contacts with you. . . . Two S.L.I. boys never meet unless they speak of you."²⁵

Many of the Cajun GIs reported how their linguistic abilities served them well in French-speaking areas; some became official interpreters for their units. One of the newsletters reported that a prisoner-of-war from south Louisiana taught French in a German POW camp while another Cajun GI who saw action in the Philippines received a citation for maintaining communications with a French-speaking native population.²⁶

Fletcher understood the importance of preserving south Louisiana's unique Cajun culture, especially during wartime. He responded to a letter from one Judice, a soldier who pronounced his name quite differently after returning to Acadiana after the war. "We want this section of Louisiana French, and those of you with pretty French names like Roger, Mouton, Broussard and the like should be the last ones to allow your names to be changed to the more prosaic English or hill-billy ones," President Fletcher wrote.²⁷ He also encouraged other educators to respect the unique French-Acadian culture. In a public appearance in Boston, he addressed the Cambridge Historical Society with these words of encouragement: "There are those of us who are working through the schools, through the colleges, and through civic clubs to retain the beautiful Acadian language and the many delightful Acadian customs. We feel it would be a tragedy indeed to allow

served; however, she did return to SLI where she taught English and later served for many years as dean of Liberal Arts.

²⁵Robert Dewey letter, Fletcher Papers, 30-10.

²⁶Turner, "Dear Southwesterners," *Le Chêne* (Summer 1996), SKBC.

²⁷Ibid.

Heberts to become Herberts, LeBlancs to become LeBlanks, or Sonniers Swinneys."²⁸



ANNE BERARD PHOTO TAKEN 1943
IN CYPRESS ISLAND A FEW MILES FROM
ST. MARTINVILLE, LA. RECRUITING LADIES
TO JOIN SPARS. PHOTO TAKEN BY
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD T-1182 214

Wartime mobilization spread from the colleges to the primary schools. While many trained for the military at SLI, students from the High School Victory Corps volunteered to work in the fields and on the local farms. The editorial staff of the *L'Echo du Teche* mentioned frequently the program's impact upon—and benefit to—the community's war effort. A local school reported that three boys worked hard to make the school's Victory Garden "look like green uniformed miniature soldiers in drill array. Straight and healthy rows of radishes, carrots, beets, lettuce and a variety of other vege-

²⁸Joel L. Fletcher, "The Acadians of Today," *The Boardman*, January 1948, 48. SKBC.

tables are pleasing the eye and rewarding the spirits of hard workers."²⁹ Another school's 4-H club raised vegetables on campus to serve in the cafeteria. From May to July 1943, students and teachers at Breaux Bridge High School packaged more than 15,000 cans of vegetables grown in the school garden.³⁰

Many young students took to the fields to help with the annual harvest. One local newspaper report noted that at the Broussard school "every boy old enough to cut cane was in the fields." At Lafayette High School, the principal anticipated getting at least 100 boys to work in the fields. The students' dedication to the community effort earned them the title "Honor Brigade."³¹ A similar program, called "Victory Farm Volunteers," employed nearly 1,000 high school students in Terrebonne Parish to harvest sugarcane.³²

Wartime demands also necessitated changes to the state's agricultural business. Stuart Landry, president of the Rice Mills Association, warned emphatically on the eve of war that "we are in peril. We should not be talking about forty-hour weeks. We want our planes and ship-building plants to run twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. We have to get ready to defend ourselves." Landry's anxieties illustrated the pressing desire by many in the region to get American industries mobilized for the coming war. South Louisiana's rice industry certainly felt the push for more production while it continued to promote its own self-interests by arguing for greater consumption.³³

By the end of 1940, the Louisiana rice industry began a campaign to bring more rice to more customers, particularly soldiers in training. A *The Rice Journal* article written before 1941 stressed that with thousands of troops expected to arrive in central Louisiana training camps in the coming year, the industry "should make every effort to introduce rice to these soldiers the way it is served in the South."³⁴ The "rice for soldiers" campaign, as outlined in *The Rice Journal*, encouraged rice industry leaders to make every effort to get rice into the mess halls by using the slogan, "The army travels on its stomach. Make rice part of the fuel."³⁵ The idea to promote the wonderful tastes of rice and gravy—or rice and beans—served at Louisiana training camps, particularly Camp Beauregard in Pineville, stemmed from

²⁹Delcambre, *L'Echo du Teche*, 88.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 148.

³¹Bradshaw, "The Home Front," No. 39, 14. Bradshaw Papers.

³²Sanson, *Louisiana during World War II*, 194.

³³Stuart O. Landry, "Thinking Out Loud," *The Rice Journal*, 43 (1940): 14.

³⁴"Leave No Stone Unturned," *The Rice Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 11 (November 1940), 1

³⁵"Leave No Stone Unturned," *The Rice Journal*, 1. *Ibid*

the assumption that most of the soldiers from Northern states "never tasted rice except when mushily cooked and served with milk and sugar."³⁶

The major rice-producing region of the Cajun Country encompasses the tri-parish area of Vermillion, Acadia, and Jefferson Davis in the southwestern corner of the Pelican State. Geographically, this fertile prairie region—connected and irrigated via canals, rivers, and bayous—is ideal for rice farming.³⁷ These three parishes, centered on the town of Crowley, accounted for nearly 70 percent of total rice production in the state from 1939 to 1944. Furthermore, records indicate that in 1944 eight parishes in south Louisiana, including the aforementioned three, supplied America with nearly 10 percent of the total national rice harvest.³⁸

Before joining the service, Revis Sermon worked as a rice farmer for the Morton Farm and Acadia-Vermillion Rice Irrigation Company (AVRICO). In the 1920s, his family moved from Abbeville to a farm located between Esther and Forked Island, where his father managed the pumping plant, warehouse, and shop. The ingenious canal system that made rice farming in the area so fruitful extended north from Morton Farm to Abbeville and into the town of Milton—right south of Lafayette—along the Vermillion River. The irrigation system fed more than forty-five-square-miles of prairie rice fields from the Vermilion River westward to the towns of Kaplan and Gueydan.³⁹

During eighteen years of life on the farm, Sermon's family had no electricity or running water, but, as he recalled, "I did have all the horses I could ride; all the ducks, doves, and rabbits I could shoot; and all the bass, catfish, and caspergoo [*sic*] I could catch."⁴⁰ Managing a farm did, however, have its financial advantages; his father paid for his college education. In 1940, he returned home from SLI to help with his father's 600 acres that had been destroyed during a terrible August flood, when four feet of water had inundated the family's rice fields. "Needless to say, my college education ended

³⁶*Ibid.*, 3. Such promotional efforts were not necessary with Cajun servicemen scattered around the country. For example, Jim Begnaud, a Cajun soldier stationed in Oklahoma, yearned for an upcoming furlough home where he hoped to finally eat some good food—fish court bouillon, crawfish, "and[,] by all means, rice cooked our way." For the Begnaud quote, see Delcambre, *L'Echo du Teche*, 108.

³⁷See Lauren C. Post, "The Rice Country of Southwestern Louisiana," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (October 1940), 574-590.

³⁸Martel McNeely, "Rice in the Economy of Louisiana," *The Rice Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (February 1945), 23-25, 28. Actual figures are 69.5 in *The Rice Journal* and 68.75 in the *1950 United States Census of Agriculture* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C.); Jerry Sanson claims that southwest Louisiana produced 83 percent of state's total. See Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 205.

³⁹Revis Sermon, "The Life and Times of Revis Sermon, 10-28-19" (unpublished memoir), 1.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

abruptly," Sermon later wrote. When his father suffered a massive stroke the following year, the younger Sermon took over the managerial job with the Canal Company and farmed his father's 600 acres of rice. That year, he harvested the crop and even planted an extra forty acres for himself. He worked the smaller field on the weekends and his new wife, Loraine, drove the tractor. But when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, everything changed. Sermon had always dreamed of flying fighter airplanes, and in 1942, the U.S. Army Air Corps gave him that chance. He left the farm, joined the service, and later flew fifty combat missions over Europe in a P-47.⁴¹

Griffin Reaux, a Kaplan native, also farmed rice during the war. Before joining the service in 1945, Reaux worked in the fields and helped his father farm 200 acres of rice and cattle. In the early 1940s, rice farming in Vermillion Parish still required intensive manual labor. Although some technological advances (particularly the mechanical binder) had reached the south Louisiana rice fields before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the introduction of large combines did not occur until 1946. The Reaux family practiced traditional farming techniques: cutting the rice, binding it in the field, letting it dry, thrashing it, and sacking it for sale to the local rice buyers—Kaplan Mills or Liberty Rice Mill. With only one thrasher in the Reaux's neighborhood, the local farmers worked out a cooperative system, each taking a turn processing their harvest. When it came time for cutting, Reaux drove mules and wooden wagons into the field, loaded up the dried stacked rice, and hauled it off to the neighborhood thrasher. "I'll tell you, it was hard work," Reaux recalled, "but it was fun; it was a way of life, and we didn't know otherwise."⁴²

Global events, however, cast a shadow on their idyllic existence, and the Reaux family kept up with the war effort through newspapers and family discussions at the dinner table. The family farm typically produced roughly twenty barrels⁴³ of rice per acre in an average harvest, but as many as forty barrels an acre on occasion. "During that time [Kaplan] was all rice farmer. . . . 20 barrels was real good," he stated, and with a return of \$6.00 a barrel, his family made a decent living. By the time that he returned to the Cajun Country in late 1945 after his service with the U.S. Navy, however, an increase in market price and the advent of new technology had transformed the rice industry completely.⁴⁴

Long before the twentieth century, the rice-growing communities introduced livestock, mainly cattle, to feed on the lands. This experiment to im-

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 2-4.

⁴²Interview with Griffin Reaux by Jason P. Theriot, October 14, 2006.

⁴³A 162-pound measure.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

prove the soil by grazing cattle over previously harvested fields proved beneficial. By 1945, the integration of the rice and cattle industries made southwest Louisiana "one of the richest agricultural empires of its size in the world," according to *The Rice Journal*.⁴⁵

Like the *petit habitants* of the nineteenth century, Cajun farmers throughout south Louisiana practiced mixed farming during the war years in addition to producing their cash crop. All farms had a vegetable garden, a barn to store feed, and many had cows, chickens, and hogs. A Cajun from Iberia Parish who grew up on a sugarcane farm recalled that his father often commented that "everything on [his family's] table [came] from the farm, except the rice."⁴⁶ During the war, many young Cajuns still pursued traditional, seasonally-based family occupations. For example, in the summer, E. J. LeBlanc of Erath helped his father and brothers work a seine netting seafood in Vermillion Bay. In the winter, the LeBlancs lived in a camp on Marsh Island, trapping mink and muskrat and hunting wild game for their meals. Dennis Neal's family made a living planting Irish potatoes and snap beans in the Bayou Terrebonne area. John Broussard and his uncle ran a dairy farm on the Peebles Plantation in Iberia Parish. When the war broke out, he joined the Marines because, "between me and my fat uncle, one of us had to go."⁴⁷

Besides rice, other food products from the Cajun Country, such as the candied yam, a sweet potato creation of the B. F. Trappey family, found their way into the mess halls and field rations of soldiers and sailors everywhere. When the war began, the family-run company from New Iberia expanded its canning operation to Lafayette. By 1945, the Trappeys produced an estimated twelve million pounds of the canned vegetable strictly for the armed forces.⁴⁸

The Evangeline Packing Plant, owned by Edmund Buillard in St. Martinville, processed red peppers and packaged a variety of other products, including boiled crawfish and canned okra. The factory employed a few thousand Cajuns, drawn from family farms by better wages. Mary Broussard of Coteau Holmes, who worked as a welder in New Orleans during the war, had three uncles and a sister who left the fields in nearby Catahoula to work at the Buillard factory. In one of his wartime newsletters, SLI president Joel Fletcher acknowledged the contributions of this family business: "Plants like the Buillard factory, built with local money, operated with local labor,

⁴⁵McNeely, "Rice in the Economy of Louisiana," *The Rice Journal*, 28.

⁴⁶Interview with Alfred "Bennie" Granger by Jason P. Theriot, July 29, 2006.

⁴⁷Jason P. Theriot, *To Honor Our Veterans: An Oral History of World War II Veterans from the Bayou Country, Vol. I: The Pacific War* (Baton Rouge, 2002), 18.

⁴⁸Sanson, *Louisiana during World War II*, 206.

and preparing local products in finished form, are the type of industry that will build a prosperous Louisiana."⁴⁹

Sugarcane grown and processed in Cajun Country helped satisfy to the nation's wartime sugar requirements. Raw sugar was an essential component of many domestic, commercial, and military products.⁵⁰ The Pelican state's sugar region stretched from Iberia Parish southeast to Lafourche Parish. This high-yield area produced an average of 4,800,000 tons of sugar per year throughout the early 1940s,⁵¹ and, in 1944, the total raw sugar tonnage in the seven parishes of this sugar belt accounted for more than 70 percent of Louisiana's total sugar output.⁵²

Sugar "farming was the backbone of the Loreauville community," recalled Alfred "Bennie" Granger, who grew up on a sugarcane farm in Loreauville, a small town in Iberia Parish. Granger inherited a dedicated work ethic from his parents and older brothers. In a family with ten children, "everybody did their share," he said, and, for Granger, this meant completing his portion of the daily chores at home. "We had to make sure that there were corn shells for the chickens, and everybody took their turns at milking the cows . . . to put milk on the table and food on the table, and that's how it was. We were taught to work hard," he said, "and we enjoyed the farm life and all the good fruits that came from the farm." According to Granger, Loreauville once consisted of many cotton farms, until a devastating boll weevil outbreak in the 1920s and 1930s forced cotton growers to relocate or change crops. Raising cane thus became the hallmark of the area.⁵³

Military service and high-paying industry jobs captured the attention of most young Cajuns living on farms in communities like Loreauville. Soon Granger, like his older brothers, left his home town and family farm to serve his country. He volunteered for the U.S. Coast Guard in 1943 and patrolled the waters off the Carolinas. Many other young Cajun farm boys found their way into other branches of the service: Jim Lanclos, a farmer from the Jeanerette area, joined the merchant marines in 1940 and later served in the army; Howard Freyou left a farm in New Iberia and took a job at a shipyard

⁴⁹ Turner, "Dear Southwesterners," *Le Chêne* (Fall 1996), SKBC.

⁵⁰According to Bill Ishee, "Sugar made alcohol, which made gun powder. That was a strategic cargo...you wouldn't think that sugar is strategic, but in that wartime situation, it was." Interview with Bill Ishee by Jason P. Theriot, 15 August 2005, Theriot Collection. See also "War Use of Sugar," *The Sugar Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 10 (March 1942), 5.

⁵¹ Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 202

⁵² 1950 *United States Census of Agriculture* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C.).

⁵³ Granger interview. See also Marcelle Bienvenu, Carl A. Brasseaux, Ryan A. Brasseaux, *Stir the Pot: The History of Cajun Cuisine* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2005), 39.

in Morgan City before serving on a battleship; Perry Decuir, a Loreauville farmer, went to work in the oilfields before later joining the Marines.⁵⁴

[Labor shortage section begins here] Wartime mobilization produced other kinds of changes in the local industries. The terrible labor shortage in the fields, a direct result of the demand for military personnel in addition to the booming war industry along Louisiana's coast, prompted emergency measures from local and state officials. In Lafourche Parish in particular, which harvested roughly 12 percent of the state's sugarcane, farmers urged their elected officials to come up with a creative solution to solve the manpower issue. Joseph T. Butler, Jr. and Jerry Sanson both noted in their studies of World War II that multiple agencies and representatives, including local county agents, the War Manpower Commission, the American Sugarcane League, the Louisiana Cane Grower's Association, and even members of Congress combined forces to take on this challenging task. Beginning as early as 1942, a planning committee discussed the options, including deferring skilled field workers from the State Selective Service, utilizing high school boys, and even importing Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans to work the harvest. The scheme proved unsuccessful, however, in producing a substantial reserve pool of labor to meet the growing crisis, particularly with the 1943 harvest fast approaching.⁵⁵

By the end of the summer of 1943, it had become apparent to community leaders and farmers throughout the Acadiana parishes that a severe manpower shortage might jeopardize the year's rice and sugar harvest. Committees across the region's parishes launched emergency meetings to deal with the problem. In St. Martin Parish, for example, county agents and school board officials formed an Emergency Farm Labor Advisory Committee to discuss using immigrant labor and more high school boys to supplement the labor shortage in the fields. The committee assured the locals that the farmers would receive help, students would still have the 180 required school days, teachers would still earn nine months of pay, and "our fighting forces will be afforded food that they so vitally need."⁵⁶ But local teenage boys alone could hardly provide all the manpower needed to harvest by hand cash crops covering hundreds of thousands of acres.

By fall, Acadiana's agrarian economy was in crisis mode, for approaching winter weather threatened crops still standing in the fields. By November,

⁵⁴ Interview with Jim Lanclos by Jason P. Theriot, 2005, Theriot Collection; Interview with Howard Freyou by Jason P. Theriot, 24 September 2001, Theriot Collection; Interview with Perry Decuir by Jason P. Theriot, 5 November 2001, Theriot Collection.

⁵⁵ Joseph T. Butler, Jr., "Prisoner of War Labor in the Sugarcane Fields of Lafourche Parish, Louisiana: 1943-44," in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Volume VIII: The Age of the Longs, Louisiana 1928-1960*, ed. Edward F. Hass (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana, 2001), 336-337; Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 195-199.

⁵⁶ Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 185.

only 20 percent of Lafayette Parish's sugarcane crop had been cut, the *Daily Advertiser* reported. Indeed, the Billeaud Sugar Mill in Broussard just south of Lafayette was actually compelled to suspend operations for a short period because of an inadequate supply of field-harvested cane. The farmers, committees, and parish leaders consequently turned to the state and federal government for approval to employ thousands of German prisoners-of-war as field hands to save the industry.⁵⁷

When German and Italian prisoners of war first began arriving in the military camps of central Louisiana in mid-1943 (following the defeat of the German Afrika Korps in Tunisia, which netted nearly 200,000 German and Italian prisoners-of-war), committee officials jumped into action. The initial report issued in July 1943 discussed the potential use of enemy POWs as field hands by setting up sub-camps in the coastal plains and prairies of south Louisiana. Federal regulations, however, prohibited the construction and use of these POW camps within 150 miles of the coastline. Undaunted, state officials, including the Louisiana Cane Growers' Association, lobbied successfully in Washington D.C. to change the law. The Federal Government, as Sanson noted, "yielded to pressure" from the sugar lobbyists and Louisiana congressmen.⁵⁸

Construction of small POW worker camps and acquisition of land began in earnest throughout coastal Louisiana. C.J. Christ, a historian and author of *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, reported that close to 30 towns in south Louisiana established "sub-camps" for prisoners. Farmers of sugarcane, rice, and cotton employed as many as 20,000 of these POWs during the war.⁵⁹ Three camps in Lafourche Parish housed 1,026 German prisoners to work in the sugarcane fields in late 1944. Additionally, more than two thousand POWs worked the rice fields in Vermillion Parish by 1945.⁶⁰ Farmers paid fair wages to the government for this much-needed labor, as much as \$1.50 per man per day, according to one report.⁶¹

In Vermillion Parish, "Mae Mae" Romero's father, who died before the war started, owned a rice farm on the outskirts of Kaplan. With the labor shortages and no sons left behind to work the 672 acres, Seva Laviolette, the manager of the farm, employed several German POWs from the local camp. The overseer transported the workers on flatbed trucks to and from their campsite six days a week. Romero recalled, "They were fed well—a full

⁵⁷Bradshaw, "The Home Front," No. 39, 14. Bradshaw Papers.

⁵⁸ Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 196. Congressman F. Edward Hebert and Senator Allen J. Ellender led the delegation in Washington D.C.

⁵⁹ C. J. Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico* (Houma: 2005), 31-32.

⁶⁰ Matthew J. Schott and Rosalind Foley, "Bayou Stalags: German Prisoners of War In Louisiana," (Lafayette: unpublished manuscript, 1981), 5, SKBC.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

dinner everyday at noon—and they appreciated the hospitality...food was better than in Germany." A local priest named Father Odilon Briese, a native of Alsace Lorraine, France, often visited with these POWs and ministered to them. He referred to them as "his boys," said Romero.⁶²

As a teenager during the war, C.J. Christ worked on a rice farm in Mowata, not far from a POW camp in Eunice. He recalled a frightening experience working alongside a gang of German workers. He wrote, "I started pulling the wagon before the rear team finished loading their group of bundles. Suddenly this very angry German soldier ran up to the tractor and started yelling and waving a pitchfork very near my face!"⁶³

For the most part, German and Italian prisoners who lived and worked in the Cajun Country posed no threat to the community and often spoke of the generosity afforded them by the local townspeople. The farmers and camp guards, in turn, treated them with respect and adhered strictly to the Geneva Convention. Most important, the prisoners proved to be excellent field hands. In *Bayou Stalags*, authors Matthew J. Schott and Rosalind Foley concluded that the reports of country agents "clearly indicate that POW labor meant the difference between profits and losses for planters of the staple crops during the period 1944-45."⁶⁴

Jim Lanclos, whose father hired some German POWs from the tent city at the Jeanerette LSU Experimental Station, told of his wife's experience with the young enemy soldiers at the camp. "My wife worked for the postmaster in Loreauville during the war and she remembers talking to those Germans on her runs. She told one of them, 'My husband wrote to me and said he was in Munich.' The young [German] boy couldn't believe that we had made it that far into Germany. So she showed him the letter to prove it."⁶⁵ When Revis Sermon returned to Vermillion Parish in May 1945, after flying missions over Europe, he visited a POW camp in Gueydan. Dressed in full uniform, Sermon spoke to a group of 40 Germans and many of them asked him questions about their homeland. He told them that many of their cities lay in ruin and their country had been defeated. "They just couldn't believe it, tears in their eyes," Sermon recalled, "and I felt sorry for them, too."⁶⁶

Schott and Foley noted that, contrary to popular belief, most of the German POWs did not identify with Nazi ideology. The authors described the POWs as "an incredible polyglot of ethnic groups" representing "every na-

⁶² "Mae Mae" Romero, telephone conversation with Jason P. Theriot, 10 October 2006.

⁶³ Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 31.

⁶⁴ Schott and Foley, "Bayou Stalags," p. 6.

⁶⁵ Lanclos interview.

⁶⁶ Interview with Revis Sermon by Jason P. Theriot, 18 November 2006.

tion on the continent of Europe."⁶⁷ Many of them sympathized with the black Creoles—and visa versa—who continued to endure racial prejudices in the Jim Crow South.⁶⁸ Howard Fontenette, a French-speaking Creole from Iberia Parish and army quartermaster sergeant who fought at the historic battle of Kasserine Pass in North Africa in 1943, made friends with an English-speaking POW at the Jeanerette camp. "I talked with him...He told me, 'Soldier, war is hell.' He had been captured in that Kasserine Pass where we had been fighting. We didn't talk much, but we had a special thing between us, since we had fought at the same battle."⁶⁹

The stories of German escapees from these camps are rife with folklore and intrigue. Prisoners who escaped quickly learned of the harsh environment surrounding their campsites along the bayous, marshes, and coastal patches of south Louisiana. Two escapees from a Donaldsonville camp returned to the camp the following day after a night of running from the snakes, alligators, and mosquitoes in the boggy swamp.⁷⁰ Two other POWs in one of the Houma camps escaped and wound up lost on a deserted dark road to the isolated town of Dulac where "the mosquitoes like to kill them," one local stated. "This truck stopped and he [one of the Germans] said, 'Lord, Man, take me back to the prison camp!'"⁷¹ One local newspaper reported that sheriffs captured three escaped POWs in the swamps around Patout Bayou near New Iberia. Other rumors circulated about POW attempts to flee to the coast and rendezvous with German U-boats.

Although rumors still persist about U-boat activities off the Louisiana coast, one thing is clear, U-boats came to the Gulf of Mexico for one purpose: to sink oil tankers. "Attack only ships over 10,000 tons and give first priority to tankers," Admiral Carl Dönitz, the German naval commander, instructed his Gulf of Mexico-bound U-boat captains. "Don't bring any torpedoes home. Good hunting."⁷² U-boats reaped havoc all over the Gulf Sea Frontier, beginning with operations in May 1942. Their attacks cut crucial oil imports from Venezuela to the Allies by a third.⁷³ By August nearly 100

⁶⁷ Schott and Foley, "Bayou Stalags," p. 4.

⁶⁸ For more on this see Matthew J. Schott, "Prisoners Like Us: German POWs Encounter Louisiana's African-Americans," *Louisiana History*, Vol. 36, No.3 (Summer 1995), 277-296.

⁶⁹ Interview with Howard Fontenette by Jason P. Theriot, 2005, Theriot Collection. See Theriot, *The Mediterranean Campaign*, 13-17.

⁷⁰ Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 32.

⁷¹ Carolyn Portier Gorman, "Recollections of War: 1940-1943 On Bayou Little Caillou: An Oral History Collection," *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*, Vol. VI, No. 2. (1987), 34.

⁷² Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 47.

⁷³ David S. Painter, *Oil and the American Century: The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Oil Policy, 1941-1954* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 17-18.

ships fell prey to U-boat attacks; oil tankers accounted for nearly a third of that number.

The U-boat attacks brought the war to south Louisiana's doorstep. Texaco, which drilled for and extracted oil in the wetlands of south Louisiana and employed many local Cajuns, lost five tankers to submarine attacks, including 97 officers and crewmen.⁷⁴ Local Texaco employees witnessed some of these horrific attacks, including the burning of the *SS David McKelvy*, torpedoed just off the coast near Lake Pelto and Caillou Island in Terrebonne Parish (roughly 30 miles south of Houma). Two days later, a second tanker, the *SS William C. McTarnahan*, caught fire from a well-placed enemy torpedo attack, within sight of an offshore oil storage facility.⁷⁵ In a bone-chilling eye-witness account of a U-boat attack, Paul McMillan, Jr., a former SLI student, wrote to his sister about the horrors of submarine warfare. McMillan, a merchant mariner aboard the tanker *S. S. Gulf of Mexico*, witnessed a tanker ship, the *Vincent*, just a few hundred yards away his, burst into flames from a U-boat torpedo attack. "The Vincent," he recorded in a diary shortly after the incident, "in these last few seconds had become a flaming inferno, the most horrible sight I have ever seen and I pray to God that I never see anything like it again." Sometime later, McMillan's sister wrote a letter to SLI President Fletcher containing her brother's diary entry from this incident, and also informed the president that her brother had died a short while later from a similar torpedo attack.⁷⁶

In the late 1930s, prior to the development of submarine pipelines, Texaco (then the Texas Company) established an innovative floating port terminal for storing and discharging crude oil to large tankers anchored out in the Gulf. "Port Texaco," as it came to be known, consisted of three World War I-era tankers sunk parallel to each other between Caillou Island and Lake Pelto. Workers loaded the oil from the tank batteries in the marsh into the barges and tug boats pushed the cargo down the bayou to the Port Texaco storage facility. One of the tankers had electric power to operate all the necessary equipment, including generators, pumps, and living quarters. When the large Texaco oil tankers from Port Arthur, Texas, appeared on the horizon every eight to ten days, the workers at Port Texaco pumped the stored crude into larger barges (capable of handling 16,000 barrels of oil), and the tug boats "hipped" the steel vessels offshore to meet the big tankers and transfer the cargo. C.J. Christ stated, "During World War II, the parish [Ter-

⁷⁴ Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 203. The total loss for the five Texaco tankers equaled 80,000 barrels of crude oil.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

⁷⁶ Letter from Paul McMillan, Jr.'s sister. Fletcher Papers, 31-3.

rebonne] furnished a huge amount of crude oil for the Texaco refinery in Port Arthur, Texas....their methods were leading edge and innovative."⁷⁷

Eddie Henry, a Cajun from Terrebonne Parish, grew up on a house boat in the marsh with his father and trapped for fur-bearing animals most of his young life. When Texaco came to town, the company started hiring locals who knew about boats and the local waterways. During the war, his father worked for Port Texaco hauling oil on barges from Golden Meadow, Leeville, and the surrounding lakes. "There were several fields," Henry recalled. "There was Caillou Field, Lake Barre, Bay St. Elaine, and Dog Lake. These were fields that Texaco had...and of course they used the smaller barges to come inside to get the oil from the tank batteries and bring it out." His father worked on tugboats during the war and eventually became the captain of Port Texaco. Henry related his father's story as follows:

These tugs were not wheel-house controlled like all the big tugs today; they didn't have no power clutches, you had an engineer and a captain. When they brought the barges out to the ship that was anchored out in the Gulf, they would "hip" two barges, one on each side, that way when he got to the ship no matter how the wind was blowing they could dock one of them. Then, they'd turn around and dock the other one. That's when a captain had to be a captain; he had bells to ring and that engineer better not be asleep.⁷⁸



In the late 1920s and early 1930s, after two decades of exploring for and producing oil from the region's known salt domes, the oil and gas industry finally moved into the tidal marshlands and shallow bays in search of petroleum. The companies, after trial and error, adapted to this wetland environment, utilized the advantages of south Louisiana's waterways, and transformed this coastal region into an energy corridor.⁷⁹ In the 1930s, an army

⁷⁷ Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 201.

⁷⁸ Interview with Ed Henry by Jason P. Theriot, 3 October 2006.

⁷⁹ The author is currently working on a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Houston on the environmental history of Coastal Louisiana's oil and gas industry.

of oil men from Texas and Oklahoma began moving into the local towns like Houma and Morgan City to establish operations. "It was like we had been invaded," explained one local Cajun. And they called these outsiders *Modie Texiens* [damn Texans].⁸⁰ When Harnett T. Kane published her writings in 1944 about the coming of the oil industry into Louisiana's "Deep Delta Country," she observed that, "At the bars and restaurants, the juke boxes play songs of the range and the mountains, and the older natives watch in wonder as the slow-talking, quick-walking new arrivals step past them... they may not like the Frenchmen, but they do like the French jeunes filles."⁸¹

Windell Curole, a local historian and director of the South Lafourche Levee District, stated, "The Texans and Oklahomans knew how to drill, but they did not know how to navigate a boat. [They] did not know how to deal with the waters. And that's where our people took off."⁸² Oil companies hired local Cajuns to operate the boats, barges, and tugs (including their own shrimp boats) for the oil industry because of their experience with and knowledge of the coastal waterways.

In the 1930s and 1940s, geophysical crews using seismic recording instruments ventured into the marshes and swamps in search of underground oil deposits. Forging through the unforgiving terrain proved costly and nearly impossible, even for experienced locals. Cajuns in the oil business offered up their own "home grown innovation" with the advent of the motorized marsh buggy and the customized shallow-draft flatbottom crew boat. Andrew Cheramie, a Cajun from the Lafourche area, fabricated and patented one of the earlier versions of the marsh buggy. These specialized vehicles

⁸⁰ Lauren Penney, "In the Wake of War: World War II and the Development of the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry" in D. E. Austin, T. Priest, L. Penney, J. Pratt, A. G. Pulsipher, J. Abel and J. Taylor, *History of the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry in Southern Louisiana: Vol. 1: Papers on the Evolving Offshore Industry*, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, New Orleans, LA. OCS Study MMS 2008-042, 37-66.

⁸¹ Harnett T. Kane, *Deep Delta Country* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce), 258. For more works that explore the cultural aspects of the oil and gas industry in south Louisiana, see Barry Jean Ancelet, "Rednecks, Roughnecks, and the Bosco Stomp: The Arrival of the Oil Industry in the Marais Bouleur." *Attakapas Gazette*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 29-33; Jacques M. Henry and Carl L., Bankston, III, *Blue Collar Bayou: Louisiana Cajuns in the New Economy of Ethnicity* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002); Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003); and Robert Gramling, *Oil on the Edge: Offshore Development, Conflict, and Gridlock* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1996).

⁸² Interview with Windell Curole, Offshore Oil and Gas History Project (OOGHP), 2002, a study funded by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service [hereafter MMS Study].

"facilitated the penetration of geophysical crews, and behind them drilling and pipeline operations, into the marshes of southern Louisiana."⁸³

As nations went to war in the early 1940s, geophysical crews migrated to the marshlands and coastal waters in search of oil and gas.⁸⁴ Cajuns Millard Mannina, J.D. Boudreaux, and Nelson Constant worked for surveying crews and seismograph companies in the early 1940s before joining military service. Mannina earned his way up from an instrument helper making thirty cents an hour to a "shooter" handling dynamite and making seventy-five cents an hour. He spent time in the wetlands around Weeks Island before taking a job as a roughneck on a drilling rig in Charenton Lake. He saved up enough money to go to college at LSU and joined the ROTC. When the army reviewed his impressive resume, they assigned him to an engineer battalion as a construction foreman in the Pacific building airfields and bridges.⁸⁵ J.D. Boudreaux worked for a seismic crew in the treacherous swamps around Johnson Bayou. "The mosquitoes were terrible," he described, "and we had to wear a mask and a helmet with a screen to work in the swamp. But the snakes were about as big around as your arm."⁸⁶ He later joined the U.S. Navy. Nelson Constant's Cajun French and local knowledge provided his employer, Humble Oil, with a unique advantage in the often difficult world of obtaining permits and land surveys in rural enclaves. Constant worked as a guide and translator and helped to acquire the necessary permits from local landowning Cajuns for exploration rights.⁸⁷

In 1940, ocean-going tankers from the Gulf ports provided the U.S. East Coast with 80 percent of its petroleum, approximately 1,200,000 barrels of oil a day. With an increase in demand spurred on by war mobilization and a dramatic drop in transportation as a result of U-boat attacks, an oil crisis ensued. In 1942, the Gulf of Mexico was one of the most dangerous places to work. Pure Oil Company, which had built an offshore drilling rig a few miles into the Gulf south of Cameron Parish, actually sealed up its well heads and abandoned the platform. The Gulf coast ports shut down for the

⁸³ Tyler Priest, "Technology and Strategy of Petroleum Exploration in Coastal and Offshore Gulf of Mexico," in Austin et al, *History of the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry in Southern Louisiana, Volume I: Papers on the Evolving Offshore Industry*, 28.

⁸⁴ For a description of seismic operations in the wetlands during the 1940s, see A. B. Hamil, "Portable Equipment Expedites Inland Marine Seismic Surveys," *Oil and Gas Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (31 May 1947), 146-156.

⁸⁵ Interview with Millard Mannina by Jason P. Theriot, October 2001, Theriot Collection.

⁸⁶ Interview with J.D. Boudeaux by Jason P. Theriot, 2001, Theriot Collection.

⁸⁷ Interview with Nelson Constant, OOGHP, 2001, MMS Study.

first time. "Those 24 U-boats were just tearing us up," C.J. Christ explained.⁸⁸

With a two-front war being waged overseas, the U.S. military demanded, ever increasingly, fuel for its tanks, planes, ships, and for its allies. Airplanes, for example, burned thousands of gallons of fuel per day.⁸⁹ At the height of the war, the United States consumed five million barrels of oil per day for domestic and military purposes.⁹⁰ The harsh reality of war economics prompted Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes to exclaim: "This is a war of machines and of ships and of airplanes powered by oil. In short this is an oil war."⁹¹ Louisiana responded: Oil production increased from 215 million barrels in 1941 to 275 million barrels in 1945.⁹² But the logistics involved in transporting the crude needed to be revamped to meet the pressing demand. "It had to be met by pipe lines," wrote John L. Loos in his study of the Interstate Oil Pipe Line Company.⁹³

At the beginning of the war, a handful of oil fields in south Louisiana linked to an interstate pipe line system that transported crude to refineries, mainly located in Baton Rouge. As mobilization increased, additional fields tapped into this pipeline system. The Anse La Butte field north of Breaux Bridge, discovered in 1911, remained dormant for many years until it went back into production following a successful strike in the area during the war.⁹⁴ "The numerous wells," a local Breaux Bridge bulletin recorded, "are now yielding the golden fluid in large quantities."⁹⁵ The Bayou Sale field south of Franklin also tied into the pipeline system. By 1944, that field piped in more than three million barrels of oil for transportation to the refinery.⁹⁶

When the pipeline connected to the oil patch at Golden Meadow and Raceland in lower Lafourche Parish, the pipe liners ran into problems. The

⁸⁸ Theriot, *The European Theater*, 10. A lack of steel to fabricate the drilling rigs also hindered development and production, see Peeney, "In the Wake of War."

⁸⁹ Penney, "In the Wake of War."

⁹⁰ D. Thomas Curtain, *Men, Oil and War*, (Chicago: Petroleum Industry Committee, 1946), 63; See also Charles C. Scott, ed., *Petroleum Industry Committee in World War II, District V, 1941-1946* (San Francisco: 1947).

⁹¹ Carl Coke Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), 349.

⁹² Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 228.

⁹³ John L. Loos, *Oil On Stream: A History of the Interstate Oil Pipe Line Company, 1909-1959* (Baton Rouge; Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 196.

⁹⁴ Cyril K. Moresi, "The Anse La Butte Oil Field," *Oil*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (March 1941), 39-42.

⁹⁵ Delcambre, *L'Echo du Teche*, 33.

⁹⁶ Loos, *Oil On Stream*, 162.

pipeline stretched across sugarcane plantations, swamps, and shallow lakes, where Cajuns made a living farming, fishing, shrimping, and trapping. John Loos noted that French-speaking Cajuns inhabited the region and when needed, French interpreters, familiar with the pipe industry and the local communities, communicated with the farmers to secure permission to acquire lands for laying pipe. And when persuasion failed to appeal to the uncompromising and suspicious Cajuns, a parish priest got the call to obtain support for the pipeline development.⁹⁷

War mobilization in south Louisiana's oil and gas industry produced not only valuable energy resources for the nation, but also provided key innovations to propel the industry forward, ultimately into offshore development. In the early 1940s, the United Gas Pipeline Company built the first submarine natural gas pipeline across Lake Pontchartrain, transporting valuable natural gas supplies from Coastal Louisiana more than 200 miles away to the industrial centers in Mobile, Alabama.⁹⁸ Other companies, such as Humble, Gulf, and Shell also expanded their South Louisiana operations during the war years. The pipe liners, roughnecks, seismic crews, welders, fitters, deck hands, mariners, tugboat captains, and shrimp boat captains all contributed to the mobilization of Louisiana's petroleum industry to service war needs. "Not all patriots carried a gun, flew a plane, or manned a warship," wrote C.J. Christ. "Some served their country with knowledge and loyalty."⁹⁹

The same could be said for those in south Louisiana's wartime ship building industry. From 1940 to 1944 employment in the war manufacturing industry—much of it centered on shipbuilding—increased from 4,685 to 64,500.¹⁰⁰ Workers from all over the state and beyond migrated to the coastal communities and took up jobs at places like Higgins Industries, Delta Ship Yards, Consolidated Aircraft, Chicago Bridge and Iron, and Thibodaux Boiler Works. These industries and their workers combined to produce a substantial allotment of mid- to small-sized military vessels and equipment used throughout the war.

Andrew Jackson Higgins, of the famed Higgins Industry, established his ship building facility in New Orleans near City Park. His vision, innovation, and ambition as America's top ship builder earned him high praise from General Dwight Eisenhower who called him "the man who won the war for us" and from Adolf Hitler who referred to Higgins as a modern day Noah.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁹⁸ United Gas Companies, *15th Annual Report*, 1944, Louisiana State University Shreveport archives, Collection 460, Box 1, Folder 5. See also Elton Sterrett, "25-Mile Under-Water Span in Seafaring Pipe Line," *The Oil Weekly*, Vol. 103, No. 7 (20 December 1941), 33-38.

⁹⁹ Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 203.

¹⁰⁰ Rudolf Heberle, *The Labor Force in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1948), 183.

The Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP) or "Higgins Boat" delivered assault troops to the shores of nearly every beach the Allies invaded, including Iwo Jima, Anzio, and Normandy. During the war, Higgins built 12,300 of these remarkable vessels. The ingenious wooden, shallow draft design stemmed from a rather unlikely source, the Cajun trappers and fishermen of the south Louisiana marshes.¹⁰¹

For generations, Cajuns built and used light weight "pirogues" and "bateaus" to make a living in the marsh trapping muskrats, netting seafood, and hunting in the narrow, tidal waterways of south Louisiana. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Cajuns used similar vessels in the oil fields to locate potential leases, and to transport seismic crews and supplies. These boats needed to be light weight and easy to handle for portage over land. They also had to be durable and built to last in coastal Louisiana's unforgiving environment.

Andrew Higgins revered the unique flatbed boats built and used by Cajun trappers to travel in the swamps and coastal marshes.¹⁰² In the 1930s, Higgins modeled one of his earliest and most successful designs after the Cajun craft. He called it the "Wonderboat," the predecessor to the "Eureka" model, which Higgins later modified for the U.S. Navy, calling it the LCVP. The newly redesigned, high-powered Higgins vessel easily cut through sandbars and mudflats. The light weight hull, constructed out of five-eighths inch mahogany plywood and powered by a 225 horsepower diesel engine, made for almost effortless beach landings and retracting. Built to hold roughly 30 men, the Higgins Boat, as it came to be known, with its retractable steel ramp, provided for quick deployment of troops assaulting a beach.¹⁰³

In July 1942, Higgins expanded his industry to a new plant 50 miles south to Houma. The "predominantly local Cajun labor force" in Houma constructed Higgins Boats and other military equipment. When Fred Horil, one of Higgins's top supervisors, arrived at the Houma plant he found that nearly everyone seemed skillful in the art of boat building. The Cajuns acquired this knowledge from their backwoods upbringing, fishing and trapping along the coast for most of their lives.¹⁰⁴ Jerry E. Strahan, the author of Higgins's

¹⁰¹ For Eisenhower's quote, see Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climatic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 45-6; For the Hitler reference, see Keith Darce, "New boat a tribute to WWII vets, Higgins designer," *The Times-Picayune*, (1999) <<http://www.nola.com/dday/index.ssf?/dday/d060699a.html>>

¹⁰² "Builders, Heroes & the Boat That Won the War for US: Andrew Jackson Higgins," <<http://www.lpb.org/programs/higgins/higginsbio.html>>

¹⁰³ Darce, "New boat a tribute to WWII vets, Higgins designer"; John A. Heitman, "The Man Who Won the War: Andrew Jackson Higgins," in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Volume VIII: The Age of the Longs, Louisiana 1928-1960*, ed. Edward F. Hass (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana, 2001), 308-9.

¹⁰⁴ Jerry E. Strahan, *Andrew Jackson Higgins and the Boats that Won World War II* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 128, 133.

biography, noted that the proficient Cajun boat builders at the Higgins Houma plant worked emphatically to produce seven boats a week.¹⁰⁵

The 20,000 workers employed by Higgins Industries during the war produced a variety of vessels for the military, other than the famous LCVP, including patrol craft such as PT boats, Landing Craft, Mechanized (LCM) for vehicles, and the much larger Landing Ship Tank (LST), to name a few more well-known models. In 1943, the U.S. Navy reported that Higgins Industries designed and built nearly all of its more than 14,000 transport naval vessels deployed around the world. In 1944, prior to the June Normandy invasion, workers at Higgins produced an astonishing 18 landing craft a day.¹⁰⁶ The "Higgins Landing Barge School" at Lake Pontchartrain trained countless Navy and Coast Guard men to operate these craft.

Instructors employed by Higgins and navy personnel trained thousands of men to operate the landing craft. Avery Derouen, a navy coxswain from the shrimping town of Delcambre, trained on the Higgins boat in San Diego, and later delivered scores of Marines at the invasion of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Harry Jackson, a navy man from New Iberia, joined in 1945 and learned to operate the LCVP at a training base in Fort Pierce, Florida. "This was strictly training in the Higgins boat from the LST going into the beaches to drop troops, tanks, or supplies," Jackson said. "We would practice landing all day long. We were training for the invasion of Japan."¹⁰⁷

The ship building industry, like the oil industry and farming, struggled with man-power shortages to keep up with around-the-clock production during wartime. Again, the local communities responded: thousands of young women answered the call, left the comfort of their homes, and migrated to the ship building centers to produce war vessels. Women made up 80 percent of the work force at Higgins. Annette Dugas, of Coteau Holmes, left the "country" to train at an industrial school in Rayne for two months. She then took a job at Higgins as a machinist and later moved up to shipping and receiving. She lived with her sister, Beulah, in a little house not far from the ship yard.

Beulah Dugas, like her sister, joined the six-million-women-army of factory workers, idealized as "Rosie the Riveter." As a poor 18-year-old Cajun girl from a large family of eleven, Dugas left the small town life to work at a factory in St. Martinville sewing uniforms for soldiers. One day, a representative from Delta Ship Yards came to the factory in search of potential

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰⁶ Heitman, "The Man Who Won the War," *Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Volume VIII*, 309-311; Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 58-9; Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 219; Darse, "New boat a tribute to WWII vets, Higgins designer".

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Harry Jackson by Jason P. Theriot, 18 November 2002, Theriot Collection.

welders. She volunteered for the job and subsequently trained for six weeks at a welding school in Lafayette before moving to New Orleans. "I welded the big Liberty ships," she explained. "We were there in the deep water of the industrial canal. I started off tacking because they wanted to see how much I had learned at school. Then I had to weld a straight line. Gradually they moved me up." Men and women welders at Delta received equal treatment and equal pay for the same work. Every one had to wear trousers, gloves, protective head gear, and a company badge.¹⁰⁸

Dugas began welding at Delta in 1942. At 18—and a fast learner—she made her way up from \$.75 hour to \$2.25 an hour—"that was top pay for a qualified welder," she stated proudly.¹⁰⁹ The 7,000 employees of Delta worked three shifts around the clock and by 1943 cranked out a Liberty Ship every 67 days.¹¹⁰ Dugas welded on ships at Delta for two years. She and her sister joined two dozen other women from the St. Martinville area who lived and worked at the New Orleans ship yards together. Although the "big city" and "Navy boys" made her a little scared, especially leaving the factory yard for home late at night, she knew that her job made a difference. "Those ships we were building were important for the war," she commented. "Everybody contributed to that war."¹¹¹ She sent most of her paychecks home to help her family but kept a small war bond that she later used to buy a baby bed for her first child.

Mary Broussard Berard, a Cajun from St. Martin Parish, also joined the ranks of Rosie the Riveter's all volunteer female army. In 1944, she went to work for Consolidated Steel's airplane factory making Catalina Seaplanes for the U.S. Navy. The workers built the big "flying boats"—that carried 90 men—on the banks of Lake Pontchartrain. The company sent her to riveting school for six weeks where she learned to "buck the rivet" using various tools, such as the air gun, drill, and various kinds of buck bars. "We started with the skin of the plane," she began. "Then we put in the ribs and made little holes for the rivets. You'd come up and put your rivet in the hole, and put your scotch tape on there and you had a 'buck' on the back with a buck bar."¹¹² She and her partner took turns bucking the rivet and using the air gun and electric drill.

Berard, like many young Cajuns, quit high school to help the nation in its time of need. She had several brothers serving overseas, and her mother wanted her to stay behind and finish school, "but then I decided I wanted to go help out too...because my brothers were over there fighting for us [so]

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Beulah Dugas by Jason P. Theriot, February 2002, Theriot Collection.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 217.

¹¹¹ Beulah Dugas interview.

¹¹² Interview with Mary Broussard Berard by Jason P. Theriot, 3 October 2006.

why shouldn't I go and see what I can do." Berard started off riveting at \$.97 an hour and moved up to \$1.75 by the time she left Consolidated a year later. She didn't do it for the money, she said, "in fact I sent it all home."¹¹³

Consolidated Steel also built a factory in Orange, Texas. During the war, a large number of Cajuns migrated across the Sabine River to southeast Texas to build U.S. Navy destroyer escorts and steel barges. Lynn Breaux, a farmer from Iberia Parish, received a two-year deferment from Uncle Sam to weld at the ship yard in Orange.¹¹⁴ In *They Called It the War Effort*, author Louis Fairchild chronicles the experiences of dozens of shipyard workers who came to Orange from all parts of the region to build the war ships, including several from the Cajun Country. Benita Hebert, from Vermillion Parish, went to trade school in Crowley to learn sheet-metal work. After the schooling was completed, Hebert and some friends took a bus to Orange to join the war effort and build ships. When asked about how the men in the shipyard treated the women, she said, "They treated us good. They really did. They all had their tries, you know, but we were just part of the [group]. We all ate lunch together. We all did our thing."¹¹⁵ The 26,000 wartime employees at Consolidated in Orange, including many Cajuns, built more than 400 vessels for the U.S. Navy.¹¹⁶

One of the most impressive resumes of any Cajun in the ship building industry during World War II belongs to Ann Lafosse. In 1943, she left St. Martinville at 21 years of age to train as an electric welder at the Charles Chenault Welding School in Lake Charles. After five weeks of schooling she went to work for Consolidated Steel in Orange. She and handful of others drove in a car back and forth from Lake Charles to Orange every day for work. Following a stint with Consolidated, she then went to work for Higgins Industry in New Orleans as a tool pusher. "Everybody in St. Martinville went to New Orleans to work at Higgins Shipyard, a lot of 'um," Lafosse recalled. "In fact, the four-plex that we rented, we were on one floor and our [Berard] cousins occupied the other three sections."¹¹⁷ She also later worked at Delta Ship yards and recalled the launching of the great Liberty Ships, "It

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Lynn Breaux later joined the army engineers and carried a welding machine all across the Pacific welding together the steel mats that made up the mobile landing strips. For more on Lynn Breaux's World War II story, see Theriot, *The Pacific War*, 80-86.

¹¹⁵ Louis Fairchild, *They Called It the War Effort: Oral Histories from World War II, Orange, Texas* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1993), 183-84. Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

¹¹⁶ "USS Orleck – Historical Summary," <<http://www.ussorleck.org/Historical.asp>>

¹¹⁷ Interview with Anne Berard Lafosse by Jason P. Theriot, 20 April 2006.

was so exciting...big, big ship. That's when I was in the little house [tool shed] giving out the electric equipment...making good money."¹¹⁸

When asked to explain the overarching desire for women during World War II to leave the security of their parents and community and to take up a dirty job like welding or riveting in a dangerous and altogether new environment, Lafosse stated, "That was a rare thing...and I was brave to go." Emotionally, the war "shook every body," but her experience in the shipyards taught her, and thousands of Cajuns like her, that "women could do a man's work."¹¹⁹

In Morgan City, the Chicago Bridge and Iron Company—known for constructing large steel storage tanks, bridges, and water towers before the war—built some of the most unusual, yet vital, war vessels for the U.S. Navy Bureau of Yards and Docks: the Advanced Base Sectional Docks (ABSDs), or floating dry docks, designated as USS YFD. These massive structures, some of them 640 feet long, 120 feet wide, and 59 feet high, could lift a ship weighing several thousand tons right out of the water to receive repairs. During the war, welders and fitters at Chicago Bridge and Iron fabricated two large dry docks, dozens of smaller dry docks, and several sections of welded steel plating for other structures. The Navy deployed these floating dry docks to Galveston Bay, North Africa, and the Philippines to repair damaged ships.¹²⁰

The father of Morgan City, Charles Morgan, built a steamship company along the Gulf Coast in 1872. Apparently, Morgan himself financed the initial dredging of the local channel that stretched out to the Gulf. John Dilsaver, who worked at the Chicago Bridge and Iron ship yard during the war, offered a possible reason why the Navy chose this small coastal shrimping village for its dry dock construction: "Down the [Atchafalaya] river, not very far, maybe four miles, there's a bend in the river, and right off that bend in the river, we call that Fool's Point. There's a hole out there about a hundred and twenty-five feet deep, and that was the only place that was deep enough water to sink these dry docks once they were completed to test them."¹²¹

Chicago Bridge and Iron Company began operations in Morgan City in 1941 with an initial order for a 15,000 ton dry dock (the "Restorer") and later for an 18,000 ton dry dock (the "Repairer"). The ship yard also constructed sections for a 50,000 ton and a massive 100,000 ton dry dock later assembled and completed at the company's ship yard in California. Each

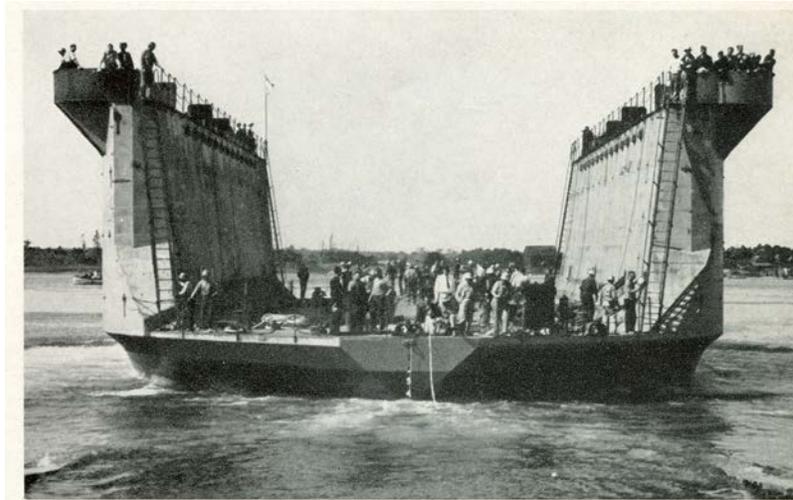
¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Interview with John and Catherine Dilsaver, OOGHP, 2003, MMS Study; Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 56.

¹²¹ Dilsaver interview, MMS Study.

finished vessel came equipped with self-powered diesel-electric engines for running the cranes, tools, welding machines, and air compressors. Welders fabricated the dry docks in sections held together by 632,000 feet of welding. To put in perspective, these mammoth steel structures equaled the size of a World War II era aircraft carrier.¹²²



This view shows a 1,000-ton AFD dry dock, as it was launched at Eureka, Calif. We also built AFDs and YFDs at Newburgh, N. Y.

Initially, the company employed about 600 people. Managers brought in some from the East Coast, but more than half came from the local community. By 1942, the Morgan City ship yard had 2,000 people on its payroll, including several women.¹²³ The company set up a welding school on site and advertised for openings throughout the immediate region. Cajuns from all corners of the rice fields, oil patch, swamps, and lakes came to Morgan City for an opportunity to learn a trade, to make a decent wage, and to help the war effort. Some arrived by bus, others by boat, but they all brought with them various skills, knowledge, and a work ethic they had acquired while growing up and living in south Louisiana.

Rayne native Edward Dupont had built steel tanks for the rice farmers and entered trade school before coming to work for Chicago Bridge and Iron in 1941. He and his brothers learned from their father the "just get at it" atti-

¹²² *The Bridge Works: A history of Chicago Bridge and Iron Company* (Chicago: The Modium Press, 1987), 104.

¹²³ "First Steel Floating Dry Dock Of Its Kind In American Launched Here," *Morgan City Review*, 29 May 1942, 1; *The Bridge Works*, 102.

tude about working and getting things done. Dupont welded for a year and a half on the mammoth steel structures. "The walls on it were 125 feet high," he recalled. "They would sink it and pull the ship up and lift it clean out of the water."¹²⁴

Clarence Pearce, a Cajun from the Atchafalaya Basin, lived on his family's houseboat in Morgan City before the war. After he finished school at the age of 16, he took a job at Chicago Bridge and Iron. The company's welding school provided Pearce the necessary training, and he worked there on the dry docks for two years. Hubert Chesson, a Cajun from Iberia Parish, had been laboring for Noble Drilling as a roughneck at T-Bayou near New Iberia. When the war broke out, he went to work at the ship yards in Orange, Texas, and then to Morgan City to build the dry docks. When he entered military service, he chose the Navy, because, as he said, "The two jobs that I had was for the Navy...building ships. I chose the Navy and stayed there thirty-four months."¹²⁵

In 1942, Clarence DuPlantis moved to Morgan City from Vermillion Parish. He went to the company's welding school for six weeks and then took his spot in the yard. When the unions propositioned him to join, DuPlantis turned down their offer, because, as he said, "Well, you had to pay dues, and...I was satisfied with my pay, so they say, 'Well, you going to be the first one gone.' But come to find out, I was the last one there....I helped them to pack and welded some braces to ship that stuff off." Working in the ship yard, however, did have its shortcomings, particularly when pulling the graveyard shift, as DuPlantis vividly recalled. "Man, you talk about cold," he said, referring to the strong north winds that blew through the yard in the winter time, "I even put my feet in paper bags trying to keep them warm."¹²⁶

Cecile Grow grew up in a three-bedroom camp boat in the Patterson swamp. Her mother died in 1941, leaving a half-crippled father—wounded in World War I—to take care of nine children. Her father took a night job at Chicago Bridge and Iron working as a guard. He traveled by boat to get to work every night. She explained, "It was too far for him to walk, so he'd take his rowboat and he'd ride in it and dock at the back of the place," where, apparently, the company reserved a special place to "park" its employees' boats, as many people from the bayous and marshes traveled by water. Growing up in the area, with a father who worked for the company, Grow recalled the celebration of the christening of one of the giant floating docks. "That was so exciting," she said. "All the bands were playing. It was

¹²⁴ Interview with Edward Dupont, OOGHP, 2001, MMS Study.

¹²⁵ Interview with Clarence Pearce, OOGHP, 2004, MMS Study; Interview with Hubert Chesson, OOGHP, 2001, MMS Study.

¹²⁶ Interview with Clarence DuPlantis, OOGHP, 2001, MMS Study.

a really nice thing that went on that time."¹²⁷ C. J. Christ noted that for the historic May 1942 launching of the "Restorer," the first dry dock of its kind built for the war effort, some 6,000 people gathered along Bayou Boeuf in Morgan City to see one of the largest floating structures ever constructed in south Louisiana at that time.¹²⁸

Hundreds of Cajuns from both sides of the Atchafalaya River moved to Morgan City to work at Chicago Bridge and Iron. Some of the hands already had welding experience; others learned the trade at the company's welding school. They lived with their families in bunk houses, house boats, or shanty one-bedroom apartments. They worked around the clock through humid summers and chilly winters cutting steel plates and burning rods to launch the finished vessels on time. The Navy needed these dry docks and Chicago Bridge and Iron needed its local labor pool to get the job done. As George Horton, company president, warned in 1941: "We are now at war. Our financial report is attached, but it does not mean much. If the war is lost, we shall not own the company; and if we win, changes in values before that happy time arrives will, I fear, make present day money look small."¹²⁹

By 1940, the Cajuns of south Louisiana remained one of the largest subgroups in America, still very much isolated geographically from the rest of the United States. The impact of Progressivism and New Deal political and social reforms—with support from Huey Long's administration—had affected the Cajun way of life, as did technological advances in communication, transportation, and the emerging oil industry, but had not yet mirrored the profound socioeconomic and cultural transformations that occurred throughout the country. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, four years of war, and the mobilization of the home front forever altered the traditional rural agricultural-based society in south Louisiana and the way of life for many Cajuns.

During the 1940s, the rice and sugarcane industries in rural south Louisiana experienced a major transformation. By 1945, technological advances, such as the introduction of large combines, rice dryers, mechanical tractors, and cane harvesters, finally modernized the once time-consuming and labor-intensive work that Cajun farmers had endured—and mastered—for generations.¹³⁰

On the American home front, everybody sacrificed and participated in rationing, collecting scrap metal, and buying war bonds, which provided war

¹²⁷ Interview with Ira and Cecile Grow, OOGHP, 2003, MMS Study.

¹²⁸ Christ, *World War II in the Gulf of Mexico*, 56.

¹²⁹ *The Bridge Works*, 99.

¹³⁰ The number of mechanical cane harvesters used in South Louisiana increased from 25 in 1940 to 400 at war's end. Mechanical harvesters cut 63 percent of the nearly 300,000 acres of sugarcane harvested in 1946; see Glenn R. Conrad and Ray F. Lucas, *White Gold: A Brief History of the Louisiana Sugar Industry, 1795-1955* (Lafayette, La., 1995), 69-70.

materials and raised money, but ever more important, helped develop a sense of national unity across ethnic and cultural boundaries. Initially, the Cajuns joined in the national campaign to collect old bed frames, conserve sugar, and save their pennies for war stamps as a way to associate with the rest of the country. But as their sons and daughters left home for a war overseas, and for industries in urban centers, communication with them proved difficult, these people felt more compelled to sacrifice at home so their family members serving had food, bullets, and bandages. The war touched everybody down the bayou and along the prairies; Cajuns felt the need to give more, not simply because America was at war, but because their loved ones were at war. Dot Broussard, a home demonstration agent in St. Martin Parish, instructed hundreds of women in the community about preserving and canning fresh and cooked foods for shipment to the soldiers overseas. Fried chicken became the most popular canned food. "I believe every boy in St. Martin Parish [serving in the military] must have got some of that stuff because they sure would thank me when they got back," she recalled.¹³¹

The "Americanization" phenomenon firmly planted itself in the Louisiana educational system during the 1940s. Moreover, the Cajuns of the World War II generation had much more education than any previous generation. They learned to speak English in school and learned about American history from the Anglo teachers. With war emerging, the educational goals and curriculums changed to instill more American values and place more emphasis on science and mathematics among the Cajuns. The Cajuns who fought in World War II left home well equipped to handle the challenges beset before them. Higher education allowed the young Cajuns to compete on a national level for important military positions, such as fighter pilots, like Jefferson DeBlanc and Bob Adams, and officers in Special Forces units, like retired Brigadier General Robert J. LeBlanc of Abbeville. Norris Breaux, a former SLI student, wrote, "Back in 1933 when I enrolled as a freshman at SLI, I never thought I'd be an instructor, why I could barely speak English! But here I am and the Navy thinks I'm a pretty good instructor."¹³²

The Cajuns on the home front experienced many changes throughout the war, most of which they could not have foreseen. The role of women, for example, changed dramatically. For the first time, Cajun women worked alongside their male counterparts—for equal pay—riveting and welding steel plate together in the factories. The Cajuns, by their very nature—resourceful, inventive, hard working, and reared on small family farms and in various outdoor environments—proved perhaps better prepared to meet these challenges than previously realized.

¹³¹ Interview with Dot Broussard by Jason P. Theriot, 5 September 2005, Theriot Collection.

¹³² Norris Breaux letter, Fletcher Papers, 62-4.

The war ushered in a new era of prosperity for the Cajuns. The *petite habitant's* way of life came to an end; no longer did subsistence farming dominate the economic landscape. A booming wartime economy, increased education, an improved standard of living, mechanization in the fields, and high-paying jobs in the oil field completed the transition of these French-speaking people from a generally poor, rural agricultural community to a "blue collar" society that pioneered the offshore oil and gas industry.

Cajuns on the home front labored for nearly five long years, planting, drilling, building, and sacrificing for the war effort. Along the way, they discovered new ideas, new techniques, and new outlets for change. The industrial enterprises that emerged, along with the modernization of agriculture and the advent of the steel fabrication industry to support the oil industry's move from the inland marshes to offshore, transformed the landscape of south Louisiana forever. As they had done in the past, the Cajun people adapted to the changes brought on by the realities of war. Along the way, the Cajuns lost some of their unique ethnic markers, but managed to maintain their core cultural values into the post-war decades.