

Opinions

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Battle of Duty Ferry, round two knockout

A conflict over access to the Boeuf Wildlife Management Area (WMA) from Duty Ferry Road came to a head over a locked gate, dubiously sanctioned I have been told, by a single previous member of the Police Jury. Regardless of whether the gate were properly authorized or not, the Police Jury voted seven to one to open the road for another .7 mile past the gate.

This action by the Police Jury gave hunters access on the Catahoula side of the WMA by way of two ATV trails previously cut off by the gate, thereby resolving a conflict with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF).

At least eight people spoke at the almost two hours long meeting. For once the people got their money's worth and Harold Sones showed himself more in control of the meeting than previously, using his gavel several times (that's what it's there for). When you keep the conversation going but still keep it orderly, more people can talk and be heard. It works out better for everyone than simply shutting down the discussion.

Those who favored the Police Jury's abandonment of Duty Ferry Road argued that the road was in

constant jeopardy from the river. Also, maintenance, as president Sones also pointed out, would be disproportionately expensive for the resident population served considering that only a couple of people lived on the road.

No doubt that is true, but Catahoula Parish has very few things of value in such abundance as it does hunting, fishing, and as one person pointed out, opportunities for bird watching and other outdoor wildlife related activities. At some point, Duty Ferry Road and other access routes could attract investment catering to the people willing to pay for relief from our growing cities. We don't want to cut off our economic nose to spite our face.

We, and by "we" I mean especially our governing bodies including the villages, School Board, Police Jury and so forth, should be planning proactively for what might help the parish to develop. The Sheriff took a big step in that direction by investing in the Catahoula Correctional Center. I think the School Board is looking ahead, too, by floating a vote to rebuild the old gym, cafeteria, lunch room, and class room building in Harrisonburg. Parents in Jonesville, Larto or Sicily Island may want to consider something

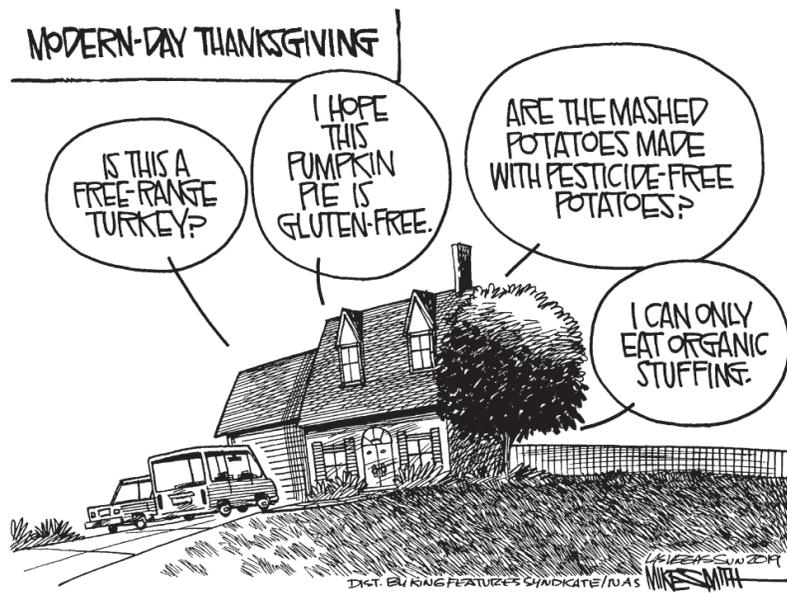
similar.

In any case, while conserving resources and being careful of the taxpayers' pocketbooks makes sense anytime, we are finding ourselves having to make increasingly difficult choices forced on us by the national, regional and local decline in rural populations.

A gentleman who introduced himself as the demographer (one who studies population growth and related statistics) for the state legislature informed the Police Jury that seven of nine wards in our parish required adjustment to their boundaries so that equal numbers of residents will be served by each Police Juror.

Considering that when the non-voting population of the parish is subtracted from the total count, not only do we have less than the official census of 8,906 people, but there are actually only 8,433 of us who aren't locked up.

We have one Police Juror for every 937 Catahoula residents not in prison. Natchitoches Parish does the same job with one representative (including the independently elected parish president) for every 6,252. Think about that.



Playing in a Cotton Gin

OSHA wasn't around when I was about 7 or 8 years old or they would have had a fit seeing me 'play' in the cotton gin in front of our house in Harrisonburg. I'm not sure if I'm better for it or not. Allowing my curiosity to exceed my sense of caution was something I did frequently and I've got the scars to show for it. As dangerous as it was around those machines, I never once hurt myself.

For that matter, I was never told to be careful or go home. But I'm sure every worker there knew to "keep an eye on Junior so he doesn't hurt himself."

At the same time and in spite of the obvious danger, I was having another 'adventure.' And that's something that must have had tremendous value because seventy years later I can remember it like it was yesterday.

Like all of my early adventures, I can smell the cotton, both as freshly picked, and after being freshly ginned. It smells different, yet you know its cotton. I'm sure a good cotton farmer or cotton ginner can even tell the quality of the cotton just from its smell.

While the title of this story is about 'playing,' it's really more about 'seeing' how cotton is ginned, bailed, and sent on to the big compress plant in Ferriday to press the bails even more.

But it's also about the people who brought their cotton to the gin, and the stores that sold them the things they needed or wanted. And about the town itself, as it came alive with excitement from before dawn until well after dark. Sometimes, the gin never stopped running for days on end. Everyone seemed happy.

So I'll start with what I remember most about this story – the people who plowed, planted, grew, chopped, picked, and brought their cotton to the gin. They came in mule-drawn wagons and huge custom-built cotton-carriers pulled by big trucks, Model-T's, rusty pickups, and sometimes even tractors. It seemed there was no limit as to how large or how small a load it was or what brought it there.

Mules didn't care, but horses and an

occasional cow, didn't like the gin-noise at all. A towel or shirt over their head usually settled them down.

Some folks would load their entire family in the wagon, all sitting atop the cotton they were there to sell. Mama or Grandma might be sitting in her rocking chair, looking for people she knew to wave to. I thought it was like a parade float with the queen sitting on her throne. I sure wish someone would have captured all this in a movie. It would be priceless. Now it's just priceless in my head.

They all got in line and waited their turn to pull under the big metal pipe that sucked every pod of cotton out and piped it into the machinery that combed the cotton fibers from the hard shells. Then the seeds were combed out and any remaining shell pieces removed in the final step before bailing.

Somewhere along the line the customer's load of cotton was weighed and paid for by the gin company. For some, that would be the first actual cash money they might have until next year. And most of it was already owed for the seed to plant this year's harvest.

Then they might stop at the bank and any of ten busy stores in town where they may have bought something on credit last year and needed to pay-up. No one liked to owe more than one crop's worth. Better to not owe anyone anything other than simple courtesy and respect.

If money was leftover, it might buy one of the young'uns a pair of brogan shoes or a dress or maybe a few yards of cloth to make a dress. And if they still had money leftover, they might buy a sack of flour or a pound of coffee as a treat. Then buy whatever amount of seed needed to do it all over again.

Growing cotton was not for lazy people, and certainly not for ambitious people who wanted to make a lot of money. But no amount of convincing would change the way some lived and worked hard to do what God intended for them to do.

As for me, I roamed freely through the gin

watching and absorbing everything with pure enjoyment, I would always end up climbing around on top of the big bales of cotton stacked on the deck out back waiting for the truck to take another load to Ferriday. From there, who knows where it would go to be made into a million things that cotton is used for.

I liked hearing that someone's trailer load of cotton may end up being in a shirt or socks, or maybe even a costume for a movie actor, or blouse for a queen in some foreign country.

Then, just like that, the gin would shut down until next year. The gates and doors would be closed and it would be just a big quiet tin-covered building sitting there waiting for another season.

The town would become less hurried and peaceful once again, and I would set out to find new adventures to keep my curiosity satisfied.

By: Leroy McMillin, Jr.

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