

FELIX VOORHIES

ACADIAN

REMINISCENCES : THE

TRUE STORY OF

EVANGELINE

Felix Voorhies

**Acadian Reminiscences : The
True Story of Evangeline**

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Acadian Reminiscences: The True Story of Evangeline

Introduction

Acadian Reminiscences, depicting the True Life of Evangeline, is a story centered about the life of the Acadians whose descendants are now residents of the Teche Country also known as the Land of Evangeline.

These people lived a pure and simple life with an unbounded devotion to their religion and with an unshakable faith in their God. Their love for one another is unparalleled in the annals of human history, to which may be attributed their fortitude and perseverance in their travels from Canada, upon being expelled by the British, to their chosen Land on the banks of Bayou Teche.

The author, Judge Felix Voorhies, relates the story as it was told to him by his grandmother. The story begins by telling of the native land of these Acadians and of the village of St. Gabriel from which they were driven when the French Province was surrendered to the British. It tells of members of the same families being separated and placed aboard different ships and some never to see each other again. The story tells of their landing in Maryland and after some time, hearing that members of theirs and other families having landed in Louisiana. This news brought encouragement and determination, in face of great dangers, to travel to the beautiful Land of the Teche.

The author was best able to present this story as it was handed down to him by word of mouth by his grandmother who adopted Evangeline when orphaned at an early age. The writer repeats the story in a simple narrative manner characteristic of the Acadians.

To this day travelers may visit the quaint town of St. Martinsville on the banks of Bayou Teche and pay their respects at the grave shrine of Evangeline and for a few fleeting moments live the life of these early settlers.

Because of the demands for this story and in tribute to Judge Felix Voorhies, my grandfather, a man of noble character, staunch patriotism and unerring judgment, I, together with all members of the Voorhies family, dedicate this book.

FELIX BIRNEY VOORHIES.

Chapter One

Acadian Reminiscences

With the true Story of Evangeline

It seems but yesterday, and yet sixty years have passed away since my boyhood. How fleeting is time, how swiftly does old age creep upon us with its infirmities. The curling smoke, dispelled by the passing wind, the water that glides with a babbling murmur in the gentle stream, leave as deep a mark of their passage as do the fleeting days of man.

I was twelve years old, and yet I can picture in my mind the noble simplicity of my father's house. The homes of our fathers were not showy, but their appearance was smiling and inviting; they had neither quaintness nor gaudiness, but were as grand in their simplicity as the boundless hospitality of their owners, for no people were more generous or hospitable than the Acadians who settled in the magnificent and poetical wilds of the Teche country.

My father's house stood on a sloping hill, in the center of a large yard, whose finely laid rows of china trees, interspersed with clusters of towering oaks, formed delightful vistas. On the declivity of the hill the orchard displayed its wealth of orange, of plum and peach trees. Farther on was the garden, teeming with vegetables of all kinds, sufficient for the need of a whole village.

I can yet picture that yard, with its hundreds of poultry, so full of life, running with flapping of wings and with noisy cacklings around my mother as she scattered the grain for them morning and evening.

At the foot of the hill, extending to the Vermillion Bayou, were the pasture grounds, where grazed the cattle, and where the bleating sheep followed, step by step, the stately ram with tinkling bell suspended to his neck. How clearly is that scenery pictured in my mind with its lights and shadows! Were I a painter I could even now portray with striking reality the minutest shadings and beauties of that landscape.

How strange that I should recall so vividly those things, while scenes that I have admired in my maturer years have been obliterated from my memory! Ah! the child's mind, like soft wax, is easily molded to sensations and impressions that never fade, while man's mind, blunted by the keenness of life's deceptions, can no longer receive and retain the imprints of those impressions and sensations.

If this be true, does not a kind Providence suggest to us, in this wise, the wisdom of molding the child's mind and intelligence with the fostering care of parental solicitude, that he may become an upright man, a good citizen and a reproachless husband and father.

My father was an Acadian, son of an Acadian, and proud of his ancestry. The term Acadian was, in those days, synonymous with honesty, hospitality and generosity. By his indomitable energy, my father had acquired a handsome fortune, and such was the simplicity of his manners, and such his frugality, that he lived, contented and happy, on his income.

Our family consisted of my father and mother, of three children, and of my grandmother, a centenarian, whose clear and lucid memory contained a wealthy mine of historical facts that an antiquarian or chronicler would have been proud to possess.

In the cold winter days the family assembled in the hall, where a goodly fire blazed on the hearth, and while the wind whistled outside, our grandmother, an exile from Acadia, would relate to us the stirring scenes she had witnessed when her people were driven from their homes by the British, their sufferings during their long pilgrimage overland from Maryland to the wilds of Louisiana, the dangers that beset them on their long journey through endless forests, along the precipitous banks of

rivers too deep to be forded, among hostile Indians, that followed them stealthily, like wolves, day and night, ever ready to pounce upon them and massacre them.

And as she spoke, we drew closer to her, and grouped around her and stirred not, lest we lose one of her words.

When she spoke of Acadia, her face brightened, her eyes beamed with a strange brilliancy, and she kept us spellbound, so eloquent and yet so sad were her words, and then tears trickled down her aged cheeks and her voice trembled with emotion. Under our father's roof she lacked none of the comforts of life. We knew that her children vied with each other to please her, and we wondered why it was that she seemed to be sad and unhappy. We were then mere children and knew nothing of the human heart, grim experience had not taught us its sorrowful lessons, and we knew not that a remembrance has often the bitterness of gall, and that tears alone will wash away that bitterness.

She sat in her rocking chair, with hands clasped on her knees, her body leaning slightly forward, her hair, silvered over by age, could be seen under the lace of her cap, her dress was neat and tasteful, for she always took pride in her personal appearance.

She called us "petiots" meaning "little ones," and she took pleasure in conversing with us. My father remonstrated with her because she fondled us too much. "Mother," he would say, "you spoil the children," but she heeded not his words and fondled us the more. These details are interesting to none but myself, and I dwell, perhaps, too long upon them. Alas! I am an old man, reviewing the joys and sorrows of my boyhood, and it seems to me that I have become once more a little child when I speak of days gone by, and when I recall the memory of those I loved so well and who are no more.

I shall now attempt to repeat the story of my grandmother's misfortunes, and as she has related it to us time and again.

Chapter Two

My Grandmother's Narrative

She Depicts Acadian Manners and Customs

“Petiotics,” she said, “my native land is situated far, far away, up north, and you would have to walk during many months to reach it; you would have to cross rivers deep and wide, go over mountains looming up thousands of feet, and beneath impending rocks, shadowing yawning valleys; you would have to travel day and night, in endless forests, among hostile Indians, seeking an opportunity to waylay and murder you.

“My native land is called Acadia. It is a cold and desolate region during winter, and snow covers the ground during several months of the year. It is rocky, and huge and rugged stones lie strewn over the surface of the ground in many places, and one must struggle hard for a livelihood there, especially with the poor and meagre tools possessed by my people. My country is not like yours, diversified by rolling and gentle hills, covered the year round with a thick carpet of green grass, and where every plant sprouts up and grows to maturity as if by magic, and where one may enrich himself easily, provided he fears God and is laborious and economical. Yet I grieve for my native land, with its rocks and snows, because I have left there a part of my heart in the graves of those I loved so well and who sleep under its sod.”

And as she spoke thus, her eyes streamed with tears and emotion choked her utterance.

“I have promised to give you an insight into the manners and customs of your Acadian ancestors, and to tell you how it was that we left our country as exiles to emigrate to Louisiana. I now keep my promise, and will relate to you all that I know of our sad history:

“You must know, petiotics, that less than a hundred years ago Acadia was a French Province, whose people lived contented and happy. The king of France sent brave officers to govern the province, and these officers treated us with the greatest kindness; they were our arbiters and adjusted all our differences, and so equitable were their decisions, that they proved satisfactory to all. Is it strange, then, that being thus situated we prospered and lived contented and happy? Little did we then dream of what cruel fate had in store for us.

“Our manner of living in Acadia was peculiar, the people forming, as it were, one single family. The province was divided into districts inhabited by a certain number of families, among which the government parceled out the land in tracts sufficiently large for their needs. Those families grouping together formed small villages, or posts, under the administration of commandants. No one was allowed to lead a life of idleness, or to be a worthless member of the province. The child worked as soon as he was old enough to do so, and he worked until old age unfitted him for toil. The men tended the flocks and tilled the land, and while they plowed the fields, the boys followed them step by step, goading on the work-oxen. The wives and daughters attended to the household work, and spun the wool and cotton which they wove and manufactured into cloth with which to clothe the family. The old people not over active and strong, like your grandmother,” she would add with a smile, “together with the infirm and invalids, braided the straw with which we manufactured our hats; so that you see, petiotics, we had no drones, no useless loungers in our villages, and every one lived the better for it.

“The land allotted to each district was divided into two unequal parts; the larger portion was set apart as the tillage ground, and then parceled out among the different families; and yet the clashing of interests, resulting from that community of rights, never stirred up any contentions among your Acadian ancestors.

“Although poor, they were honest and industrious, and they lived contented with what little they had, without envying their neighbors, and how could it be otherwise? If any one was unable to do his field work because of illness, or of some other misfortune, his neighbors flew to his assistance, and it required but a few days work, with their combined efforts to weed his field and save his crop.

“Thus it was that, incited by noble and generous feeling, the inhabitants of the province seemed to form one single family, and not a community composed of separate families.

“These details, petiots, are tedious to you, and you would rather that I should tell you stories more amusing and captivating.”

“No, grandmother, we feel more and more interested in your narrative. Speak to us of Acadia, your native land, which we already love for your sake.”

“Petiots,” she said, “I love my Acadia, and you will learn to love it also, when you shall have been made acquainted with the worth of its honest and noble inhabitants; besides,” added she, with a sad smile, “the gloomy and sombre part of my story remains to be told. When you shall have listened to it, you will then understand why it is that I feel sad and weep, when the remembrances of the past come crowding in my heart. But to resume, contiguous to the village ground lay the pasture grounds, well fenced in, and which were known as the common. In these grounds, the cattle of the colonists were kept, and thus secured in that safe enclosure, our herds increased every year. Thus you see, petiots, we lacked none of the comforts of life, and although not wealthy, we were not in want, as our wishes were few and easily satisfied.

“Plainness and simplicity of manners are the mainsprings of happiness, and he that wishes for what he may never have or acquire, must be miserable, indeed, and worthy of pity. Alas! that this simplicity of our Acadian manners should have already degenerated into extravagance and folly! Ah! the Acadians are losing, by degrees, the remembrance of the traditions and customs of the mother country, the love of gold has implanted itself in their hearts, and this will bring no happiness to them. Ere you live to be as old as I,” she would say shaking her head mournfully, “you will find out that your grandmother is right in her prediction.

“In Acadia, as we prized temperance, sobriety and simplicity of manners more than riches, early marriages were highly favored. Early marriages foster the virtues which give to man the only true happiness, and from which he derives health and longevity.

“No obstacle was thrown in the way of a loving couple who desired to marry. The lover accepted by the maiden obtained the ready consent of the parents, and no one dreamed of inquiring whether the lover was a man of means, or whether the destined bride brought a handsome dowry, as we are wont to do nowadays. Their mutual choice proved satisfactory to all, and, indeed, who better than they could mate their hearts, when they alone were staking their happiness on the venture? and, besides, it is not often that marriages founded on mutual love turn out badly.

“The bans were published in the village church, and the old curate, after admonishing them of the sacredness of the tie that bound them forever, blessed their union, while the holy sacrifice of mass was being said. Petiots, it is useless for me to describe the marriage ceremony and the rejoicings attending the nuptials, as you have witnessed the like here, but I will speak to you of an old Acadian custom which prevails no more among us, one which we no longer observe.

“As soon as the marriage of a young couple was determined, the men of the village, after having built a cozy little home for them, cleared and planted the land parceled out to them; and while they so generously extended their aid and assistance, the women were not laggards in their kindness to the bride. To her they made presents of what they deemed most necessary for the comfort and utility of her household, and all this was done and given with honest and willing hearts.

“Everything was orderly and neat in the home of the happy couple, and after the marriage ceremony in the church and the wedding feast at the home of the bride’s father, the happy couple were escorted to their new home by the young men and the young maidens of the village. How genial

was the joy that warmed our hearts and brightened our souls on these occasions; how noisy and light the gaiety of the young people; how unalloyed their merriment and happiness!”

Chapter Three

Rumors of War Disturb the Peace and Quiet

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