

Mon Louis Island

By Blair Bateman

The car is packed, the kids rounded up and, at last, the family is under way for a few days vacation at Dauphin Island, Alabama. About twenty miles from Mobile on the west side of the bay, traveling south on Dauphin Island Parkway, we pass Pelican Reef Restaurant and Marina on the left, and cross the East Fowl River bridge onto Mon Louis Island. Every day, both Mobilians and tourists make this drive and never realize the rich historical significance of the area.

While some will say that Mon Louis is not a real island, it is, indeed, surrounded by water on all sides. Approximately two miles wide and six miles long, it is bounded by Fowl River on the north and west, Mobile Bay on the east, and the Mississippi Sound on the south.

Over 300 years ago, in January of 1699, two brothers, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville and Jean Baptists Le Moyne de Bienville, explored the west side of Mobile Bay for France. Eleven years later, on November 12, 1710, Grosse Pointe, as it was then called, was given as a land grant to Nicholas Baudin, Sieur de Miragouane, who had recently arrived from Mont Louis (near Tours), France. His settlement was located about a league (three miles) below *Rivière aux Poules* (Fowl River), near the northern end of the island, and it became known as Miragouane; the island itself became Mon Louis Island, after his native home.

Before it was recognized as United States territory, the area had been ruled by France, England and Spain. Over the years, the names of streets, some landmarks, and even families who have lived there for centuries, have changed spelling.

Mon Louis became a thriving community, partly because of its excellent location. Whites, Blacks and Creoles lived and worked together on this small island which lay between Mobile and the city's early home port at Dauphin Island.

Some families raised cattle; others had orchards or grew produce. Fishing, crabbing and oystering brought income, and provided food for the families, for fish and seafood were abundant. Heavily laden cast nets were pulled in, and it was not uncommon to throw in a line and hook a tarpon. Neighbors and friends were happy to share large catches.

One early and very successful business was the Mobile Shipyard, located on the north tip of Mon Luis Island, at the mouth of East Fowl River on Mobile Bay. For more than 100 years the Collins family owned and operated the shipyard, building the finest sea-going vessels operating from the northern Gulf to the Florida Keys. They built everything from pleasure boats to fishing vessels, cutting the cypress trees themselves, and crafting the vessels through the years with the same tools and methods they had originally used. One of their more memorable projects was the building of a 50-foot

schooner for the Confederate Army which was used to run the Yankee blockade of Mobile Bay.

Today, after the pounding and flooding of hurricanes through the years, the landscape has altered in many ways; however, Mobile Seafood currently holds and repairs its vessels in the original Collins family's Shipyard. And, continuing the area's dependence on seafood, new farming beds for oysters have been planted to assure abundant harvests in safe and protected waters.

Other changes are, perhaps, a mixed blessing. Once several beach accesses afforded families places for relaxation and enjoyment, and vendor shacks provided sandwiches, and cold drinks. Today, we are a more mobile society, and Gulf Shores and Orange Beach are within ready reach. There is only one beach access now, Mobile County Bayfront Park, near the southern end of the Mon Louis Island--a beach with relatively few visitors.

Another change is the increased development of the island. The long, lonely stretch of road on the way to Dauphin Island is now a busy thoroughfare, providing access to the increased commercial development and the many new homes--homes built, for the most part, along the bay and Fowl River.

With this growth comes, inevitably, degradation of the environment. Bulkheads seal off wetlands (the fish and seafood "nurseries), and actually cause erosion of adjacent property; wakes from high-speed boats and jet skis are another major source of damage. Some topographic changes are inevitable, others are not.

Next time you head out with the family for Dauphin Island and cross over the bridge onto Mon Louis Island, remember the rich history and traditions of the area. Think of the original families whose descendents still live in the area, and think of those whose livelihood still depends on clean waters for fishing, shrimping, oystering and crabbing.