

MONLEZUNS; mid 1850's; Jefferson Davis Parish, Louisiana
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*****MONLEZUNS

HD: Generations of Monlezuns have made their mark

When the Monlezuns left the Basque country of southern France near the Pyrenees in the mid-1850s, France was undergoing almost constant revolution from Napoleon's time through the Franco-Prussian War and was still ruled by monarchs.

So, the Monlezuns left their home near the Forest of Monlezun and headed for the land of freedom. Among them was a young boy, Dominique Monlezun (sometimes spelled Moalysin, Moleson, Molisier) the ancestor of a large family in Jefferson Davis and Calcasieu parishes.

About the same time, from the Pyrenees, came a young lady named Louise Thomasine Peterson.

The two families landed in New Orleans in 1866 but soon made their way to the southwestern section of Louisiana, where Louise Thomasine Peterson and Dominique Monlezun were married in 1874 in a Lafayette church. The couple settled near the Vermilion Parish line in Jeff Davis, across from present-day Lake Arthur. They had five children, Josephine, Joachim, Emile, Theodore and Antoine.

The four sons, like their father, were carpenters and built many of the early Lake Arthur homes which are still standing. They build their own homes in a row on Iowa Street.

Josephine Monlezun became Mrs. John Murray and moved to Westlake. They Murrays had five children, Mrs. Lillian Burlon of Mission, Texas, and four others, Wilma Fruge, Pat, Dewitt and Quentus, all of whom are deceased. Grandson Bobby Murray lives in Westlake.

Dominique's oldest son, Joachim, married Adele Boutte and they had five children, Rita Monlezun Broussard of Lake Arthur, Enez Marx of Crowley, and three now deceased, Alice Gaithe, William Monlezun and Mary Broussard. Three grandchildren, all of Lake Charles, are Patrick Broussard, Irene Coco and Catherine Singer. Two others are Sister Lurline of New Orleans and Sister Magdalen of New Hampshire, both Marionites of the Holy Cross. Adele Harrington of Beaumont is another grandchild.

The next son, Emile, married Adeline and had four children, Mrs. Freeman (Louise) Bertrand of Lake Arthur, Eddy Monlezun of Beaumont, Lucy St. Martin of Lafayette and Claude, deceased.

The third son, Theodore, and his wife Blanche lived in Lake Arthur and had four children J.T. Monlezun Jr. and, Mrs. Herbert (Lily Mae) Riquelmy, both of Lake Arthur; Louis Monlezun of Lake Charles and Milton Monlezun, deceased.

The last son, Antoine Monlezun, married Victoria Broussard, granddaughter of Eugene Miller of Grand Chenier. Their grandchildren (children of Lee J. Monlezun Sr.) are Dominique of Lake Arthur; Robert, a draftsman with Marathon Oil in Alaska, and six others, all of Lake Charles, Dr. Lee J. Monlezun Jr., Dr. Charles J. Monlezun, Mrs. Hector (Bernadette) Ponton, Mrs. Victor (Constance) Darbonne, Malcolm Monlezun and Mrs. Pierre (Ione) Broussard. Two other children, Alvin and Veronica drowned in 1965.

Antoine, helped build the first church in Lake Arthur, Our Lady of the Lake, including the tall steeple. He climbed to the top and painted it. He also built his home before he married Victoria Broussard.

Dr. Lee J. Monlezun Jr. has just remodeled that home. "It was built almost 100 years ago," he says, "and looking at the cypress it was built from, the tremendous size, it boggles the mind to think of how he got it out of the swamps. He had to cut down a tree, trim it into a log and, using horses and slides, pull it from the swamp. He used what he called a "passe par toute" saw, meaning roughly, 'it will pass through anything.'" Grandpa Monlezun had 15 acres of swampland where he cut the cypress trees. Some of the boards are as much as 16 inches across."

Malcolm J. Monlezun, a Lake Charles anesthetist, recalls that his grandfather Antoine, in addition to being a carpenter had several other businesses. "He drove an old Chevrolet truck on which he carried dynamite that he bought and sold to be used to blow up stumps. He also built vaults for graves and then made the crosses on many of the graves in St. Anthony Cemetery in Lake Arthur." Another grandson, Dr. Charles Monlezun of the Institute of Behavioral and Biofeedback Therapy in Lake Charles, is often called family historian. "My grandparents, Victoria and Antoine, had two sons in World War II. Clyde Monlezun was in the army and later retired as an army Lt. Colonel in Sequin, Texas. Another son, Alvin, who graduated from LSU at 21 during World War II with a degree in Commerce, plus ROTC experience, went right into the army ... he was killed in his foxhole in Belgium during the first part of the Battle of the Bulge on Oct. 10, 1944, before the push forward to Bastogne and is buried in Belgium."

A fourth sibling was Beulah Pitts, who resided in Dallas, where her two sons live today.

Victoria Broussard Monlezun lived to be nearly 106 years old and gave several taped interviews during the last few years of her life. One interview in McNeese State University archives, conducted by Mrs. Lloyd Barras, gives a clear picture of her life as a child.

She was born in and Grand Chenier and told how she and friends would pull Spanish moss from trees and make monster costumes with it. "Victoria was still gardening, canning and keeping house until

she was 103. She grew sassafras roots and other ''leaves'' in her yard for colds and she drank the water that she boiled her home-grown okra in to ''keep the blood moving smoothly through the vessels.''

It was during a taped interview by her grandchildren that the 104-year-old Victoria suddenly said, ''I buried my wedding dress.'' Everyone was shocked. ''Grandma, you didn't bury your wedding dress!'' ''Yes,'' she said. ''I did. It was being eaten up by moths and there was no use keeping it. So Antoine and I put it in a can and buried it in the back yard.''

The Monlezuns are a musical family. Grandmother Victoria brought a musical inheritance from her Broussard ancestors, of which Doug Kershaw and his brothers are also descendants.

When her son Lee J. Sr. graduated in 1936 from Lake Arthur High, where his voice teacher was Elmo Sonnier from Scott, he was auditioned and granted a music scholarship at LSU. For the audition he sang ''Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes'' and ''Little Man, You've Had A Busy Day.'' However, after one semester he realized he couldn't make a good living from music so he came home.

''When I got home, Papa said, 'You are going to school!'''' he said. ''So the very same day he took me to Lake Charles and we went to Vincent Business College. Papa asked the owner, Lawrence Vincent, if he could teach me something about business. Mr. Vincent said, 'Sure.' Then Papa asked him how much. '\$165 for a nine-month course.' So Papa gave Mr. Vincent \$165 and I went to business school for the next nine months.''

During those school days he earned money by plucking chickens at the Capital Store with Jesse Knowles.

Apparently the business education paid off because he owned a number of businesses in Lake Arthur, including a bulk fuel plant, a sportsman's center, tire store, wrecker business, hardware store, insurance agency, income tax service and bulk butane delivery.

Today business interests are carried on by his son, Dominique J. Monlezun Sr., owner of Lake Arthur Butane Company. He has a two-year-old son Dominique and another son Christian.

Through the years the family has never lost the love of music. They still gather to sing and play for banquets, fund raisers, festivals and special days. Members play various instruments including piano, organ, ukelele, washboard, spoons, autoharp, tambourine, accordion, banjo and guitar.

One daughter, Constance Darbonne, is a registered nurse and director of Home Health-Hospice of Lake Charles Memorial Hospital. She married Victor Darbonne, also a musician. They made an album ''September 1st'' with Pat Keating and Phil Smathers. Constance recalls that her father Lee often sang opera arias while making butane deliveries in his truck.

''And my mother, Gertrude Hensgens Monlezun, who lives in Lake Arthur,

was also from a musical family," she said. "She and her brother, C.L. Hensgens, played musical instruments for parties and dances when they were growing up in Roberts Cove. She also sang with Happy Fats, an early French group. But her daddy wouldn't let her make a record."

Bernadette Monlezun Ponton, Network Resource Coordinator for the Ministries of Our Lady Queen of Heaven Parish says, "I remember when I was 15 and Constance was 12, our parents sent us on a train to New York to be on the 'Ted Mack Amateur Hour.' He sent our brother, Lee J. Jr. who was 17, along to act as our guardian. We didn't win but we had a great trip."

The young Monlezun daughter, Ione Broussard, a Lake Charles real estate agent, remembers singing for Lawrence Welk in a talent contest.

"I was attending McNeese at the time," she says, "and my father heard about the contest, so he came looking for me. I was out taking care of some horses for Mrs. Joe (Margaret) Lowenthal, when he found me and suggested I go try out. "I always carried my guitar in my truck, so I rushed down to the Civic Center and entered the contest. I sang John Denver's yodeling song. And I won the contest. So I performed on stage as Lawrence Welk's Champagne Lady. Later when Welk's Country and Western Group came on stage, they asked me if I could sing 'Jambalaya.' I told them I could not only sing it, but I also ate it. So they asked me to sing it with them. Later Mr. Welk invited the whole Monlezun family to come backstage to meet him, and he invited me to go on tour with him. But Pierre Broussard had just asked me to marry him, and I decided that was more important."

It's been a long time since that first young Monlezun, Dominique, from France's Basque country, settled in Louisiana. But those years have seen his descendants become a vital part of Lake Arthur and of Jeff Davis and surrounding parishes. And they are still providing a strong, respectable heritage for future generations.