

## Oakland/Burmuda in the Civil War

The election of Abraham Lincoln as the nation's sixteenth President in November 1860 on a platform opposing the expansion of slavery was the last straw for the South's "fire-eaters." Within days, South Carolina called a convention to consider secession and, on December 20 and by a vote of 169-0, became the first of the southern states to secede from the Union. In January, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana followed suit, as did Texas on February 1. By the time Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4, 1861, the Confederate States of America was a reality; with the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, the Civil War began.

Emmanuel Prud'homme left school in Georgetown shortly after Lincoln's inauguration, but his brother Alphonse continued his work with the railroad until after Fort Sumter when he, too, returned home to Bermuda. By May, both had enlisted in the Confederate Army. As her brothers left for war, Henriette returned to Bermuda from New Orleans to be with her father. Phanor's step-daughter and niece, Desiree, also came back to Bermuda in 1861 after her husband, Emile LaCoul, joined the army.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Civil War**

After Fort Sumter, western and northern buyers quickly

39. Emil LaCoul's plantation, now known as Laura Plantation, was at Vacherie in the southeastern part of the state. Coincidentally, this was the same plantation that had once been owned by Phillippe Guillaume Benjamin Gilles Duparc, whose wife Anna "Nanette" Prud'homme was Phanor's aunt.

withdrew from the cotton market, although New Orleans factors continued to buy for a while longer. It was a banner year for cotton production, but by year's end, one Louisiana planter lamented that "all commercial interests are entirely destroyed" by the Federal blockade of Southern ports. "Cotton and sugar cannot be sold."<sup>40</sup> A few of the more optimistic planters continued to plant cotton in 1862, and some may even have managed to export their crop overland to the Mexican port at Matagorda until that avenue, too, was closed by the Union blockade. The Federal occupation of New Orleans in April 1862 and of Baton Rouge a short time later forced removal of the state's capital to Alexandria, and ensured that cotton would be worthless to Confederate planters in Louisiana for the duration of the war. As a result, the Prud'hommes and most of the rest of the planters along Cane River had little incentive to continue planting cotton and, instead, focused their efforts on growing corn and other products that could help supply the Confederate armies.

On May 1, 1861, following speeches and a special service at the cathedral, Alphonse Prud'homme left Natchitoches with one of the local companies of volunteer soldiers, the "Pelican Rangers." By June, the company had been divided and they were at Camp Poteau in Arkansas. Alphonse's brother-in-law Winter Wood Brazzealle was captain of Prud'homme Rangers No. 1, and serving with them were Alphonse's cousin Lestan Prud'homme and Winter Brazzealle's younger brother Baker Blount Brazzealle, who would marry Alphonse's younger sister Henriette in 1865.<sup>41</sup>

40. Malone, p. 68.

The Prud'hommes and Brazzealles did not have to wait long for action. By August they were in Missouri under the command of Brig. Gen. Ben McCulloch and, on the tenth, engaged a Union army under Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon in a fierce battle at Wilson's Creek. It was a Confederate victory, but there were over 2,300 casualties on both sides, among them Alphonse's friend and cousin Placide Bossier. "I could not stay to see him die;" Alphonse wrote home; "... I cut a large lock of his hair . . . I have also his prayer book." His brother-in-law Winter was, he also wrote, "cool as a cucumber, cautioning his men constantly to be steady." Alphonse himself was complimented by his commanding officer who noted that he was "reported to have cheered and acted with coolness."<sup>42</sup>

Alphonse was promoted to sergeant after Wilson's Creek and, in early March 1862, was in the thick of battle again as a Confederate army under Maj. Gen. Earl van Dorn engaged the Union Army of the Southwest at the Battle of Pea Ridge in Benton County, Arkansas. This time, Alphonse and the Confederates were not so lucky; as the three-day battle ended, he found himself wounded and a prisoner of war. He managed to escape ten days later but was so badly wounded that he was discharged and sent home. In addition, his one-year tenure of enlistment was up in April, and so he spent the rest of the spring and early summer recuperating at Bermuda.<sup>43</sup>

41. Breedlove, pp. 24-25.

42. Breedlove, p. 27.

43. Fortier, no page numbers.

Hopes for a brief conflict and a certain Confederate victory had faded quickly and, with the fall of New Orleans in April 1862, evaporated altogether. Alphonse's younger brother Emmanuel was also on active duty, and back home their father was deeply engaged in supporting the Confederate war effort. Continuing to manage his plantation, he was in routine contact with the Confederate government and constantly sending food and other supplies to the Confederate commissary as well as to his own friends and relatives. With the ever-tightening Union blockade of Southern ports, such basics as soap, candles, and cloth were increasingly in short supply, and Phanor Prud'homme was active in reviving some of the home industry that could supply those goods. Spinning and weaving were especially important, and Phanor organized and helped supply spinners and weavers on his own plantation as well as throughout the parish.<sup>44</sup>

By July 1862, Alphonse Prud'homme had recovered from his injuries and joined his brother-in-law Winter Brazzealle in recruiting a battalion of five companies of cavalry. Organized on September 21, 1862, the Second Louisiana Cavalry was led by Colonel W G. Vincent, Lieutenant Colonel James McWaters, Major Winter Brazzealle, and Alphonse Prud'homme as adjutant. By October, Phanor Prud'homme was again alone at Bermuda, worrying for both of his sons as well as his son-in-law.

By the spring of 1863, the Union armies were beginning

44. Breedlove, p. 32.

to expand their control beyond the southern parishes around New Orleans that they had occupied the previous year. On April 14, Alphonse's unit was engaged in a fierce battle at Irish Bend in St. Mary's Parish, which resulted in a Union victory and opened the way for Federal occupation of western Louisiana. The battle also left Alphonse severely wounded for a second time, although this time he escaped capture. Again, he was forced to return home to recuperate.

In May 1863, Federal troops occupied Alexandria, the temporary state capital after the fall of New Orleans, and state officials were forced to flee again, this time to Shreveport. Recovered from his wounds, Alphonse left Bermuda in June to rejoin his command and resume his duties as adjutant.<sup>45</sup> Anticipating imminent invasion, Phanor and others along the Red River were desperately making arrangements to save what they could, some even going so far as to send their slaves and livestock to Texas. After his long-time overseer Seneca Pace left to join the army in 1862, Phanor appears to have had an increasingly difficult time in securing the services of a competent overseer. In May 1862, he engaged a Mr. Phelps as overseer, but he was gone in October. In December Prud'homme hired P. T. McNeely, but for unknown reasons, McNeely was let go in August 1863. Subsequent overseers were equally short-lived.<sup>46</sup>

45. An adjutant is an army staff officer who helps the commanding officer by handling correspondence, distributing orders, etc.

46. Breedlove, pp. 99-100; Thomas, p. 47.

Meanwhile, Phanor's youngest son Emmanuel was a member of the Twenty-sixth Louisiana Regiment of Lt. General John C. Pemberton's army at Vicksburg. In May 1863, General Ulysses S. Grant's armies converged on the city, which was the last obstacle to full Federal control of the Mississippi River. On May 22, Grant began a terrible siege and bombardment of Vicksburg that went on for six weeks before Pemberton finally surrendered the city on July 4, 1863. With the fall of Port Hudson a few days later, Federal forces had complete control of the Mississippi, effectively splitting the Confederacy in half. Among the thirty thousand Confederate soldiers who surrendered at Vicksburg was Emmanuel Prud'homme; but he was soon paroled, ultimately rejoining the Confederate army and serving until the end of the war.<sup>47</sup>

Through the early years of the war, conquest of northwest Louisiana was considered a low priority for the Union armies; but, with northern industry suffering from want of cotton, priorities changed in 1863. By the spring of 1864, forty-five thousand Federal troops were massed at Alexandria, awaiting the rains that would make the Red River navigable and allow conquest of the upper reaches of the valley and confiscation of its rich store of cotton. All over upper Louisiana, massive amounts of cotton had built up in warehouses as the Federal blockade of Southern ports shut down the cotton export market. Over twelve thousand bales were reported in the Natchitoches area alone, and in order to prevent a potentially-valuable commodity from falling into enemy hands, Confederate army

47. Mills, p. 77.

officers executed a two-year-old proclamation from the Governor that ordered "the destruction of all cotton within the limits of Louisiana that is in danger of falling into the hands of the enemy;" By the time Federal forces under Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Banks moved out of Alexandria in late March 1864, the banks of Cane River were already ablaze with burning cotton. As the Federal troops ascended the valley in early April, cotton continued to burn; and one Confederate soldier remembered:

From the 24-Mile Ferry [below Cloutierville] up to the Town of Natchitoches, it looked like everything was on fire, every plantation had fire and smoke. Cotton was burning. Cotton gins and gin houses were burning. And it seemed to be a retreat of 24 miles through the fire and smoke of burning cotton and cotton houses and even when we arrived at Natchitoches, there was cotton burning on the opposite bank of the river.<sup>48</sup>

Although many residents remembered wanton destruction by Federal troops, the goal remained destruction of cotton itself and not necessarily the means of its production. At least officially, destruction of private property was to be avoided, as Federal commanders made clear in orders issued in late March:

In relation to cotton gins where there are but Small lots of cotton and not enough time to Remove this, the cotton will not be fired, but

48. Sharon Sholars Brown, editor, "Papers of the Fifth Grand Reunion of the Descendants of the Founders of Natchitoches" (Conference held 27-28 July 1984, Northwestern State University), p. 32, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University of Louisiana.

in all such cases every effort should be made to roll the cotton out. But where there is cotton in any quantity in the gin-houses, and no opportunity to remove it, it must be burned....You will also refrain from burning where the gin houses connect with dwellings or other expensive range of buildings.<sup>49</sup>

In April, battles at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, northwest of Natchitoches, resulted in a Federal defeat and "a frantic retreat ... a relentless 30-hour-long forced march" that took the Federal troops back down Cane River. On this march, there was widespread looting and burning of civilian property, including the entire town of Grand Ecore, above Natchitoches.

One Confederate general remembered

the destruction of this country by the enemy exceeds anything in history. For many miles every dwelling house, every Negro cabin, every cotton gin, every corn crib, and even chicken houses have been burned to the ground.<sup>50</sup>

That assessment of the extent of destruction that occurred during the Red River campaign may have been overstated; even so, the Prud'hommes' losses were heavy. The Confederates (or Prud'homme himself) had burned nine hundred bales of cotton at Bermuda, and the steam-powered gin that Phanor had built in 1860 was destroyed by Federal

49. Testimony of F. L. Grappe in Charles C. Bertrand v. United States, Case #345, French and American Claims commission, microfilm, p. 33, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University of Louisiana.

50. Brown, "Papers of the Grand Reunion," p. 34.

troops.<sup>51</sup> Still, although the Hertzogs lost their house at Magnolia, the Big House at Bermuda was not burned nor were Beau Fort, Cherokee, and a number of the other Cane River houses. Yankee soldiers apparently were in the Prud'hommes' house, however, and according to family legend slashed the portrait of Lise Prud'homme in the parlor.<sup>52</sup> Family tradition also holds that the slaves moved all of the furniture out of the big house, which they expected to be destroyed by Union soldiers, and begged the soldiers not to fire the dwelling. Another family story tells that Phanor was bedridden in the spring of 1864 and, for that reason, the house was not burned.<sup>53</sup> Even more romantic is the story that Phanor Prud'homme defied Gen. Banks' troops with a shotgun, thereby saving his house from destruction.<sup>54</sup> Whatever the reason, the Prud'hommes' house was still standing when the Federal troops departed. For Bermuda and Natchitoches Parish, the war was mostly over.

In July 1864, Lt. Alphonse Prud'homme was mustered out of the army on account of the severe wounds he had received and from which he had never fully recovered. That gave him the opportunity to continue his courtship of Ambrose LeComte's twenty-four-year-old daughter, Elise; and on September 6, 1864, they were married. In spite of the hardships all around them, they were still able to have a

51. Breedlove, p. 36.

52. Association of Natchitoches Women, *Natchitoches*, p. 46.

53. Steve Gross and Susan Daley, *Old Houses* (New York: Stewart, Tabor, and Chang, 1991), p. 141.

54. Herman de Bachellette Seebold, *Old Louisiana Plantation Homes and Family Trees* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 1971 reprint of 1941 edition), p. 366.

proper wedding, perhaps at her father's town house in Natchitoches since the big house at Magnolia was in ruins. Elise even managed to send "a splendid cake, a rich bouquet, and a finely wrought miniature Confederate flag" to a friend who placed an announcement of their marriage in the *Natchitoches Times*, which had somehow managed to resume publication. "We could hardly realize;" the announcement read,

as we beheld the superb cake, that destitution or want ever scowled upon our happy land. We were immediately carried back, in dreamy imagination, to the happy times of yore, ere the foul feet of the invader had left an impress on our soil.<sup>55</sup>

It was a long, sad winter for the Prud'hommes and most other Southerners as the war ground to its inevitable end. The election of Lincoln to a second term coincided with Sherman's "March to the Sea" in November and the fall of Savannah on Christmas Eve 1864, which destroyed the Confederacy's ability to feed itself and left its army and much of the civilian population on the verge of starvation. As the Federal army plundered its way through the Carolinas in February 1865, efforts to negotiate a peace conference collapsed and few were surprised when Gen. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia on April 9. Three days later, Lincoln was assassinated and, on April 28, the last Confederate army surrendered. The war was over.<sup>1</sup>

55. Deblieux Collection 5-D-3, Folder 262, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwestern State University of Louisiana.

1. Oakland Plantation Historical Structure Report pp. 22-27