200 YEARS OF PROGRESS IN THE LOUISIANA SUGAR INDUSTRY: A BRIEF HISTORY

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The Louisiana territory, named for Louis the XIV, king of France, was claimed by de La Salle in 1682. Although sugarcane originated in New Guinea, Louisiana has long been known for its importance in the world's sugar industry. Columbus, in his second voyage to the New World in 1493 carried sugarcane from the Canary Islands to Santo Domingo.

Sugarcane may have been first planted in Louisiana during the late 1600s by Iberville, the "Founder of Louisiana." However, there are no records of successful cane production until 1751 when Jesuit missionaries carried sugarcane plants, with help from experienced field workers, to what is now downtown New Orleans where the Jesuit Church stands on Baronne Street. The cane, "Creole," was sweet and excellent for chewing. However, it was very susceptible to the frosts that occurred in the less than tropical area of New Orleans. The plantings survived and by the late 1750s one sugar mill had already been built by Claude-Joseph Dubreuil de Villars of Esplanade Street.

Other planters followed his example and the industry attempted to expand. However, the manufacture of sugar, which had moved from Europe and spread throughout the Americas, was difficult because of the short growing season, early winter frosts and immature cane in Louisiana. "Tafia," a rum-like drink, was produced from cane juice and consumed in great quantity. Enough sugar was produced to satisfy the modest New Orleans market in some years.

The sugar was of extremely poor quality and could not be shipped back to France. This caused the developing industry to falter and it was not until the end of the 18th century when several factors enabled the industry to blossom. Of particular importance was the indigo crop, which had been a major economic factor to the area but was lost due to wet weather and insects. A new cane variety, "Otaheite" (Tahiti or Bourbon cane), was imported from Santo Domingo around 1797, and Etienne de Bore provided the manpower and expertise for sugar manufacture. De Bore married the daughter of the former treasurer of Louisiana, Jean-Baptiste Destrehan, and they risked their fortune in the manufacture of sugar. With the expert help of a sugar maker, Antoine Morin from Santo Domingo, de Bore succeeded in making sugar granulate at his wife's family property (now Audubon Park in New Orleans). De Bore was not the first to have accomplished the feat, but he was the first to do it in a manner judged to be economically successful. His first crop consisted of some 100 hogsheads (100,000 lbs.) of sugar which were sold for 12.5 cents per lb., along with 50 cents per gallon for molasses, which netted him a profit of $12,000. Because of this success, the commencement of the U.S. sugar industry is cited as 1795.

In 1803, the U.S. purchased the territory of Louisiana from the French. Anglo Americans poured into Louisiana and joined others in developing the sugar industry. The War of 1812 temporarily slowed the development of the industry.

Several factors were instrumental in renewing the industry's growth. The use of steam power in milling cane, proposed earlier, was finally adopted in the early 1800s in the Louisiana sugar industry. This allowed the use of more efficient horizontal mills, which were larger than those used with animal power. In 1825 two new varieties, which became known as Louisiana Purple and Louisiana Striped, were shipped to Louisiana. Both canes

were more frost resistant than Creole or Otaheite, which allowed the industry to quickly expand outside of the New Orleans area. Norbert Rillieux, a free man of color born in New Orleans and educated in Paris, installed his invention, the first triple-effect evaporator, in 1834. However, it was not until 1843-1844 that his multiple-effect evaporation process was proven successful. This invention, still used today, has proven to be one of the greatest contributions to the world's sugar industry. Other inventions which proved successful at about the same time were the centrifuge, condenser and polariscope.

The planters and processors of that time were faced with the constant risk of frost, floods, cane pests, animal and insect pests, sickness among slaves, animal diseases and falling market prices. One of the largest problems was the need for labor. Slavery proved to be the answer and the industry grew to 300,000 slaves prior to 1860. The catastrophic effects of the Civil War on the sugar industry can be easily seen by comparing the 264,000 short tons of sugar produced in 1861 with the 5,971 short tons produced in 1864. Sugar producing plantations decreased from 1,200 in 24 parishes in 1861 to 175 plantations in 16 parishes in 1864.

Following the Civil War, the industry slowly began to reorganize, although labor was still the major problem. The industry was forced to accept change in order to survive. Mechanization, first animal, then steam, electricity and gasoline, quickly spread throughout the industry. Chemical fertilizers replaced manures. The Louisiana State University Experiment Station conducted research in a number of areas. New varieties were imported from foreign lands. Consolidation continued with a further reduction in the number of factories – each growing in power, efficiency and size.

World War I raised sugar prices briefly, but they fell quickly after the war was over. New diseases entered the cane belt, and along with poor weather, caused the near destruction of the cane industry. Sugar production dropped to the lowest levels (47,000 tons) since the Civil War. Mosaic resistant POJ varieties from Java were imported. These canes were spread across the industry, which quickly recovered from the onset of new diseases. It was at this time that the American Sugar Cane League, Louisiana State University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture joined forces to develop varieties for the Louisiana sugar industry.

The Great Depression brought drastic changes in the value of the industry and ownership of farms and factories. World War II brought sugar rations to the U.S., but more importantly, an extreme shortage of labor. Mechanical harvesters cut the entire Louisiana crop by the late 1940s while mechanical planters were soon developed. Research programs were instituted in all areas of production by the various agencies involved in Louisiana. These programs must continue in an effort to further increase production efficiency and to overcome the numerous issues facing the industry including environmental regulations.

During the 1990s, the industry's acreage has reached an all time high. Perils faced by early growers and processors are still affecting the industry. However, in the 200th year of production (1994) the industry has set a new record for Louisiana sugar production, having recovered over 1.04 million tons of sugar. This is a remarkable feat for an industry that has a very short growing season, frosts and freezes too early in the harvest season, and an industry that many say shouldn't even be producing sugarcane. This tremendous accomplishment and the 200 years of production occurred because of the diligence of the many members of the Louisiana sugar industry – from Iberville, to de Bore to Rillieux, to the modern-day scientists, growers, processors and other individuals. The year 1995 is not only a time to commemorate 200 years of production, but also a time to work toward higher goals, including increased efficiency in the global community in which Louisiana now operates.