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HOW SWEET IT IS:  
SWAMP POP SODA AND MODERN DAY SUGAR

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Mississippi

Rebecca Lauck Cleary

May 2018

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis accompanies a documentary film about Swamp Pop Premium Sugarcane Sodas, a Louisiana cane sugar beverage created by Collin Cormier and John Petersen, two cousins from Lafayette, Louisiana. The two recognized the long history of sugarcane farming in Louisiana, and were inspired to feature real cane sugar from their home state in their beverages. This paper begins with an overview of research about the historical aspect of sugarcane production and continues with contextualization of the interviews with co-founders Cormier and Petersen, as well as sugarcane farmer Jessie Breaux. The accompanying film contains interviews conducted in the summer and fall of 2017, where Cormier and Petersen discuss their focus on Swamp Pop's regional identity, why they decided to start their company, marketing, and distribution, and Breaux discusses the role of a modern day farmer and the production line of creating a commodity.

This project is important for the field of Southern Studies to show how modern-day entrepreneurs looked in their own backyards, so to speak, in order to discover a product that uses the sugar of their home state—something that has been there for more than two hundred years.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the tireless encouragement from Peter John Cleary.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank everyone at the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture for believing in me and in this project. I would also like to acknowledge the help of Collin Cormier, John Petersen, and Jessie Breaux and their patience with me during our interviews, Julie Cormier for her help in locating childhood photos of her son and nephew, and my mom for originally suggesting this idea. Without their help, this could have never been completed.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

When people ask me where I'm from, I always say I am from Louisiana, even though I have lived in Oxford, Mississippi for more than two decades. Therefore, it seemed like a natural fit for my Southern Studies master's thesis to contain research about my homeland. While enrolled in the SST 555 Foodways and Southern Culture course in Fall 2015, one of the requirements for the final assignment was to either write a paper or conduct an oral history project. Since I have a print journalism background thanks to my undergraduate degree and a career as an editor and public relations professional, I decided to branch out of my comfort zone and try my hand at an oral history. The idea was to make a short slideshow with photos and an interview I recorded with my second cousin Collin Cormier (his mother and my mother are first cousins), who started his own business with John Petersen, his first cousin on his father's side. That business is Swamp Pop Premium Sodas, a beverage that uses one hundred percent Louisiana sugar as its sweetener. Swamp Pop sees the sugar contained in its bottles as a source of pride for the state. I became fascinated with their idea, and after I completed my initial audio interview with Cormier, I knew I wanted to expand my research and learn more about the sugarcane industry of the past and present to see where they co-mingled, as well as where they

differed. I wanted to see what current sugarcane farmers are doing, and how the farming industry has changed or stayed the same over time.

The idea of exploring a family owned business venture also appealed to me. Like Cormier and Petersen, I wanted the chance to spotlight Louisiana, while contributing to the field of food studies and seeing the food product as part of a longer process with the land and region.

After enrolling in a year of Southern Studies documentary film classes, with a semester from SouthDocs Director Dr. Andrew Harper and a semester with Pihakis Foodways Documentary Filmmaker Ava Lowrey, I knew I would create a documentary film of my own. The thesis and film are considered together, with the paper a more academic form, and the film a visual representation of the Louisiana area and its people.

Regarding my approach and methodology, I conducted oral history interviews with Swamp Pop Premium Soda's two founders, and Jessie Breaux, a retired sugarcane farmer. The sugarcane grown at St. Mary's Co-op in Jeanerette, Louisiana, where Breaux worked for more than three decades, eventually becomes sweetener for Swamp Pop. Petersen put me in touch with this particular farmer because he knew his son Ryan Breaux, and had been told the sugar from St. Mary's Co-op ended up in their product. Although Petersen wasn't sure about this, Breaux confirmed this in the oral history interview I conducted with him two months later.

My personal relationship with Cormier was the basis for knowing about Swamp Pop, but getting to know Petersen, whom I had only met once before, and Breaux, whom I had never met, inspired me to let the broader field of Southern Studies have an opportunity to also become informed about their present-day work.

The literature I read to expand my knowledge of sugarcane took me from the Caribbean and Europe deep into Louisiana, which proved invaluable to me when I interviewed Breaux,

because I understood the terms and processes that he discussed, such as bagasse. Bagasse is the fibrous matter left after the cane has been crushed and the juice extracted, and since it constitutes thirty-one percent of the weight of the cane, it can be costly to dispose of, as well as bulky (Abbott 1990, 116). This literature also helped to provide a historical and geographic context in which to situate Louisiana's sugar industry.

In addition to the written work, I also produced a film with the three interviewees, providing a visual component to the words on the page. Documentary work is made easier for novice digital filmmakers, since "Today's digital documentaries rose out of a decades-long process of simplifying shooting and editing" (Kalow 2011, 5). In that same piece, Kalow writes that "there are so many untold stories that would make great movies, and there isn't enough production funding to pay for them" (Kalow 2011, 5). With the assistance of borrowed camera equipment from the Southern Documentary Project at the University of Mississippi, I created a twelve minute film by only spending my time and effort.

Another reason for the making of a film is because of the ability to have a choice on the filming and editing, and ending up with an imaginative product. "For many of us, we want to communicate our passion for a story that needs to be told. You might come to a project already having insider access, or you might need time to develop the relationships and knowledge needed to make a documentary" (Kalow 2011, 22). I don't believe this story could have been told with only one format, so the combination of film and written work adds layers to the finished project.

My intention is for the written thesis and the documentary to work hand in hand, however, you can view one without the other. The chapters that follow outline how sugar came to Louisiana, an often written-about topic, and the politics it brought with it, followed by retired

sugarcane farmer Jessie Breaux discussing how sugarcane is farmed today in the modern era, how GPS technology has changed some aspects of farming, and how Louisiana sugar ends up in a Swamp Pop soda.

Chapter three explains the history of Lafayette, with oral histories from Cormier and Petersen, and an explanation of the concept of *terroir* for their product. Amy Trubek defines terroir as the conditions in which a food is grown or produced and that give the food its unique characteristics. I wanted to see how terroir, often associated with French wines, could be applied to Swamp Pop's need to have regional flavors. This work is also important to the field of Southern Studies because I look at a beverage instead of food, a soda instead of wine, as is most often the case with terroir studies.

Chapter three discusses the marketing and branding ideas behind the business. I researched other niche sodas, such as Cheerwine and Jones Soda, to see how they approach not being a soda giant but still having an appetite for their share of the market. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Bartow Elmore's *Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism* is a fascinating look into one of the world's most valuable brands (Elmore 2016, 7) and how Coke became a soda giant.

This chapter also looks at the Burguières family. Donna Onebane tells the saga of Jules M. Burguières Sr. and five generations of Louisianans who, after the Civil War, established a sugar empire that has survived into the present in her book *The House That Sugarcane Built: The Louisiana Burguières*. As viewed from the lens of one family, Onebane traces the Burguières from seventeenth-century France, to nineteenth-century New Orleans and rural south Louisiana and into the twenty-first century. The family-owned sugar business, the J. M. Burguières

Company, plays a pivotal role in the expansion of the sugar industry in Louisiana, Florida, and Cuba.

And what of sugar as a sweetener, in and of itself? As Andrew F. Smith points out, “once we become conditioned to consume sweet foods, even the sight of them will cause us to salivate” (Smith 2015, 7). Although Swamp Pop is on the high end of soft drink sugar content, “deliciousness was always our goal,” Petersen said. In this way, they were not afraid to use more sugar than other beverages because they did not want to skimp on flavor.

The goal of my project is to examine the way Cormier and Petersen use the sugar, and through their entrepreneurial spirit, spin it into a new product. I take the reader and viewer on a journey through the sights and sounds of southwestern Louisiana to show how the sugar of the past is a means for a business of today.

## CHAPTER II

### BACKGROUND ON SUGAR

*“Sugarcane is always sweet, people only sometimes so,”* David Shields

#### **The chemistry of sugar**

Sugar, from a chemistry standpoint, is a sweet, crystalline substance,  $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$ , obtained chiefly from the juice of the sugarcane and the sugar beet, and present in sorghum, maple sap, etc., used extensively as an ingredient and flavoring of certain foods and as a fermenting agent in the manufacture of certain alcoholic beverages (Webster’s).

But sugar, as Sidney Mintz explains, was first domesticated in New Guinea, and is the end product of an “ancient, complex, and difficult process” (Mintz 1985, 21). Columbus first carried sugarcane to the New World on his second voyage in 1493, from the Spanish Canary Islands. “Hence it was Spain that pioneered sugar cane, sugar making, African slave labor, and the plantation form in the Americas” (Mintz 1985, 32). Historically, there has always been an association between sugar and slavery, and the introduction of sugar to the Western Hemisphere also had a lasting effect on the development of the region. As Abbott makes clear, the cheap and abundant labor provided from African slaves meant the industry became prosperous (Abbott 1990, 11).

This chapter will provide a brief history of sugar production, and a retired sugarcane farmer will offer insight into today's process.

The sugarcane plant itself is a large grass of the family *Gramineae*, with six known species of sugar cane. "Though other species besides *Saccharum officinarum* have been used to breed new varieties in recent decades, the source of genes for sucrose accumulation has continued to be this species above all, the so-called noble cane, with soft, sweet, juicy stalks that grow as thick as two inches, and twelve to fifteen feet high, when mature" (Mintz 1985, 21).

As for consumption, Mintz writes that in 1000 A.D., few Europeans knew of the existence of sucrose, or cane sugar. But soon afterward they learned about it, and by 1650, in England the nobility and the wealthy had become inveterate sugar eaters, and sugar figured in their medicine, literary imagery, and displays of rank. In fact, by 1800, sugar was a necessity and a major part of a person's diet. "By 1900 it was supplying nearly one-fifth of the calories in the English diet" (Mintz 1985, 5).

When Mintz wrote his book *Sweetness and Power*, he wanted to "explain what sugar reveals about a wider world," (Mintz 1985, xxiv), and I hope to show how two entrepreneurs are utilizing sugar—specifically, Louisiana sugar—today, and what it means for their business. Although there are many texts about the sugarcane industry of the past and the origins of its place in Louisiana, my work focuses on individuals who are using that product in the modern era with an emphasis on regional pride and identity.

## **The Bayou State**

The state of Louisiana has a long history with sugar, beginning in 1751 when Jesuit priests brought sugarcane to the southern part of the state. Shortly thereafter, Jean Étienne de Boré produced the first granulated sugar in the state and is known as the father of the commercial sugar industry” (LSU Ag Center).

Soon after, a thriving sugar industry replaced the cultivation of indigo in the state.

“The first sugarcane varieties grown in Louisiana were ‘Creole,’ from which Etienne de Boré’s first granulated sugar, ‘Otaheite,’ and later ‘Louisiana Striped,’ ‘Louisiana Purple’ and ‘D74.’ These varieties were called the ‘Noble’ canes and were characterized by a large stalk diameter, low fiber content and a sucrose content satisfactory for sugar production under Louisiana conditions (LSU Ag Center).

Sugar has been associated with many things during its history, including slavery, flavoring or concealing tastes, preserving foods, a substitute and rival of honey, and since it was also first associated with the rich and the noble classes, and it remained out of the reach of the less privileged for centuries (Mintz 1985).

According to William Gilbert Taggart, who wrote his 1933 master’s thesis at Louisiana State University about the agronomic practices and their influence on the development of the Louisiana sugar industry, the first commercial crop of sugar was not produced until 1796. “While it is said that planters freely followed the lead of de Boré, and it is known that in 1815 the crop amounted to about 5,000 short tons, it was not until about 1830 that our records begin to show much that is of interest to us in this work” (Taggart 1933, 3).

In 1830, the Secretary of the United States Treasury sent out a questionnaire to a number of sugar planters in which he asked for information on the culture of sugar cane. One of the questions asked about how many “hands” were required to cultivate the land — primarily enslaved workers. “Sixty working hands are necessary to cultivate 240 acres of cane in well prepared land, and to do all the work necessary until the sugar is made and delivered” (Taggart 1933, 5). That meant that for the sugar planter, the costs for delivery was about three and one-half cents per pound for expenses incurred, without reckoning the interest on his capital. Slavery made these economics viable.

A hogshead was used as unit of measurement for sugar in Louisiana for most of the 19th century, equaling about sixty-four gallons, and plantations were listed in sugar schedules as having produced  $x$  number of hogsheads of sugar or molasses. In 1840, the number of enslaved people employed in sugar culture was 149,890. “In 1843, the State Of Louisiana had 700 plantations, 525 in operation, producing 90,000 hogsheads. In 1844, the number of hogsheads was 191,524, and of pounds, 204,913,000; but this was exclusive of the molasses rated at 9,000,000 gallons” (Taggart 1933, 14).

As an example of how much sugar was produced in the nineteenth century, he writes that “in 25 parishes; 1,240 sugar houses; and the yield of sugar was 186,650 hogsheads, or 207,337,000 pounds” (Taggart 1933, 14). Taggart’s research is an interesting glimpse into the past, to see the amount of money flowing through the farmers of the state as well as how many plantations were in operation.

As of 1845, “The cane is now cultivated and worked into sugar in nineteen parishes: West Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge, Iberia, Ascension, St. James, St. John, St. Charles, St. Bernard, Jefferson, Plaquemines, Assumption, Lafourche, Terrebonne, St. Mary, St. Martin,

Lafayette, Vermilion, and St. Landry” (Taggart 1933, 6). Looking to the future, there were also large preparations being made to plant cane in the cotton parishes of Rapides, Avoyelles, Concordia, and Calcasieu, which would mean an expansion into the middle area of the state.

Even from the 1930s to the 1970s, when journalist Patsy Sims traveled to the cane country of Louisiana, she recognized that little had changed since sugar was first brought to the state in 1751. “Little, except the tractors and giant harvesters that dotted the fields. Year after year the tall green cane would shoot up, lining highways and dirt roads and hiding behind it the mostly black fieldworkers and the paint-thirsty shacks where their parents and their parents’ parents had lived, struggled and died since the days of slavery.” (Sims 1994, xiii)

### **Sugary business**

By 1900 the sugar industry was important business for Louisiana, Texas and Hawaii, and later Florida, with sugar refining playing a huge role. Subsidies and tariffs encouraged U.S. sugar production, and by 2000, “60 percent of the raw sugar consumed in America was produced from domestic sources” but since 2008, thanks to NAFTA, Mexico supplies 15 percent of the sugar Americans consume (Smith 2015, 56).

In *The Modernization of the Louisiana Sugar Industry: 1830-1910*, John Heitmann examines the fact that several of the sugar industry leaders, despite great profits from slave labor, were “receptive to science-based technology” and welcomed scientific and technological change, because they recognized that “innovative ideas led to higher earnings and long-term stability” (Heitmann 1987, 25). He heavily focuses on the role of scientists and chemists, whose new methods of analysis and new instruments were introduced in 1830, but only used by a small

group of farmers, mainly because they were in relatively isolated parishes. Scientific, technical, and business institutions related to the sugar industry failed to mature prior to the Civil War because “an underdeveloped transportation system in the region kept sugar planters southwest of New Orleans in relative isolation,” and the state and federal governments were not helpful (Heitmann 1987, 48). The Civil War “marked a watershed for the Louisiana industry by precipitating tremendous changes in ownership and in the traditional labor system,” and furthermore, concurrent with the Civil War, a new international sugar market was rapidly developing (Heitmann 1987, 48). After the Civil War, domestic sugar industry growth declined (production was 264,000 tons in 1861 and 9,950 tons in 1865), and “the certainties associated with slavery were now replaced by a new, untried free-labor system” (Heitmann 1987, 49).

### **Forming alliances**

The establishment of the Louisiana Sugar Planters Association (LSPA) was crucial to the modernization of the sugar industry between 1880-1890, and the organization was founded and led by the wealthiest and most politically active sugar planters, who developed alliances with federal government officials, engineers and academic scientists who lobbied for protective tariffs to rebuild the industry after the Civil War (Heitmann 1987, 69). Throughout the 1870s, a number of Louisiana planters “recognized that science was power, and with the end of Reconstruction a campaign was mounted to secure the services of a state chemist”, with the idea that they would assist agriculturists by “analyzing various soils of the state and the commercial fertilizers sold” (Heitmann 1987, 169).

The idea of science and technology were extremely important for the sugar planters, and they also recognized the importance of lobbying. The fact that the progressive elite welcomed scientific change, but were eventually thwarted by the “complexities of change”, as Heitmann puts it, seemed like a sad blow to the sugar industry. However, before technological advancements in agriculture, back in the mid-1880s, the state legislators were ignoring their planter constituents’ requests for more scientists to analyze soil, and eventually the LSPA stepped in to pressure the legislature. Thanks to that, on October 20, 1885, the Louisiana Scientific Agricultural Association was chartered to develop and improve the agricultural interests with scientific and chemical experiments (Heitmann 1987, 174), and a sugar experiment station was erected in New Orleans in 1890 (in the present site of the Audubon Zoo), as well as an Audubon Sugar School that was established in 1891 (uniting theory and practice in the hope that planters’ sons would study chemistry and engineering) because of a lack of response by both Tulane University and Louisiana State University in establishing an undergraduate technical program meeting the needs of sugar interests. The LSPA was crucial in seeing that “shrewd politics,” supplemented with “science-based technology” could save the sugar industry, but due to the decline of the LSPA in 1900 because of a changing political climate since not enough Democrats were elected, eventually the sugar experiment station closed in 1912 due to lack of funding.

After the Louisiana Sugar Planters Association folded, in 1922, the American Sugar Cane League formed as a non-profit organization of sugarcane growers dedicated to support the industry through research, legislation, and education, and their original purpose was to develop a research program to combat cane diseases that threatened to wipe out the Louisiana sugar industry, and increase sugarcane yields (amscl.org)

There are two stages of production for sugarcane, and those factor into the yield itself. “The primary stage covers all the activity and processes of production from the preparation of the land, planting, and tending the sugarcane plants right up to and including harvesting of the cane and its transportation to the mills or factories for processing into sugar” (Abbott 1990, 61). The secondary stage encompasses sugar production, whether that means the raw or refined version, its by-products, and its distribution (Abbott 1990). The sugarcane needs a farmer to assist with the process, to plant it in the ground before the growing season and harvest it once it’s ready. In order not to lose sucrose content, the sugarcane must be cut in a timely manner, and a mill should be near the cane fields (Abbott 1990, 62).

As long as there is sugarcane, there has to be sugarcane farmers who are willing to do the exhausting work.

### **Raised on the farm**

A perfect person to explain the ins and outs of sugarcane, from planting to harvesting to refining, is Jessie Breaux [pronounced BRO]. He always knew he wanted to be able to be a part of the land, despite the arduous work. He was born as the middle child of five siblings at Camperdown Sugar Plantation, located between Franklin and Baldwin, Louisiana, then moved to Katy Plantation when he was six years old. Even as a teenager, he would rather work on the farm on the weekends than go out and do other things, and by doing that he also saved a little money along the way. He graduated high school in 1969 and earned an agronomy degree from the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette (now known as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette), then returned to work farming at the Matilda Plantation in the Franklin area. In 1982,

he and his wife bought out his employer, P. J. Degravelle, a well-known grower in the area. That year, they purchased the farming operation, starting out with 600 acres of total land. Along the way they acquired other properties by buying out other farming operations and ended up with a 2,400 acre sugarcane operation. Although he retired last year after twenty-eight years, he now works part time for a land company that owns sugarcane property in Louisiana, Florida, and Texas, so he really isn't out of the business.

I conducted his interview on a warm, sunny September day at St. Mary's Sugar Cooperative in Jeanerette, one of eleven raw sugar factories operating in Louisiana, where Breaux still spends time. According to Breaux, St. Mary's was built in 1946, with its first year of operation in 1947. It is located at 20056 LA Highway 182, near the one hundred and twenty five mile long Bayou Teche (which Southern writer Harnett Kane dubbed "the most handsomely endowed of the bayous") and a quaint local restaurant called the Yellow Bowl that serves traditional Cajun food such as crawfish étouffée, crawfish bisque, crabmeat au gratin, and softshell crab, along with plate lunch fare of red beans and rice, catfish, black eyed peas and vegetables. Small houses dot the highway, along with sugarcane fields and churches.

Commonly known as "sugar mills," these facilities are primarily located in south Louisiana. While the number of sugar mills in the state has decreased over the past four decades, this is due to the increased efficiency of the factories, rather than a drop in sugar production. Today's Louisiana sugar mills have become so efficient that it takes fewer mills to process the cane—even though sugarcane production remains at or near all-time highs ([www.amscl.org](http://www.amscl.org))

Breaux, whose formative years took place just a half-mile down the road from St. Mary's, said farming was something he always wanted to do.

“You have to love farming; if you don’t have a love for it, you better find something else to do. I’ll say it, farmers comprise less than two percent of the total population in this country, but I can guarantee you that those less than two percent love every day that they walk out the house and go out to work” (Breux interview).

Breux’s connection to the land of south Louisiana is apparent as he tells the story of his family history, compiled by himself and one of his sisters:

“The first Breux that came to Louisiana was in 1766, a young man 17 years old named Firmin Breux. He traveled to Louisiana from Boston—he was a Nova Scotian exile—he was an Acadian, and he came here alone, and ended up in Louisiana in St. James Parish, and ultimately ended up in the area known as Breux Bridge. He acquired property there in Breux Bridge, and the Bayou Teche basically starts in the Breux Bridge area and in order to get to the other side of the bayou you had to be able to build a walking bridge. Ultimately the name Breux’s Bridge became the name of that town. And from that, family migrated down this way, in the early 1900s, my great grandfather ended up in St. Mary Parish and then he moved in 1917 to the Caffery property where I still live today” (Breux interview).

Eventually, Breux bought property and built a home there, yet after four generations, no one farms today, but he says that’s the nature of the business. “The young man that bought me out, his family is also similar to mine, they were in sugarcane, and I am happy that I was able to help him get back into sugarcane business” (Breux interview). Breux said his farm manager bought him out and is doing well.

## **Look to science**

Modern-day farmers approach the role of science and technology in their work with GPS and tractors, as Jessie Breaux discusses. He says tractors from years ago needed to be hand cranked, and only one row at a time could be worked; therefore technology plays a huge role in modern day farming.

“We could do more with one tractor than we could with the tractors from years ago and the labor just disappeared locally for whatever reason, so therefore we had to go and find offshore labor to now work on the farms and today with the technologies we have today, you know, one tractor can cover five rows at a time, and the rows are six foot center, so thirty-six feet wide. We got wide equipment going out there, one man can do the equivalent of four or five people now. We have tractors that actually drive themselves, with the computer technology we have, we laser level fields based on computer satellite imagery, now when we draw your rows, the land’s flat, you have to draw your rows back in it, you also do that by satellite, you just put the tractor in the field, basically you let the steering wheel go, and it’ll go from one end to the other, you have to turn it when it gets to the other end, and everything comes out very straight and neat. Now with the larger eight to one hundred to three hundred horsepower equipment, it takes fewer people but when you sit in the cab of that tractor, the cab has air and it’s all electronic, it’s computer driven, it’s high tech but it gets the job done” (Breaux Interview).

As a member of the American Sugar Cane League, Breaux says that farmers put up funds based on the amount of sugar they produce to fund the League.

“The American Sugar Cane League was formed by the factory and growers many years ago. It’s an organization to speak for farmers and the factories of Louisiana. Over time it has

become the main association that we have to go to Washington to discuss things that occur in the sugar industry, in the sugar program, in the farm bill and they're our voice and it's worked very well over time" (Breux interview).

Breux shares his opinion that since Louisiana sugarcane farmers have been in existence for two hundred and twenty years, those farmers are not going anywhere.

"Louisiana, this part of the state, really the southern part here in Louisiana where sugarcane is produced, sugarcane's the only crop that really can withstand the hot, the bugs, the storms, that we have, it actually weathers those storms very well" (Breux interview.) In fact, since sugarcane is a grass, it requires much rain in the early growing season, followed by plenty of sunshine in order to ripen the plant (Abbott 1990, 16).

Since storms are actually fairly common events for Louisiana, with hurricane season stretching from June 1 to November 30 of every year, rain helps the sugarcane grow. But sometimes, fierce winds accompany heavy rains. The worst storm Breux experienced was 1992's Hurricane Andrew, one of the most destructive hurricanes in U. S. history, hitting Florida and then gaining strength in the Gulf of Mexico before slamming into Louisiana, causing billions of dollars in damages (wwl.com).

"I was in New Orleans because my wife's birthday was within a few days of the storm so we were celebrating her birthday and I looked and I saw what was happening and I said, 'let's go home.' We came home and I had a good crop that year, but twenty-four hours later, it was gone. It was a storm that I'll never forget. It stripped every leaf off of every tree and ripped every cane leaf that was out in the field and broke a lot of the cane. A news reporter called me one morning early from New Orleans to ask me what I was gonna do, I said, 'well, I'm gonna wake up and go

to work.' I don't know what he wanted to hear, but you know, that's what farmers do, you have to get up, you have to deal with it." (Breux interview).

Breux explains the lengthy process of planting, growing, and harvesting the cane all throughout the year, starting in January, when the harvest from the previous year is complete. Hearing his explanation of the harvest made the facts of the history books come alive, as his passion for his endeavors is easily apparent.

"Sugarcane sprouts from the roots that are beneath the soil's surface. We cultivate the soil around the plants to warm the soil and to kill off any weeds that have come up and also knock the ruts down because during the harvest. Then in April we apply fertilizer to the cane that's in the ground and once that is done, the cane starts to grow rapidly. Sugarcane can grow on a warm day from an inch to an inch and half a day. Once the fertilizer is done...it has to just take off, Mother Nature does her thing. But there is land that we have fallowed without cane that we have to prepare for planting in August and September. It's laser leveled, soil fertility tests are taken on that property and then we'll get it ready. All the sugarcane now is planted in the ground for the 2018 harvest" (Breux interview).

Breux says the average yield per acre is thirty-three to thirty-four tons per acre of sugarcane, and from a ton of sugarcane there is an average of 7,500 pounds of sugar made. Then the farmer has to pay production costs, processing fees, and rental fees. "The farmer at the end of the day only gets about half of that amount as far as what he uses for his production costs (Breux interview).

Breux grew five different varieties of cane, in order to spread out the chances of something going wrong, whether it's a bug or bad weather. "Some were early sugar, mid-sweet,

some were more erect than others, they would stand in wind, and some were more bore resistant than others. The main pest is a sugarcane bore, so they had different traits” (Breux interview).

There are always new varieties of sugarcane coming out, too, thanks to research stations at LSU, Houma, Canal Point and the American Sugarcane League. “From the minute a cross is made in a greenhouse, the pollination cross of the seed, it takes twelve years for that variety to get to the field. So it’s a long process, it’s a tedious one, so they select for different things along the way—disease resistance, sweetener content, even whether it will lodge easier in the wind. We don’t want cane that will go down in the wind very easy, you want something that’s gonna be able to stand up. All those traits are part of what we need to accomplish the task of farming sugarcane” (Breux interview).

The cane is ready for harvest in October, when harvesters chop the cane and transport it to the factories where it’s crushed and all the juice is squeezed out. The impurities are filtered out, then heated to evaporate all the moisture out of that juice. The end result is a very thick product called mesquite, which is put into vacuum pans in the factory, where, under pressure from the steam, the crystals grow in the mesquite.

But in all cases, the “cane must be cut when ready so as not to lose its juice or the proportion of sucrose in this juice; and once it is cut, the juice must be rapidly extracted to avoid rot, desiccation, inversion, or fermentation” (Mintz 1985, 21).

“The crystals grow, and we have guys that have been coming to St. Mary’s for over thirty years from Costa Rica and this is what they do. They make sugar, they’re sugar makers we call them. You have to do this on a regular basis because there’s an art and a talent and a technique to it also. Once the sugar crystals attain a certain size, they drop that liquid out of that vacuum pan, into centrifugals. Centrifugals spin at 3,000 RPMs and they spin the molasses off and you end up

with sugar. We start shipping it to the refinery, which is LSR, Louisiana Sugarcane Refinery, down in Gramercy. This is called raw sugar at this point, and they remelt the sugar and take out the rest of the molasses that's in the sugar product and you end up with a white sugar crystal. That product is sold to grocery stores, and along the way we also sell to Swamp Pop, and so I can tell you that the sugar they're using is grown right here in the fields here in Louisiana, processed here, refined here, and they use it in their product. So it's a Louisiana made sweetener that they use and that process happens year in and year out, every year we continue" (Breux interview).

One of the other things that happens at the factory is that the pulp that is generated—the bagasse—is used to fire the boilers, meaning the factory is self-sufficient once it gets going. "We're producing steam by burning the bagasse that comes from the plant, so we don't use any natural gas. We start the factory on wood chips, with gasoline, with natural gas burners, because they're equipped with natural gas burners in case something happens catastrophic and it goes down. Once the boilers are lit and the bagasse starts to move, then we turn the gas valve off" (Breux interview). The cane by-product fueling the factories is important because it means the factories are self-sufficient during the process of separating the raw sugar and molasses.

Breux knew of the Swamp Pop Soda business, and says the name Swamp Pop is perfect for the area.

"I was really excited about two young men from here, and the possibility that they could use Louisiana sugar. It's like farming, you roll the dice, it's a gamble, you gotta have good intestinal fortitude, and you weather the storms that do come, and those two young men have done that, and it really does me well to see them using Louisiana sugar. It's a great story" (Breux interview).

This connection to the land and their home is what ultimately drew Cormier and Petersen into business together, as they looked at the sugarcane growing in the fields around them, and concocted an idea for a business.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SUGARY BUSINESS OF SWAMP POP

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote his epic poem “Evangeline” in 1847, which follows the 1755 expulsion of the Acadians from French Canada, in what was known as Le Grand Dérangement (Hebert-Leiter 2009, 27). Although Longfellow’s is a tragic yet fictional account of two lovers, Evangeline and Gabriel, it has “historical significance as the first piece to focus attention on the deportation of the Acadians” (*Arkansas Review* 204). The Acadians were scattered far and wide, and many eventually ended up in Louisiana where they formed the basis of the Cajun culture (Hebert-Leiter 2009, 27). Longfellow’s poem is set thirty minutes southeast of Lafayette, Louisiana, the unofficial capital of Cajun Country. Lafayette colorfully mixes tradition and progressiveness, blending French, Spanish, Indian, and African influences.

According to the LafayetteTravel.com website, the city itself takes up 49.35 square miles, and is situated 15 miles west of the Atchafalaya Basin and 35 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico at latitude 30.21 N longitude 92.03 W, exhibiting the subtropic climate typical of South Louisiana. There are forests, prairies, bayous, swamps, and marshes. In a census conducted in 1769 by Spanish Governor O’Reilly, the population listed as 409, but the biggest historical event was the migration of the Acadians, marked from 1765-1785. The French Revolution also had an effect, as many French Loyalists fled to Louisiana to settle. In 1821 Acadian Jean Mouton

donated land for the construction of a Catholic church and created the church parish of St. John the Evangelist, and a settlement grew around the church and on January 17, 1823, the Louisiana Legislature created Lafayette Parish from the western portion of what was St. Martin Parish, where St. Martinville is located. First called Vermillionville, it was renamed Lafayette in 1884 to honor the French Marquis de Lafayette. It is the parish seat, nicknamed the Hub City. According to the 2010 census, the total population of Lafayette is 120,623, making it the fourth-largest city in the state.

Lafayette is known as the “Heart of Acadiana,” and the term “Acadiana” signifies “a twenty-two parish area encompassing Louisiana’s so-called French Triangle,” including Acadia, Ascension, Assumption, Avoyelles, Calcasieu, Cameron, Evangeline, Iberia, Iberville, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, Lafourche, Pointe Coupee, St. Charles, St. James, St. John, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary, Terrebonne, Vermilion, and West Baton Rouge (Brasseaux and Gould 2011, 1).

Sugar is a mainstay of the agricultural economy. According to historian David O. Whitten, Louisiana boasted 1,536 sugar mills in 1850 (Brasseaux and Gould 2011, 113). Indigo, then cotton, were raised in attempts to develop a commercial crop that could grow in the tropical region, but by 1830, most plantation owners had adopted sugar cane (Arkansas Review 204). Today, there is a \$2 billion sugar cane industry and research advances in both production and processing have kept Louisiana’s sugar industry competitive (Gravois 2001).

The American Sugarcane League states that sugarcane is produced on more than 400,000 acres of land in twenty-three Louisiana parishes, with 16,400 employees involved in the production and processing of sugar. Louisiana produces twenty percent of the sugar grown in the United States, as one of the oldest sugar producing areas. The Louisiana sugarcane industry has

continued to increase in productivity, due to several factors including improved varieties, pest control and processing techniques.

Collin Cormier and John Petersen are first cousins and natives of Lafayette, who grew up like brothers and spent much of their childhoods on the forty acres of their great-grandfather's farm, located five miles west in the small town of Scott. Cormier attended culinary school at Louisiana Culinary Institute in Baton Rouge, was a chef in St. John in the U. S. Virgin Islands, then moved back home to become executive chef at Blue Dog Café, and then start his own gourmet food truck, Viva La Waffle, that served savory waffle sandwiches. He recently opened Pop's Poboy's, a restaurant named after his great-grandfather Jacques "Jack" Guilbeau, and his sandwiches are "classic interpretations and exciting twists on Louisiana's favorite sandwich plus starters, salads, sides, and refreshing beverages all in a relaxed casual setting" ([www.pospoboy's.com](http://www.pospoboy's.com)). Accolades are no surprise for him: in 2014, he was named one of the 20 Under 40 by the Daily Advertiser newspaper and the 2015 Best Chef by Acadiana Profile Magazine.

Petersen earned a business degree from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and also founded Lafayette's Genterie Supply Company, a lifestyle store located downtown, before devoting his days solely to Swamp Pop. In 2015, Swamp Pop earned the Junior Achievement Hall of Fame Start-Up Business of the Year Award from the Moody School of Business at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

"The two first cousins enjoyed a stellar first year in business, more than tripling their goal of selling 6,000 cases of Swamp Pop Premium Sugarcane Sodas and establishing their commercial brand in myriad places across the United States" (Stickney 2015).

When I interviewed Cormier and Petersen in July 2017 in the casual setting of Pop's Poboys, located at 740 Jefferson St. in Lafayette, on a Sunday afternoon when it was closed to the customers' usual demands for food, they recounted stories of running around in the old barn, swimming in muddy ditches, climbing trees and getting dirty, as little boys are prone to do. When the opportunity came along for the duo to start a business together, they decided to jump into the super-competitive beverage industry, using the triple entendre of "pop:" a term for both soda and for music, and an homage to their great-grandfather. They started with four original soda flavors: Noble Cane Cola, Satsuma Fizz, Praline Cream Soda, and Jean Lafitte Ginger Ale. Later, that would expand to a Filè Root Beer and a Ponchatoula Pop Rouge.

The noble cane is a mixture of a traditional cola, mixed with the flavors of the local brown turkey fig. The most popular flavor is the praline cream soda, which is a traditional cream soda added with brown sugar, butter, and pecan flavors to create a rich, creamy, candy-like drink. The ginger ale includes crisp cucumbers and sharp ginger, and the pop rouge is their nod to Ponchatoula, Louisiana: the Strawberry Capital of the World.

"We knew we wanted to do something with figs for sure, because we had some big fig trees at the farm, growing up. Satsuma was definitely one we wanted to focus on, and we liked the idea of a cucumber ginger ale because cucumbers were always in our gardens, in our backyards and stuff like that, and then a praline cream soda seemed to make sense to us as well" (Cormier interview).

For Cormier and Petersen, they understood that their business would appeal to those who wanted a sugary beverage, and wanted it to have not just any sweetener. But even before they found any sugar to use in the product, the cousins had a name easily available in their minds.

## **The flavor of music**

The Louisiana musical genre swamp pop began in obscurity but went on to have national influence as a hybrid of music indigenous to southeast Texas and the Acadiana region. There are emotional vocals, simple, unaffected (and occasionally bilingual) lyrics, honky tonk pianos, bellowing sax sections, and a strong rhythm and blues backbeat. “Upbeat compositions often possess the bouncy rhythms of Cajun and black Creole two-steps, and their lyrics frequently convey the local color and joie de vivre that pervades south Louisiana,” (Bernard 1996, 6). Some people could refer to it as “white rhythm and blues;” or perhaps a “combination of rock ‘n’ roll and country and western music;” or even “rockabilly with a strong blues element,” (Bernard 1996, 8). Ironically, “the term swamp pop originated not in south Louisiana nor even in the United States, but in England, where young music enthusiasts stumbled on the imported sound shortly after its American inception” (Bernard 1996, 14).

Michael Doucet, Cajun fiddler, singer, and songwriter who founded the band BeauSoleil, the first Cajun band to win a Grammy Award in 1998, gave an oral history interview with the Library of Congress on June 28, 2017 and said there didn’t used to be a category for Cajun music. “It is really world music when you think about all the influences. It happened in the 50s. And a certain genre of music that’s mixed with rockabilly and New Orleans music. And it’s called swamp pop” (Doucet interview).

Classics of the genre include Bobby Charles’s “Later Alligator,” Dale and Grace’s “I’m Leaving It Up to You” (1963), Johnny Preston’s “Running Bear” (1959), Freddy Fender’s “Before the Next Teardrop Falls” (1974), Phil Phillips’s “Sea of Love” (1959) and Jimmy Clanton’s “Just a Dream” (1958), all Top Ten national hits (Bernard 1996, 6).

Regardless of how the melodies all started, Cormier and Petersen knew the name of their sodas would be a nod to the fun and fitting descriptor of the mashup of music, which itself was the “natural result of colliding cultural elements—Cajun and Creole, black and white, French and English, rural and urban, folk and mainstream — that coalesced on the prairies of southwestern Louisiana to create a harmonious whole” (Bernard 1996, 8).

Petersen recognizes that the genre may be well known around the streets and fields of southwest Louisiana, but it may leave consumers in other parts of the country scratching their heads. Regardless, they felt the name of the product might get people to try it, even if they weren’t familiar with what it meant.

“Swamp Pop is a play on the name of the Louisiana music genre called swamp pop, which is the kind of Cajun rockabilly sort of thing that emerged I guess halfway through the previous century. So here, it’s something that people recognize fairly quickly and other parts of the country it’s not so much, but we wanted to do an actual soda that was a play on the name of the music genre and because Collin is a chef, ideas for flavors that kind of I guess were inspired by flavors that we grew up on came pretty quickly, so once the name idea was there and we thought, ‘hey this is a brand that might have some legs,’ the actual product ideas came along pretty quickly thanks to Collin” (Petersen interview).

Equipped with a name, Cormier and Petersen were ready for a product, and they were ready with a baseline value of how to do things.

## **Louisiana sugar**

“This was right in the thinking process—the idea that we had to use Louisiana sugar came from the name as we were developing the flavors. In fact, part of the reason why the idea worked was because of the sugar cane industry in Louisiana because of the history of it. I mean, it was part and parcel with why doing a double entendre on the name of the music genre even made sense, so we knew right off the bat it was going to have to be Louisiana sugar, we never even priced out or considered sugar from any other source. That was partly convenient because we felt like the soda market had been even up to that point moving, away from high fructose corn syrup and other imitation sweeteners, so we knew that was the direction the industry was going anyway and here we our in home state that happens to be this amazing state that grows sugar cane, here’s this great idea, here’s this great name, it has to be that way. So there was never a question about that. It feels good knowing that we’re doing something that ricochets around other parts of industry in Louisiana” (Petersen interview).

Petersen continues: “To know that in some small way we’re contributing to that industry, to an indigenous industry, something that’s been here for so long, it always only made sense for us to take advantage of that resource, so running into a farmer or hearing about a farmer whose sugar goes into the pipeline that we ultimately get it out of is nice kind of vindication of yes, you can do this and it makes sense to, and it’s a good thing” (Petersen interview).

Cormier echoed that sentiment, and recalled growing up running around his great-grandfather’s land.

“There’s a huge sugar cane industry here and there was sort of a movement in the soda industry as a whole of going back to cane sugar and so you know, in the beginning that was something me and John sort of talked about that we were surprised that no one had ever done here with the industry that we have. So it became important to us, although Pop-Pop wasn’t a

sugar cane farmer, we wanted to support the farmers who make a living here and we also just sort of liked the idea that too that when you drive down the interstate here, you're surrounded by the sugar that makes our product so you know, that's really cool" (Cormier interview).

For comparison, in the early twentieth century, Coca-Cola was once the single largest industrial consumer of sugar in the world, Bartow Elmore writes in *Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism*. "By 1985, Coke made the switch to 100 percent corn syrup in all of its beverages sold within the United States, which resulted in a dramatic increase in per capita caloric soft drink consumption, which rose from 28.7 gallons in 1985 to 36.8 gallons in 1998" (Elmore 2016, 269). In 1999, Coca-Cola also spent \$174.4 million on advertising (Nestle 2002, 22), which is far beyond what Swamp Pop has available. Cormier and Petersen knew being a rival of Coke was not a route they wanted to take, so from the outset, although it was a core value to use Louisiana sugar, it ended up being a much harder process than the entrepreneurs thought.

"While we are surrounded by cane fields and a large sugar cane industry, so much of the sugar gets refined in these central locations and there's no way to verify where it ends up, so when we were towards the end of our fact-finding journey to see if that was possible we ended up finding Louisiana Sugar Refinery in Gramercy, and they were able to. While they do process sugar from other places, certain runs that they do are all Louisiana cane sugar and so they were able to certify for us that whenever we buy sugar from them, that it is all certified Louisiana cane sugar. While our Pop-Pop didn't grow cane, the fields around him did, so we did spend some time running around in cane fields and you know, you can't avoid it, if you drive around Lafayette. In fact there's even tracts of land in the city still that in season will have sugar cane grown on it. We thought it was neat that sodas used to be sweetened with only cane sugar, so it

was a nice kind of call back to the tradition of soda making plus being able to help out a local industry as well” (Cormier interview).

However, they learned pretty quickly that they are a small part of the sugar cane industry.

“Louisiana produces a lot of sugar, which is really put into context when we visited the refinery and stood by thirty foot mountains, literal mountains of sugar, and realized one of our bottling runs doesn’t even comprise half of that mountain of sugar. It was cool to be able to see it and know it came from a field somewhere in the area and have it in a bottle that you can hold in your hand, which is not really something we saw much in the beverage industry. There’s obviously a trend towards local products in the food industry, but we were sort of happy to bring it to a beverage” (Cormier interview).

In *Sugar: A Global History*, Andrew F. Smith examines why humans are attracted to sweet-tasting foods, which is mainly due to the 10,000 taste buds in the mouth that have special receptors for sweetness (Smith 7). Smith outlines how people in cane-growing areas have used the liquid and products from it to sweeten foods and beverages, including ancient times in India (a five-ingredient punch), China (candies and rice pudding), the Middle East (cookies, crackers and candies). “Refined sugar achieved its pinnacle of conspicuous consumption in the households of wealthy Egyptians” (Smith 67), and throughout the Middle Ages, the most popular European drink was hypocras, a mulled wine sweetened with honey. More recently, added sugar is also found in energy and sports drinks that can contain 16-33 grams of sugar.

It is estimated that about eight percent of the total calories consumed in the world comes from sugar, although the amount consumed by populations varies greatly, even with an anti-sugar movement (Smith 135). Despite this, sugar cane and sugar beet remain important crops, with Brazil leading the way, followed by India, China and Thailand. “Consumed in moderation,

sweet foods and beverages will remain an integral part of our lives far into the future” (Smith 136).

In terms of sugar content, there are 46 grams of sugar in a 12 ounce bottle of Swamp Pop, which is on the high end, but as Petersen says: “We knew that, but deliciousness was always our goal, so we just did what was required for deliciousness. So in a case of Swamp Pop, to give kind of an idea to what people can relate to because grams is sort of nebulous, there’s about 2.4 pounds of sugar in a case of 24 Swamp Pop” (Petersen interview). In comparison to soda giant Coca-Cola, when they first started by the mid-1910s, “Coke was the single largest industrial consumer of sugar in the world, funneling roughly 100 million pounds annually into customers’ bodies” (Elmore 2016, 77).

Since humans survive on complex carbohydrates, it is common for their lives to be built around that crop. “Its calendar of growth fits with their calendar of the year; its needs are, in some curious ways, their needs. It provides the raw materials out of which much of the meaning in life is given voice” (Mintz 1985, 10).

In his own way, Cormier echoes this sentiment. “Sugar should be at the heart of soda,” he said (Stickney 2015). Therefore, the heart of Louisiana is represented by Swamp Pop Soda.

## **Across America**

When I asked Petersen about the regional identity of Swamp Pop, and how it can change when it’s exported, he explained that he didn’t want to put any sort of visual indicators of the typical South Louisiana items on the packaging, because even though the name may not be

understood immediately they needed to signal to people in other ways that this was a premium product.

“The question of how our brand and our flavors and their names play in other parts of the country has been a really interesting part of doing this. We know what a satsuma is, we assume other people may not, but we don’t know kind of how far that reaches. So I think the consensus is that most people don’t know what a satsuma is (laughing), outside of Louisiana or outside of the South, so that’s been an interesting kind of learning process to see what even if it doesn’t translate, it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a bad thing, it just becomes a curiosity rather than kind of a interesting, familiar thing. And the same with the brand, so Swamp Pop to people here who know the reference are familiar with the music, they see it and they understand it quickly. In other parts of the country, it’s seen as kind of more of a curiosity than a clever thing and that’s ok” (Petersen interview).

He added that the South in terms of food is extremely exportable, because it’s a region of the United States where people have familiarity with the cuisine and with the flavors, or at least they know that there is a distinct thing going on there. “Even within the South, I think South Louisiana in particular is particularly strong because of you know, Cajun cuisine and all those things. So yeah we wanted to find a niche within that sort of legacy of exporting those things to other parts of the country and other parts of the world and find a new twist on doing that. It really had not been done through beverages, I think, in the way that we’re doing it” (Petersen interview).

## The taste of place

With this in mind, I wanted to read about terroir, “a French term, usually associated with wine, that can be translated as ‘the taste of place.’ Like *terrain* and *territory*, it stems from the Latin word *terra*, earth. It’s a new concept in the world of gastronomy, yet it’s not a new idea.” (Jacobsen 2010, 2). In *American Terroir: Savoring the Flavors of our Woods, Waters, and Fields*, Rowan Jacobsen explains that terroir is a relatively simple concept: site conditions affect how things grow, but terroir is about more than just geography.

“For example, locavores tend to get enthusiastic about terroir as a means for promoting local foods, but regionalism, tradition, and terroir are not the same thing. Manhattan clam chowder, Montreal bagels, and Seattle coffee are not examples of terroir. Cajun gumbo is, as it’s a dish that evolved to celebrate the best of what the land had to offer (crayfish, sassafras leaves, and so on” (Jacobsen 2010, 5). Although it pained me to quote his spelling of crayfish instead of crawfish, this idea works for Swamp Pop too, because like a gumbo, they take the flavors of the land they grew up on (their great-grandfather’s farm, where he grew figs, satsumas, and cucumbers, as well as the land around them that grew sugar) and celebrate those ingredients in a new beverage.

Amy Trubek researches the vital connections between food and place in *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey Into Terroir*. “The French have long thought about the relationship of food and beverage to place and linked place to taste, developing values and practices and making such thinking a type of cultural common sense” (Trubek 2009, xv). The French took the lead, but people around the world discern their food and drink in different ways, and today, terroir has transcended France and is a global phenomenon. Part of Swamp Pop’s appeal is its local identity,

which may be a reference to a shift in huge conglomerates. Localizing a drink is a way to stonewall against a global food system. For Swamp Pop as well, the flavors are representative of specific fruits and tastes of the founders' childhoods.

“The taste of place, like food and drink, may end up being a universal phenomenon with very localized stories, practices framed by particular cultural memories, meanings, and myths” (Trubek 2009, 12). Trubek says that food and drink from a certain place are thought to possess “unique tastes,” and therefore terroir frames a “foodview”.

Trubek references agriculturalist Olivier de Serres, who says in his seventeenth-century treatise *Le théâtre d'agriculture et des mesnage des champs* that the fundamental task in agriculture is to understand the nature of the terroir, whether it is the land of your ancestors or land recently acquired. “Soil and roots are at the heart of French cuisine as well. In his discourse, places make unique tastes, and in turn such flavor characteristics and combinations give those places gastronomic renown” (Trubek 2009, 19). I would argue that it is this exact concept that Swamp Pop Premium Sodas is bottling. The co-founders understand the land of their ancestors, appreciate the sugarcane grown on land in the city they grew up in, and use it in their beverage. They remember the tastes of the cucumbers grown on their great-grandfather's land, and the figs that their grandmother still grows and uses in her fig preserves, and put those in the ginger ale and noble cane cola, respectively. “In France terroir is often associated with *racines*, or roots, a person's history with a certain place. Local taste, or *goût du terroir*, is often evoked when an individual wants to remember an experience, explain a memory, or express a sense of identity” (Trubek 2009, 51).

Canadian scholar Robert Feagan looks at local food systems movements, which is a resistance to the global food systems gaining popularity today. Discussion about the place of

food emerges at the center of these discussions, which I view through the lens of a beverage. As Feagan writes “Food and place are intertwined in robust ways in the geographic imagination and central to our lifeworld.” By tying food (and in the case of Swamp Pop, drink) to a place provides an opportunity for marketing and cultural branding through food associated with place. Movement toward food production and consumer transactions are involved with local place. In this way, consumers place greater value on products that they associate with a region, place, terroir or method of production. By associating the flavor of Swamp Pop with South Louisiana, customers in other places may be nostalgic for a place they left behind, or if they still reside there, enhancing pride of their region. “‘Patrimonialization’ is another term used in France to describe this mesh of authenticity, heritage and food as manifested in regional cuisine, the protection of rural landscapes, and heightened or renewed sense of place (Feagan 2007, 26).”

## **Packaging**

Besides their flavors, an important part of the Swamp Pop brand is packaging and the logo, which fits with the relevance of packaging for the small soda brands. According to Allen Adamson, managing director of Landor Associates in New York, “[Packaging] is their only hope. Packaging is the last point of differentiation. It almost levels the playing field.” (Shermach 1996). Adamson also warns manufacturers against trendy designs and to think of a long-lasting, consistent logo. Bob Lussmeyer, vice president of new business for Select, said smaller soft-drink brands, must find niches like this because “the national brands do an excellent job in investing in the consumer through packaging, brand identity, advertising, and experimenting with reformulations” (Shermach 1996). Packaging was also lauded by Hellen Berry, vice

president of marketing at the Beverage Marketing Corp. of New York, who said “Packaging basically is competing for the consumer’s eye to attract attention. It’s hard to know what to say about a soft drink except that it’s refreshing, so the picture of the brand in the consumer’s mind, the package, communicates the indescribables. Color is big: red Coke and blue Pepsi. A lot of brands use waves, which make the consumer think ‘cool’ or ‘refreshing’” (Shermach 1996).

Packaging can also act as a memory trick for consumers. “The soda pop you chugged as a child can tug the memory, especially if you grew up on regional brands that became unavailable as soon as you moved away from home” (Porter, 2002). People remember the foods of their childhoods, so why not the beverages as well? “Yet when you think about it, the memory of a bottle of Blenheim’s (a zippy ginger ale from the Carolinas) or Yoo-Hoo chocolate soda (endorsed by Yogi Berra himself!) makes sense. Downing soda on a hot summer’s day was one of the rites and treats of childhood” (Porter, 2002).

Owning a business means thinking about getting the product to the consumer, since “A system of mass consumption requires a consumer culture that interacts with mass marketing” (Guptill 2017, 93). So when Cormier and Petersen were thinking of marketing their brand to consumers, they wanted to be relevant to the South Louisiana area, and appeal to outsiders: really, focusing on anyone who has an interest in purchasing their product.

The Swamp Pop logo also gives a nod to the music of the same name, and is based on the F-hole on a fiddle, which vaguely resembles the letter S. The overall packaging recalls another era, and the four-pack box looks like an old-fashioned wooden crate. Each glass bottle has artwork of the main ingredient, whether it is a strawberry, fig, or pecan, and all flavors contain the words Premium Sugarcane Soda.

Graphic designer Bram Johnson, who owns two t-shirt shops in Lafayette and New Orleans, designed the logo.

“He helped us realize that vision of trying to do something that was nostalgic, but would have the potential to be at least taken seriously in other parts of the country. We think our flavors are serious contenders in the deliciousness department, and we didn’t want them to be seen as hokey or a joke or as a gag if someone didn’t understand the name, so he helped us kind of figure out a way to design the branding in a way that would hopefully communicate and cue to people that this is a premium product even if it’s got a funny name” (Petersen interview).

Cormier said they chose Johnson, also a Lafayette native, because they knew his style was in line with what they were envisioning, and he even has Johnson’s original sketch of the logo.

“It still kind of gives me chills when I look at it. It’s really strange to be able to picture something in your head and hand it off to someone and have them create it better than you could have, but that was sort of when it really started to click for John and I and everyone that we actually may be on to something here. It was looking like what we thought it could, and we really could picture it on a store shelf from 50 years ago and that was when we really started to get excited about it” (Cormier interview).

Cormier said he does see a role for Swamp Pop both in Lafayette and the broader statewide community.

“Swamp Pop sort of took a cue from the craft beer movement that we saw happening around the country, but in Lafayette we saw a bunch of local breweries opening up all at once and we wanted to take that ethos of making something local and putting our own spin on it. We thought that it was a no-brainer that we could make this product that’s evocative of the Louisiana

flavors we grew up with plus help out—in a very small part—but help out a local industry. “  
(Cormier interview).

Though he does not want to overstate their role as an avenue for sugarcane farmers, he says, “We felt good especially when, to our relief, we were able to find a source of guaranteed, certified Louisiana cane sugar, that we were at least in some small part contributing to an industry that’s much, much older than we are, especially considering the idea and the flavors came from a farm here in Louisiana, so it kind of feels good to come full circle in that way”  
(Cormier interview).

### **It’s a family affair**

Family is weaved throughout this project, and both Cormier and Petersen buck the notion of a sour family relationship and instead, lean on each other for insight and ideas. This is also the case of the Burguières family, the oldest sugarcane farming family in the state, and although they’ve had a tumultuous history, their company is still intact, and still profitable. In *The House that Sugarcane Built: the Louisiana Burguières*, Donna McGee Onebane, a folklorist and a member of the English department faculty at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, traces the lineage and family history of Eugène D. Burguières, a merchant, and his cousin E. Denis Lalande, a jeweler, from when they first landed in New Orleans from Paris on April 29, 1831. She uses letters, photographs, business records, and memories of current descendants, as well as genealogy research done by Eugène Burguières’ great-great-granddaughter Leila Bristow.

Eugène Burguières became part of the regional sugar cane industry in October 1851, when he leased a sugar plantation along both sides of the Bayou Black in Chacahoula, in

Terrebonne Parish. Two years later, he purchased the plantation and the sugar mill. This eventually became the J. M. Burguières Company, started by Jules (son of Eugène), who made a major move when he established his own business. His timing was excellent: according to historian J. Carlyle Sitterson, “Not since the war had the prospects [for sugarcane planters] appeared so promising as in 1877” (Onebane 56). In fact, Jules Burguières “was one of the pivotal figures in the development of the Louisiana sugarcane industry” (Onebane 82). As Onebane says, “Who could resist the lure of the tropical plant that transformed into white gold, creating sugar masters across the South? After all, in 1853, Louisiana planters produced a quarter of the world’s exportable sugar” (Onebane 35).

It is truly remarkable that a business that started in 1851 is still going today, despite lean times, family disagreements and arguments. The well-educated members of the family realized that diversification was the key to staying in business, and became owners of mineral rights, salt mines, and land in order to stay afloat. One cousin even received a patent for the Clarifying Cane Juice Settler, an evaporating apparatus with a higher degree of efficiency than earlier models.

The reason the Burguières remain to this day may be because of the philosophy explained by Philip Burguières, a visionary who, along with Ron Cambre, took a risk by stepping into the turmoil of the company in 1978: “I remember when I was seven or eight years old, my daddy telling me that by the time I was fifteen, there would be no sugar business, and I’m sure his daddy told him the same thing in 1910. People have been saying the sugar business is dying for 150 years, and, every time it looks like the funeral service has been set, a notice comes out that it’s delayed again... So now, if you’re a sugar farmer in Louisiana, you have to be a somewhat optimistic person, or you just fold your tent and go home” (Onebane 2014, 166).

Cormier echoes this sentiment when he discusses his cousin. Since Cormier also has a full-time business as a restaurant owner and chef, Petersen handles all of the day to day Swamp Pop business.

“Swamp Pop has one person working full time, which is John, and I help out when I can. We’re obviously first cousins, and the financial backing is our family as well. So, it is basically all family and you know, you hear horror stories about getting involved in business with family, but it wouldn’t have made sense for us any other way because it was so strongly tied to our memories and our time growing up here that it only made sense. I don’t think anyone else would’ve understood what we were pitching except the people who were there that experienced it with us” (Cormier interview).

Petersen puts it simply: Swamp Pop is a family business completely owned by members of their family, with both sets of parents involved.

“It has not created any of the hiccups that you hear about so often from working with family, and it’s given us a good kind of foundation of support and advice. I think at the core is Collin and I’s trust in each other’s particular abilities. I think we trust each other enough as backstops to our own ideas that if it can bounce between us and we both think it’s good, then we’re confident that it’s a decent idea and if either of us is willing to say ‘I don’t think that’s such a hot idea,’ I think we’ve got enough respect for one another to say, well maybe this isn’t such a hot idea, so the balance of that has worked really well and I think part of that is based on us being family and having known each other for so long” (Petersen interview).

That balancing act has proved to be a successful formulation for Swamp Pop thus far, and the young entrepreneurs are looking ahead to see what will be their next idea.

Petersen says he hopes Swamp Pop will be seen in several more places, and that it will become more ubiquitous, even within their niche. He understands that a company has to grow, and ultimately, if customers want your product, you need to make it accessible. One possibility is to expand their flavors. “In terms of new flavors, I think we're in a really comfortable spot right now with six flavors. There are a ton of people that we still need to introduce those flavors to, and the more flavors you have, honestly, the more complicated the whole operation gets (laughs), so we try to kind of remind ourselves that while we are very used to these six flavors, these are still very fresh and very new to most people and they still need to do a lot of work for us before we start bringing in fresh legs. But who knows, down the line we've got a lot of ideas that I'm just personally curious to try and experiment with, so I'm sure there'll be more of that down the road too” (Petersen interview).

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

The course of this project spanned two and a half years, and enabled me first and foremost to determine that my favorite flavor of Swamp Pop is Satsuma Fizz, which captures the sweet, aromatic essence of the beloved Louisiana citrus fruit. Each time I pour a Satsuma Fizz over ice, or drink it straight from the bottle, it is a way to travel a few hundred miles down the interstate and go back home again. As I wandered sun-kissed sugarcane fields this past year, it reminded me of running through similar fields as a child while spending time at my grandparents' camp in Catahoula, Louisiana, a small town on the Ouchita River, with my grandfather taking a pocket knife to cut off a stalk of tall, green sugarcane as the sweet juice would pour down my chin.

As I toured the St. Mary Sugar Cooperative, I saw firsthand the amount of work that it takes to make a factory ready for the coming harvest. I even attended the 2017 Louisiana Sugarcane Festival in New Iberia, located thirty miles southeast of Lafayette. There, giant green and yellow John Deere tractors were on display with banners across the front proclaiming "Cane Families Care About Your Family. Please Drive Carefully". People say the theme of the festival, "Hi Sugar" with thick Cajun accents, and the smell of crawfish pies, soft-shelled crabs topped with crawfish étouffée, shrimp poboys, and fried fish permeate the air, as the drum beats of the middle and high school bands boom in your ears as King Sucrose and Queen Sugar ride by on

homemade floats made of painted sugarcane stalks and glitter. The Festival offered sweet treats made in the 4-H sugar cookery contest (broken up into categories of sugar cookies, oatmeal cookies, chocolate chip cookies, brownies, fudge, cakes, and pralines), and I saw the winners of the horticulture contest with their colorful flowers on display, as well as the winners of the longest stalk of cane. In some ways, I stepped back in time, venturing around small town Louisiana and becoming a participant observer in their way of life, listening to their stories, and being able to ascertain what makes the area tick.

I also came up close and personal with the wildlife at Cypress Lake, including mosquitoes, birds, several turtles and an alligator that snapped his teeth at me, which is the final footage I use in the film. I'm thankful the alligator didn't view me as his next meal, and instead, stayed in his watery habitat.

My research took me back into the past to discover how sugarcane was first processed, all the way to how it became a \$2 billion industry today, thereby completing my goal of learning more about the industry of the past and present to see where they co-mingled and differed. Although I had read about it in several texts, Breaux expertly explains the process of how the sugarcane grows, the cultivation of the soil, the distribution of the fertilizer, the planting process, and ultimately, the unwritten contract with Mother Nature that may or may not be honored.

“Year in and year out, every year we continue. Basically, it's the same thing every year; Mother Nature is the limiting factor. When she changes, our life changes around here” (Breaux interview). Whether it's a hurricane or a drought or even an exceptional year, the farmer is watching the fields to see what the harvest will bring, with one eye on the weather on the horizon. As he said in our interview in September of 2017, the upcoming harvest was due to be a good one, and he was right. Breaux is a man who did what he loved for thirty years, and even in

“retirement,” isn’t truly retired, and is still connected to the land of his birth. For him, the yearly Sugarcane Festival is a way to celebrate the sugar industry, as well as family and faith. “At the end of the day when you’ve walked in mud all day, the only thing you can ask is: dear Lord let me make another one” (Breux interview).

In fact, in 2011 Breux took over the role of King Sucrose, scepter of sugarcane in hand, waving at the crowd in the street. Kings are chosen for their contributions to the industry, and as Breux tells the story of his family history and his role at St. Mary’s, it’s easy to see how his contributions have helped the area.

I documented how two entrepreneurs are successful at a project they are both passionate about, and realize the importance of family to a business. Petersen says no day is a typical day for him, since he’s in charge of operations, preparing for the next production, coordinating with the bottler, sales and marketing, and responding to customers, retailers and distributors. Regardless of the monotony of running a business, he always comes back to one particular memory.

“The first time I drank Swamp Pop out of a bottle was when our first production run was actually complete, and that was a great feeling because it’s a physical culmination of all of this immaterial stuff that you’ve been doing for awhile. You did the design work, you sourced all the materials, you’ve got the flavor, you know where you’re getting the sugar, it’s all going to your bottler, and then it’s not an entirely finished thing until that moment when all those things come together, and that’s actually a pretty cool feeling” (Petersen interview).

Cormier, with a busy life not only as co-owner of Swamp Pop, but as the chef-owner of a successful pobo restaurant in downtown Lafayette and another restaurant that serves wood-fired pizzas he opened in spring 2018, also comes up with ideas for secondary uses for his beverage:

either as a mixer for cocktails called Poptails, or as the base in a recipe for praline cream soda marinated pork tenderloin.

“From the beginning, just because of my training and its what I do for a living, being a chef, that was always in my mind. I was always thinking of the alternate uses, whether it be in cooking or whether it be in cocktail recipes, I always thought that was a fun way to approach things, not to mention a great marketing tool as well for us” (Cormier interview).

I hope the work I did will be helpful to scholars in the future who are interested in seeing how a crop of the past can be a livelihood for individuals today. The motto of Southern Oral History Project at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill is “you don’t have to be famous for your life to be history,” something that stuck with me as I interviewed three individuals who offered glimpses into their lives as a chef, a business man, and a farmer. They are not famous, but their stories deserve to be told. It is important to preserve the voices of the South for the subsequent generations, especially for students of food studies. I believe future research possibilities could be to talk to other farmers, and to continue the conversation with Cormier and Petersen to see how they expand and grow their niche business into something more each year. Another possibility would be to visit the Louisiana Sugar Refinery in Gramercy, to see how they put together the all-Louisiana sugar runs, and how they get the sugar from other locations, as well. Overall though, I think this project showcases what I set out to do: see how sweet it is.

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## VITA

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**Adjunct Instructor**, EDHE 105: Freshman Year Experience, Fall 2014, University of Mississippi

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**Senior Staff Assistant and Website Administrator**, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, June 2013-present

- created semester class schedules using SAP, updated website content, coordinated stewardship communications, wrote and edited news releases and newsletter articles, booked travel for guest speakers, assisted with conferences and symposia; maintained graduate student files; assisted with annual reports; Eudora Welty Creative Writing Contest committee; coordinated weekly Brown Bag Lectures

**Communications Specialist**, University of Mississippi, Department of Media and Public Relations, Aug. 2005-May 2013

- developed short-term and long-term communication goals for clients; wrote news releases, brochures, annual reports and marketing materials for various schools and departments; coordinated media relations, press conferences and event promotions; member of UM Crisis Communication Team; editor of *Business First* magazine; editor of

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**Editor, *Oxford Town***, Oxford MS, June 2000-July 2005

- wrote and edited copy for weekly entertainment newspaper, coordinated editorial calendar, managed staff of freelance writers, managed budget

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- *Oxford Magazine*, Oxford MS, December 2017-present
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**Graphic Designer, *Oxford Eagle***, Oxford MS, August 1998-June 2000

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- **“An Order of Magnitude: After 20 Years on the Bench,”** *UM Lawyer*, Fall/Winter 2005
- **“It Runs in the Family,”** *UM Lawyer*, Spring/Summer 2006
- **“Another Chance to Make a First Impression,”** *UM Lawyer*, Fall 2006
- **“Making a Name for Themselves,”** *Ole Miss Alumni Review*, Winter 2006
- **“The Customer Knows Best,”** *UM Quest Research Magazine*, Winter 2007
- **“One Magic Moment: Conference Connects Student to Career in Hollywood,”** *UM Lawyer*, Spring/Summer 2007
- **“The Good Samaritans,”** *UM Lawyer*, Fall/Winter 2007-08
- **“Turning Truth into Fiction,”** *UM Lawyer*, Fall/Winter 2008-09
- **“Climate Change,”** *UM Lawyer*, Spring/Summer 2009
- **“From the Skies to the Streets,”** *UM Lawyer*, Spring/Summer 2010
- **“Legal Instruments: Alums Make Sweet Harmony with Law, Music Careers,”** *Ole Miss Alumni Review*, Fall/Winter 2010
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- **“On Their Toes,”** *Ole Miss Alumni Review*, Winter 2009
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- **“MS Law Journal Expands to Seven Books,”** *UM Lawyer*, Wint./Spr. 2012
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- **“Securing a Niche,”** *Ole Miss Alumni Review*, Spring 2014
- **“Telling Stories Through Songs,”** *Ole Miss Alumni Review*, Spring 2016
- **“Beth Ann Fennelly,”** *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, May 2017
- **“Family, Fun, Food and Football,”** *A Year in Mississippi*, Fall 2017
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- Lafayette County Literacy Council Board of Directors, 2015-present

- Junior Leadership Lafayette Steering Committee 2008-2014
- Southern Foodways Alliance Annual Symposium, volunteer, 2013-present
- Public Relations Association of Mississippi (PRAM), Oxford-Ole Miss Chapter, PRAM member 2005-2013, PRAM President 2008
- Lafayette County Chamber of Commerce Leadership Lafayette, Oxford, Mississippi, 2007
- Big Brothers, Big Sisters Board of Directors 2007
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