

History of the Louisiana Yambilee

The Yambilee Festival was born over a cup of coffee. The idea of a Yambilee was conceived by J.W. "Bill" Low, a native Texan who adopted Opelousas as his homeland. His suggestion was heartily endorsed by his friend, Felix Dezauche, a yam shipper and processor. This idea resulted in the creation of the annual festival, which is considered by many to be the outstanding festival, designed to honor a local industry. It is held during the last full week of October. The first Louisiana Yambilee celebration was held October 9th and 10th of 1946. Credit to the success of this first Yam festival goes to the first Board of Directors whose members included J.F. Dezauche, J.P. Barnett, Charles Bourque, Anthony Chachere, J.W. Low, Arnold Winsberg, J.M. Landry, Lee Mizzi, Allen Dezauche, A.B. Reed, Seth Lewis, John Thistlewaite and Alex Watkins; city, parish and state officials; Opelousas Chamber of Commerce, civic and fraternal organizations and countless individuals, too numerous to list. The first Louisiana Yambilee festival had a queen, Jean Horecky of Church Point, no king and 2 Co-Mr. Yams, Jack Herbert and Alfred Lagrange, both from Opelousas. The first king reigned during the second festival and was R.J. Castille of Sunset.

According to J.W. Low, the raison d'être of the festival was to "assist and encourage the advancement of the material prosperity and progress of the State of Louisiana, Southwest Louisiana and St. Landry Parish by stimulating local and national interest in Louisiana farm produce, particularly Louisiana Sweet potatoes (yams) and to provide colorful programs of entertainment capable of generating nationwide publicity and advertising for Louisiana yams and other farm produce."

THE SWEET GOLDEN YAM (sweet potato) has been something to celebrate every since the Frenchmen, who established the first settlement here in 1760, discovered the native Indians eating sweet potatoes. Already tested by the Attakapas, Alabama, Choctaw, and Opelousas Tribes, the tasty nourishing sweet potato became the favorite food item of the French and Spanish settlers, who in 1765, established a trading post near Opelousas. Thus the Indians, French, Spanish and Acadians, who later migrated from Canada, devoted their efforts to making the "golden yam" a prime crop. The yam crop is harvested in late summer and fall, thus the last week of October is the right time to celebrate a bountiful harvest.

The Louisiana Yambilee, Inc. is a non-profit organization made up of stockholders who meet annually. They elect a board of directors (presently 23 members) for 3-year terms. This board, under the leadership of their Executive Committee, is charged with the operation of the corporation and holding the annual festival and all its functions. They employ a secretary, who cares for the day-to-day operations of the office located on U.S. Highway 190 west in Opelousas.