Lives of Quiet Desperation

The Ancestry of a Louisiana Frenchman

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Privately Published by the Author
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Put Your Heart to the Wind:
The Lavergne Family and the Flu Epidemic of 1918

A Personal Essay by
Gary M. Lavergne

Introduction

Shortly before his death in July of 2018, my cousin Archie Lavergne of Pasadena, Texas wrote a short memoir of his life. His children enjoyed his stories about growing up in rural St. Landry Parish, Louisiana so much that they asked him to put them in writing so they would not be lost. Archie's essay, *My Life As: Pauline's Son*, is only 18 pages long, but it is a charming story of a family living and dying on farmlands in the heart of Louisiana's Cajun Country. When Archie passed away a couple of years ago, I was honored to deliver the eulogy at his funeral. After introducing myself, I said, "[Archie] was born into, and grew up in, a truly remarkable family of Lavergnes in Lawtell, Louisiana. As a matter of fact, Archie and I used to joke about how the Lavergnes *we* came from were *never* stable people."

It is easy to joke about my family; we are comfortable making fun of ourselves because what we say is funny *because* it is true! It helps that many of us are gifted *raconteurs*—we know who we are and we are alright with that.

At this writing, the U.S. is reaching the apex of a Coronavirus pandemic. With time on my hands, I re-read *Pauline's Son* with an appreciation of a more serious side to the Louisiana Lavergnes. About 100 years ago, my grandparents experienced the terror of the Spanish Flu Pandemic that swept through their home in the fall of 1918. The terror was worldwide and yet overshadowed by the Great World War.

I chose to tell this tragic and frightening story through a lens focused on my grandmother, Aline Olivier Lavergne. Archie called her "Old Mom," but the rest of us remember her as "MaMom." Like me, my brothers, and my cousins before me, Archie was expected to work at a very young age in the brutally hot farm fields of southwestern Louisiana. He wrote that one day he and MaMom were picking cotton on each side of the same row when he complained about how tired he was and how he wanted to quit for the day. In her informal, colloquial Louisiana French, she replied, *"Décourage-toi pas; mets ton coeur au*

vent." Translated: "Don't be discouraged; put your heart to the wind."[6] For years I wondered what that quote must have meant.

After investigating the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918 and what she went through, I have a better idea.

Aline "MaMom" Olivier Lavergne (1891-1977)

The cousins of mine who lived near her remember that throughout her life MaMom's hair was long and beautiful. Every morning she brushed those locks on her front porch so that strands would not fall onto her immaculately clean and polished wood floors. Then she expertly twisted, coiled, and pinned her hair into a perfectly tight and beautiful bun that stayed secure until bedtime. As a young woman and into middle age she was strong, stout, and sturdy, the result of decades of relentlessly hard farm work. But her toughness also came from her genes. Her grandmother was a Boone, and the legendary American frontiersman and pathfinder, Daniel Boone, was her great-great-great uncle.[7] Undoubtedly that toughness was reinforced by growing up without ever knowing her father, Oscar Olivier, who died in 1892 at the age of 31; Aline was only one year old. She lived with her beautiful widowed mother, Aurelia Thibodeaux Olivier, for the rest of her mother's life. (See Figure 1 below)

Figure 1: Oscar and Aurelia Thibodeaux Olivier, parents of Aline "MaMom" Olivier Lavergne

A family of farmers named Lavergne, including a long, lanky son named John Clarville (sometimes spelled "Clairville"), lived near the Oliviers. John Clarville had French ancestors from Quebec who had helped to settle Louisiana at least 40 years before the expulsion of the Acadians from what is now Nova Scotia. (Explaining to my own family that our Lavergne Family is not technically Cajun is often

[6] I want to thank Phoebe Beaugh Trotter for helping me arrive at the most appropriate translation. More formal translations would include *Ne vous découragez pas; mettez votre coeur au vent* or *Ne soyez pas découragé; mettez votre coeur au vent*.

[7] The lineage is as follows: Aline Olivier Lavergne of Louisiana > her father Oscar Olivier of Louisiana > his mother Euranie Boone of Louisiana > her father Daniel Boone of Louisiana> his father Daniel Boone was the first to move to Louisiana from North Carolina > and his father Jonathan Boone of Kentucky. Jonathan Boone and the legendary pathfinder Daniel Boone were brothers and the son of Squire Boone of Pennsylvania.

frustrating.) The 1910 U.S. Census (See Figure 2 below) provides the first evidence of Aline and Clarville's union. The listed head of household was Aurelia Thibodeaux [Olivier], and although Clarville and Aline had been married in September of the previous year, "Clarville" is listed as a "lodger."

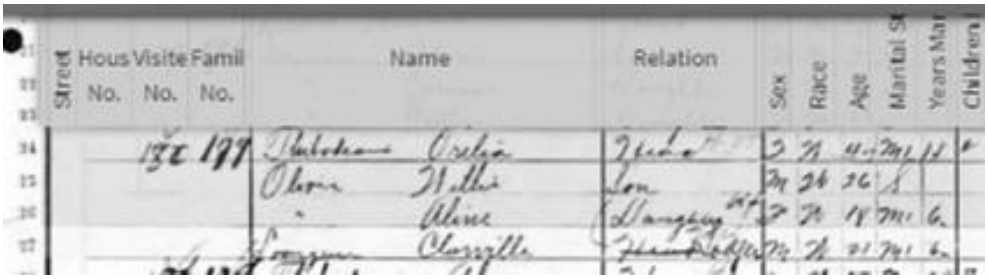

Figure 2: 1910 Census of the United States, Enumerated on April 30, 1910.

"MaMom" as a moniker was an understatement. She delivered 11 healthy babies from 1910 through 1930, which means she was pregnant for 99 (40%) of the 249 months of that 21-year period.[8]

John Clarville Lavergne (1889-1958)

For almost his entire life John Clarville Lavergne was a tenant farmer living within an area no larger than a couple of square miles. His households almost always included three generations. As stated above, he started his married life in 1909 in the home of his mother-in-law, where he continued to reside until her death in September of 1926. Immediately afterwards, Clarville, Aline, and the children moved into the home of his mother, Marie Ermine Bourgeois Lavergne, and she lived with them until she died in 1930.

Everything is relative, and the Lavergnes probably saw their life at that time as normal, but by today's standards, farm life for Clarville and Aline Lavergne was excruciating drudgery. Men like Clarville started the farming cycle in the spring behind a plow pulled by a mule. First came the cultivation of the soil; then the dirt was molded into rows; then the seeds were planted. When the plants reached a height of about three inches, the rows had to be hoed to control the weeds and the plants had to be spaced to prevent overcrowding. At harvest time everyone, men, women, and children, had to report to the fields. I never lived on those farms, but as a young boy I did work those fields on occasion. Many of my cousins, like Archie, thought picking cotton in August and September was the hardest of the chores. The heat and humidity, combined with the need to wear long sleeves to prevent abrasion of the arms, was difficult to bear. Digging sweet potatoes was the dirtiest of the chores. As Archie remembered, "Picking them up and putting them in crates meant that one had to be constantly bent over. What a back breaker that was." (Personal note: My least favorite was taking in hay bales. It is what convinced me to go to college.) In such an environment, where there didn't seem to be a clear line between human beings and farm animals, Archie remembered that a "good year" on a 40-acre farm produced 8-10 bales of cotton and several hundred crates of sweet potatoes to be sold at markets. Everything else, like corn (for animal feed and cornbread), cane syrup, and vegetables from a truck patch, provided for daily household sustenance. Archie estimated the Lavergne family's disposable *annual* income at less than

[8] Her children were: Pauline, born August 5, 1910; Ben, January 13, 1913; Joseph, March 25, 1914; Alton, 1916; Louis, May 20, 1918; Nadice, 1920; Paul, December 23, 1922; Jean Willis, February 15, 1924; Dorothy, May 28, 1926; Nolan, May 3, 1928; and Aurelia, September 7, 1930.

$2,000, one-fourth of which had to be given to the owner of the tenant farm.[9] My guess is that it was probably less than that.

Figure 3: Clarville and Aline Lavergne on their farm outside of Lawtell, Louisiana.

My father, Nolan Lavergne, who was the youngest son of Clarville and Aline, once told me that our ancestors who settled in St. Landry Parish "floated" down the Mississippi River from Canada. Family lore was that two Lavergne brothers "came down" from Quebec. I have never been able to establish the "two brothers" part, but to my surprise, the first Lavergnes of the New World were adventurers pushing frontiers.

It seems incongruent, but Clarville Lavergne was a direct descendant of some remarkable men of adventure. The first Lavergne to immigrate to the New World was named Louis, who crossed the Atlantic in his early 20s and settled in Quebec in the latter half of the 1660s. (For reasons that will soon be obvious, I will call him "Louis of Quebec.") He was probably from the French village of Mézières-sur-Issoire, Department of Haute-Vienne, France, near Bellac, which is near Limoges on the western edge of France's Massif Central. He immigrated as a cobbler or a shoemaker, and as early as 1672, Quebec Notarial Acts show his entering into a contract to make 500 pairs of shoes. But soon, he discovered that stone masonry was a much more lucrative profession. In a short time, he became the most successful of the few available masons to construct the growing city of Quebec. By 1681 he was successful enough to have made his own home in what was, and still is, the fashionable "upper town." He was one of the most prolific builders in Quebec until his untimely death in 1687. Louis Lavergne of Quebec is believed to be the first Lavergne in the New World.[10] His immigration to Quebec only 30 years after the death of its founder, Samuel de Champlain, and his role in the construction of the city (some of his buildings may

[9] Archie Lavergne, *My Life As: Pauline's Son,* an unpublished memoir, undated. In the author's possession.

[10] In the 1660s, someone named Jean Sauviot perpetuated the name of "Lavergne" after adopting it as his nickname. Louis Lavergne of Quebec was the first known resident with the actual surname of Lavergne. My information on Louis of Quebec is taken from two essays that were shared with me by a distant cousin from Canada named Louis-Philippe Provencher Lavergne. The essays are entitled: *Triumvirat maçonnique limousine à Québec* and *Lavergne: polémique autour d'un patronyme.* Cousin Louis-Philippe Lavergne added, *Déjà paru dans Mémoires de la société généalogique canadienne-française (MSGF)*, vol. 63, nº 2, 2012, p. 7-25. This information is supplemented by Cyprien Tanguay, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles canadiennes: depuis la fondation de la colonie jusqu'à nos jours*, Montréal, E. Sénécal, 1889, and reprinted 1967 by Baltimore Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967), page 355.

still be standing today) easily qualified him as an adventurer. Louis of Quebec had a son, also named Louis; I will call him "Louis of New Orleans."

Sometime around 1720, Louis of New Orleans left Quebec and, as my Dad said, "floated down" the Mississippi River to settle an area along the Gulf Coast near what is today Pascagoula, Mississippi. In 1725, in the original St. Louis Cathedral, he married Elizabeth Thomelin of a pioneer family from Mobile.[11] By 1729 they were living in New Orleans and by 1731 moved upriver on the east bank somewhere near Kenner or Destrehan, where he died in 1750. Louis of New Orleans was a resident of *La Nouvelle-Orleans* within 5-7 years of its founding in 1718 by Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, *Sieur de Bienville*. He and Elizabeth are listed in Glen Conrad's *Louisiana's First Families.* Like his father, Louis of New Orleans was an adventurer. Louis Lavergne of New Orleans had a son named Louis; I will call him Louis of Opelousas.

Louis of Opelousas probably did not remember much about his father Louis of New Orleans. The younger was only seven years old in 1750 when his father died. But like his father, he married a girl from Mobile; her name was Marie-Anne Lacase. They left what would become the New Orleans metropolitan area to settle further upriver in what is today St. John the Baptist Parish. But as that area along the Mississippi, often called the "German Coast," crowded with claims and land grants, the couple moved westward during the late 1780s to a more open area called the Opelousas District. It is from there successive generations of Lavergnes spread throughout French Louisiana, later known as Acadiana, to the hamlets of Plaquemine Point, Bellevue, Grand Coteau, Mallett, and later in newer localities like Lawtell, Church Point, Eunice and a host of other enclaves and small towns. The openness and the lack of a single administrative center of the Opelousas District did not lend itself to the easy identification of a single-site "founding" as in Quebec or New Orleans, but it is reasonable to argue that Louis Lavergne of Opelousas was an adventurer, like his father and grandfather. He was the patriarch of one of the first families of the area.

When Louis Lavergne of Opelousas settled his family in the area now known as Imperial St. Landry Parish ("Imperial" because it would later be divided into three parishes: St. Landry, Acadia, and Evangeline), adventure ended and was replaced by more than 200 years of geographic immobility. Once in St. Landry, successive heads of the Lavergne households were an unbroken string of poor farmers. The first few owned land through Spanish land grants and American homesteads; those that followed were tenants working for landowners and a percentage of their seasonal harvests. Perhaps because of their immobility and the realities of the agrarian life, children were valuable sources of labor. These generations were testaments to procreation: in my direct lineage the five generations from Louis Lavergne of Opelousas to John Clarville Lavergne of Plaquemine Point produced at least 48 children for a rounded average of 10 children per generation. For the children and adults alike, life in Imperial St. Landry was crowded, hot, dirty, brutally hard—and often, unhealthy.

[11] Winston De Ville, *The New Orleans French, 1720-1733*, Baltimore: Clearfield Company, page 61.

Figure 4: John Clarville Lavergne about the time of his marriage in 1909.

The Spanish Flu

The highly contagious malady that came to be known as the "Spanish Flu" during the second decade of the 20th Century did not originate in Spain. It emerged during the height of World War I, and during a time of rigid government wartime censorship across both Allied and Central Powers countries, the press of neutral Spain freely reported on the spread of a baffling strain of influenza. The rest of the world translated those Spanish dispatches and unfairly named the new illness the "Spanish Flu." The first announcements of the U.S. Public Health Service described it as "a very contagious kind of cold."[12]

Influenza is a viral disease. A virus is different from bacteria. Bacteria is a single cell microorganism that attaches itself to cell membranes. The human body can more easily identify and attack bacteria using its own immune system than it can fight off a virus. A virus is much smaller than a bacterium and, rather than *attaching* itself to cells, it *invades* and *seizes* the cell's genetic machinery. After that invasion the body's immune system is not able to find it and kill it like it would many bacteria. By literally reprogramming cells, viruses hijack the body in order to keep themselves alive: viruses are extremely selfish. There are means by which our bodies can fight off viral infections, one of which is for the cells to commit "suicide," but these backup systems are not always effective. Even more perplexing is that, by some philosophical standards, viruses are not "living" insofar as they have no machinery of their own; they only have genetic material which, ingeniously, supplants the host genetic machinery. As my friend, Hung Doan, Ph.D., MD patiently explained: It would be like double agents intercepting CIA cables and replacing real instructions with fake intelligence.[13]

The Spanish Flu virus of 1918 was more than just selfish. It was cruel and terrifying. This flu had a unique pathogenesis wherein infection invaded both the upper and lower respiratory tracts. This made it both easily spread as an aerosol and extremely fatal. Pathologists at the time noted lung tissues with extensive fluid and hemorrhage. What was once believed to be a "very contagious kind of cold" soon became a nightmare of full body agony, delirium, and blood spurts from the ears, nose, and sometimes,

[12] John Barry, *The Great Influenza,* New York: Penguin Books, 2005, page 171; *St. Landry Clarion, October 12, 1918.*

[13] See: https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/infectious-diseases/expert-answers/infectious-disease/faq-20058098; Barry, *The Great Influenza*, pages 35, 100, 104, 107, & 378; I am hugely indebted to my friend Hung Doan, PhD, MD for his help in understanding the biology behind this. But, of course, any errors are my own.

the eyes. Its capricious selection of victims made it even more sinister. As with all diseases, the vulnerable—already unhealthy—succumbed. But many others including healthy young adults in their prime, like young soldiers vigorous enough to endure basic training, had been crowded into barracks and ships headed for the Great War in Europe. An alarming number saw their lungs fill with fluid and cellular debris placed there by their own immune systems; they died because they could not breathe. The condition is called Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome, or ARDS. Their own bodies' immune systems reacted so violently to the virus that it killed them. It is creepy, but this is what is happening in the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic. The virus is *both* good at multiplying rapidly and causing a massive inflammatory response leading to ARDS.[14]

October 1918

By September of 1918, Clarville and Aline Lavergne had been married for nine years and were living with Aurelia Thibodeaux Olivier (Aline's mother). They had five children: Pauline, Ben, Joseph, Alton, and Louis. Two years later, the 1920 Census (See Figure 5 below) identified Clarville as the head of household and Aurelia Thibodeaux as the "mother-in-law." Their home was in St. Landry Parish in "Plaquemine Point," an area so sparsely populated it could barely be considered a community. Today, there are more houses in this area between Lawtell, which is still an unincorporated community, and Lewisburg, which does not have its own zip code, but it is still decidedly remote and rural. The three-generation family lived on a tenant farm owned by a Mr. Frank Tweedel of Lewisburg. Very likely, the arrangement was a typical one (as described above) in which Clarville farmed the land and retained 75% of the harvest; 25% went to Mr. Tweedel. For the families of the area, electricity was as mysterious and hard to understand as viruses, and indoor plumbing was about 40 years into the future (even more for some of the poorest). Even I remember hand-cranked water pumps and outhouses in that area.

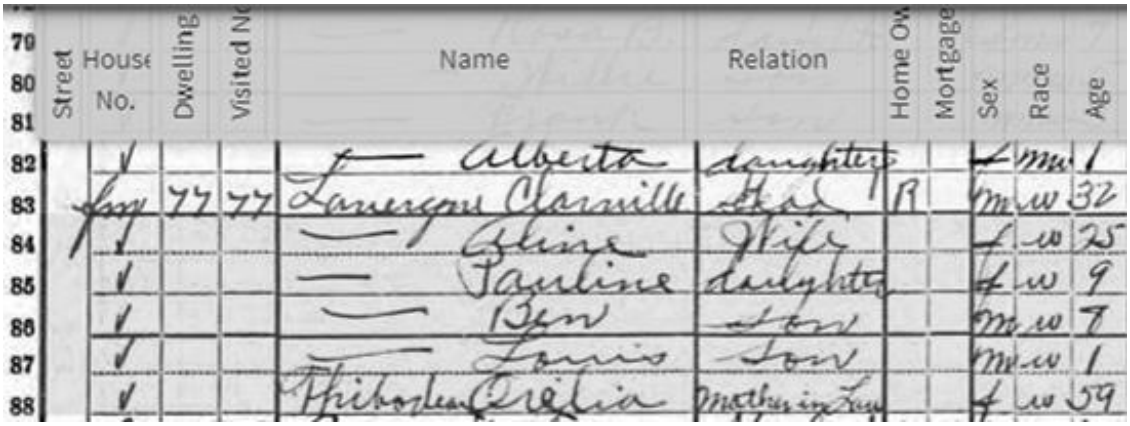

Figure 5: 1920 Census of the United States, Enumerated January 1, 1920

[14] Ibid.; Barry, *The Great Influenza*, pages 224, 249, 378, 460; *St. Landry Clarion*, October 12, 1918.

The Great War

On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson went before a joint session of Congress to request a declaration of war against Germany. No one in the Lavergne household could read, but they knew that Congress had enacted a Selective Service Act in May, which required all young men between the ages of 21 and 30 to register for possible conscription into military service. Clarville was 27, and on June 5, 1917, the official date of the first registration, he dutifully reported and registered. He easily received a deferment since, as the only adult male in his household, he supported seven people, including four children (the oldest of whom was seven), a wife, and a 56-year-old mother-in-law. What was interesting is the added claim of a "sprained leg" as an exemption. Given the rigors of his agrarian life at the time, the condition could not have been very debilitating. Perhaps it was an "extra" added by the registrar to assure the well-being of the young Lavergnes. (See Figure 6 below.)

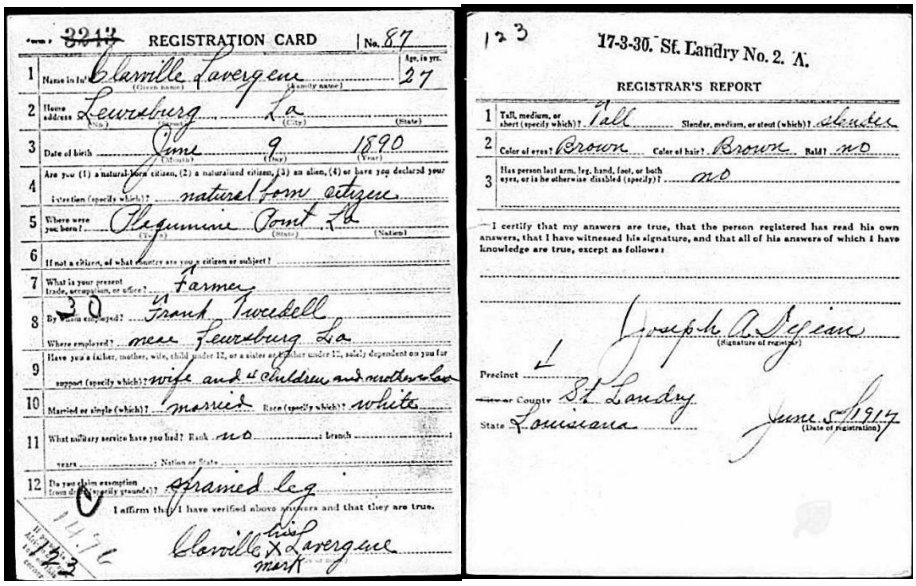

Figure 6: Selective Service Registration of Clarville Lavergne, June 5, 1917

From the second half of 1917 to September of 1918, throughout the globe, the news was of World War I raging in Europe and the slow but steady arrival of the American Army in Europe. On the home front, Woodrow Wilson led the nation in a complete mobilization of the civilian and military might of the United States. The sleeping dragon had awakened. What had been a rather tiny U.S. military establishment quickly turned into a world power. To save time, and to get to Europe before Germany could defeat the Allies, millions of healthy young American men were packed into extraordinarily tight barracks, quarters, ships, and trenches. Homefront factories brought millions of workers from all parts of the country into areas with inadequate housing and sanitation. These workers ate and drank from the same utensils and dishes. In some cases, they shared beds in shifts, and they all breathed the same damp, stagnant, stale air—and all of the surfaces—tables, floors, door knobs, hand rails—hosted bacteria and viruses.[15] The "social distancing" we practice so carefully during this current Coronavirus Pandemic was unheard of and non-existent in all of 1917 and the first nine months of 1918.

[15] Barry, *The Great Influenza,* Page 131.

Figure 7: Moving the American Expeditionary Force to the battlefields of Europe during World War I.

The Home Front

As a former high school teacher and university administrator, I have come to appreciate how schools are a barometer measuring how serious an environmental or social problem really is. For example, we know a freeze, flood, or a hurricane is serious when schools close. Conversely, when things are *really good* like if The University of Texas or LSU win a national football championship, classes will be cancelled for at least a day. Schools were some of the first institutions to close as America began to "shut down" in response to the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic. In 1918, however, school attendance was only beginning to become mandatory in Louisiana. Following two failed attempts in earlier legislative sessions, the legislature had enacted a compulsory school attendance law in 1910, but it applied only to Orleans Parish. The 1916 legislative session passed more meaningful and statewide attendance laws that required attendance by children between the ages of seven and fourteen and provided for penalties for parents who did not comply. In September of 1918, newspapers in Opelousas still found it necessary to remind parents to send their children to school. St. Landry Parish public schools opened for the 1918-19 school year on September 2 and the pupils had to be there by September 30.[16] So, Pauline, the oldest of the Lavergne children, had to go to school. (With a birthday of January 13 Ben missed the mandate by only two weeks.)

Alongside coverage of the war, in August and September of 1918, newspapers displayed their usual columns of health advertisements; none of them referred to influenza. Instead they promoted elixirs and remedies for chills and fevers, diarrhea, malarial germs, "biliousness," and "worms in children." (Personal note: I still remember my maternal grandmother explaining away some of my childhood illnesses as "maybe he's got the worms.") Entertainment ads listed moving picture shows beamed into theaters by miraculous Edison cameras. In St. Landry Parish local newspapers excitedly promoted the impending arrival of the Al G. Barnes Wild Animal Circus. The festivities were to begin with a two-mile parade through Opelousas. It was billed as "a melting pot of the Animal World" featuring four rings in a huge tent and over 1200 performing exotic animals, including lions, tigers, and leopards. In September

[16] *St. Landry Clarion,* September 28, 1918; Wallace L. Jones, Jr., "A History of Compulsory School Attendance and Visiting Teacher Services in Louisiana." (1967). LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses. 1340. Pages 29, 31, & 99.

of 1918, in Opelousas, that was the local news of the day. No one could have known that, just maybe, that the Barnes Circus spread one of the deadliest diseases in the history of Imperial St. Landry.

Even war coverage focused on rather undramatic Red Cross drives to collect linens for European hospitals and supplies to meet the needs of millions of refugees in Belgium and France. During the first week of October, the American Red Cross proudly announced that during September they had donated over five million cigarettes to the war effort. September was also a time of preparation for two nearby institutions of higher education. St. Charles College, a Jesuit school in Grand Coteau, and the relatively new public college (it was less than 20 years old), the Southwest Louisiana Industrial Institute (SLII, later to become the University of Louisiana-Lafayette), both announced that they were to become military academies to prep boys for officer training schools. They made much of how they were to be commanded by an Army officer as they vigorously recruited eligible students. They were to open on October 1. Separately, advertisements for the Louisiana State Fair ("It is the school for the farmer") scheduled for October 30-November 4, 1918 in Shreveport, took a patriotic flavor with an image of a stern-looking President Woodrow Wilson admonishing everyone that "It's your fair so be there." (See Figure 8 below) The War Department did its part by announcing that "two carloads of government [War Exhibits] will be on display, FREE."[17]

Figure 8: Patriotic advertisement of the Louisiana State Fair featuring President Woodrow Wilson.

At this writing, President Donald Trump has declared the nation in a "state of war" against the Coronavirus, and in a limited way, he has mobilized the military to assist states and localities. He ordered the Army Corps of Engineers to construct hospitals and deployed exceptionally large hospital ships to "hot spots" in New York and California. The 1918 Pandemic was different. The front-line mobilization for the war effort had already been underway and was centered around the activities of the Red Cross, and more specifically in St. Landry Parish, the Red Cross Ladies. Throughout America, the

[17] *Opelousas Star-Progress,* September 14, 1918; *St. Landry Clarion,* September 14, 21, 28 & October 5 & 12, 1918.

Red Cross functioned as the supply line for medical personnel for all branches of the military. They vigorously recruited young doctors and nurses to report for a patriotic duty to defeat the Germans, which they also called "The Hun." Unlike today, where military medical resources were deployed toward the *civilian* population, each Red Cross division, and each chapter within each division, was given a quota to move civilian medical resources and personnel to the *military*. The Red Cross compiled a list of all nurses in their area and pressured those nurses to leave their communities and join the military. They also pressured doctors, sanitariums, and hospitals to release what nurses they had. Wealthy patients with private nurses were made to feel unpatriotic. As John Barry wrote, "The drive was succeeding; it was removing from civilian life a huge proportion of those nurses mobile enough, unencumbered by family or other responsibilities, to leave their [homes and communities]… it all but stripped hospitals of their workforce, leaving many private hospitals around the country so short-staffed, or understaffed with young and vigorous medical professionals, that they closed until the war ended." The Centers for Disease Control estimated that as many as 30% of American physicians were inducted into military service during the war. An example in Opelousas was the St. Landry Sanitarium; it closed on October 5 when Dr. O. P. Daly, Jr. was inducted into the Army Medical Corps.[18]

In September of 1918, the people of St. Landry Parish, Louisiana had no clue what was coming. There had been no meaningful coverage of what came to be known locally as "The Malady" even though the virus had been spreading throughout America's Army camps. Only a few miles away in Alexandria, in a new induction center called Camp Beauregard, about 4,000 cases had been reported by the *St. Landry Clarion*. The same issue also reported that physicians and authorities are said "to have a firm hold of the situation and expect to have the disease under control in a very short time."[19]

And yet, on that exact date, October 5, 1918, everything changed when Dr. Oscar Dowling, President of the State Board of Health and Louisiana's Chief Health Officer, ordered the mobilization of the *all* health resources to "…combatting the present influenza epidemic." Three days later all schools in Louisiana were abruptly closed until further notice. Before the end of the month the State Fair in Shreveport had been cancelled. Theaters, bars, social clubs of all types, businesses, and any place where people gathered, closed indefinitely. The indomitable and fiercely patriotic Red Cross Ladies, singularly focused on the Great War, suddenly announced their efforts had switched from defeating the Hun to "battling the flu." Less than two weeks after they had opened, the Army officer prep schools set up at St. Charles College in Grand Coteau and SLII in Lafayette were both paralyzed with very sick young men. Opelousas Red Cross Ladies volunteered as nurses, reported to St. Charles College, and found that 103 of the 300 boys housed there were seriously ill—three would die and some of the volunteer nurses would themselves contract the disease.[20]

As with the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020, New Orleans was hard hit in 1918. Oscar Dowling's reaction was much like Governor John Bel Edwards' in 2020: he focused on New Orleans, where the people were, to stop the spread. The Port of New Orleans, then and now, is one of the busiest in the world and the metro area has from 25-30% of the state's population. Evidence shows that as early as September 4, 1918 local physicians made the first military diagnosis of influenza with a sailor who had arrived on the *Harold Walker* from Boston. Another sailor reported. Then the next 40 of 42 patients reporting to the

[18] Quote is from Barry, *The Great Influenza,* Page 320; *Opelousas Star-Progress,* October 5, 1918; https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/reconstruction-1918-virus.html accessed April 10, 2020.
[19] *St. Landry Clarion,* October 5, 1918.
[20] *Lafayette Daily Advertiser*, October 5 & 14, 1918; *St. Landry Clarion,* October 5, 12, & 19, 1918; *Opelousas Star-Progress,* October 26, 1918.

hospital were found infected.[21] Less than two weeks later, an oil tanker arrived at the port with crewmembers suffering with influenza. Officers on board reported that the ship's radio operator had died at sea. They assumed he had died of pneumonia. When health inspectors visited the ship they were conscious of the influenza cases that had been reported in hospitals and army bases. They immediately quarantined the tanker. Two days later, five more of the crew reported sick. The desperately ill men were removed from the tanker and brought to a local hospital. To be rid of the stricken vessel, and perhaps, to not have to take on any additional patients, Orleans officials allowed the ship to travel upriver to Destrehan, unload its oil, and get the hell out.[22]

The Malady in New Orleans was present and in full force by September 16. But the communication and data structures needed to track the flu—cases, hospitalizations, recoveries, and deaths—was nonexistent. Dowling believed that there were at least 7,000 cases in New Orleans; it was what led him to issue drastic orders closing all public places and banning all social gatherings in all of Louisiana. His estimate for New Orleans, although unbelievably frightening at the time, turned out to be wildly optimistic. By the end of the epidemic in April of 1919, New Orleans had 54,089 reported cases resulting in at least 3,489 deaths for a fatality rate of 6.5%. The *per capita* death rate was 734 per 100,000, placing it third in the United States among metro areas.[23] As John Barry wrote in *The Great Influenza,* "The virus followed rail and river into the interior of the continent, from New Orleans up the Mississippi River into the body of the nation…"[24] For Louisiana, the number of cases between October 1, 1918 and February 28, 1919 was to be reported as 244,857 out of a population of 1,750,000, (approximately 10-15% of the population). There were about 5,500 deaths, a fatality rate of 2.2% of cases reported.[25] Those statistics are almost certainly underestimating what really happened.[26]

[21] Barry, *The Great Influenza*, page 192.

[22] The University of Michigan Center for the History of Medicine has an excellent "Influenza Encyclopedia" with histories and studies of the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918. See: https://www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-neworleans.html# and accessed April 9, 2020. It is hereafter cited as "Influenza Encyclopedia."

[23] Ibid. Only Pittsburgh (806) and Philadelphia (748) had higher death rates.

[24] Barry, *The Great Influenza*, page 225.

[25] *Louisiana Morbidity Report,* Louisiana Office of Public Health—Infectious Disease Epidemiology Section, January-February, 2006. Page 1.

[26] The first axiom of statistics is that the value of its output (statistical reports and its summaries) is determined, not just by the volume, sophistication, or power of computing, but by the validity and reliability of its input (data collection). Even today with the unimaginable technology and supercomputing available to health officials during the present Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020, some of the data is problematic. The output, and thus the conclusions that result, is worthless in the absence of controls to guarantee consistency in reporting, definitions, methods, and statistical modeling. For example, in all probability, only a few highly placed authoritarian Chinese officials know the complete truth of the extent of the Coronavirus penetration and mortality of China in 2019 and 2020. (Even more so in North Korea.) As long as it has a command economy and authoritarian control by the Communist Party, what China and North Korea reported will never be scrutinized or audited, much less experimented with or manipulated, by legitimate, truth-seeking healthcare professionals. As a result, modeling based, even in part, on Chinese or North Korean data are suspect, at best, and dangerously fatal, at worst. In America, in 1918 and in 2020, even in a transparent environment, challenges exist with the standardization of data gathering, the accounting of "underlying" medical conditions, associated diseases (like pneumonia), and comorbid chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension that may compromise an immune system. The radio operator on the oil tanker docked in New Orleans in September of 1918 provides a case-in-point: The ship's officers reported that he died at sea of pneumonia. Suppose he had died of pneumonia because the Spanish Flu made him susceptible to the pneumococcus bacterium? When reporting his death, what did he die of? The Spanish Flu or Pneumonia? That would likely depend on the judgments of individuals, such as a Coroners, with varying degrees of expertise.

Joseph and Alton

In 1918, health professionals and decision makers had limited access to shared information and data, everyday Americans had almost none. Even so, those statistics meant *nothing* to Clarville and Aline Lavergne in the prairies of St. Landry Parish. The terror they came to face showed up in their house in October of 1918. At the time, three generations shared the Lavergne home: a grandmother aged 57 (Aurelia Thibodeaux Olivier); parents (Clarville and Aline) ages 29 and 27; and five children ranging in age from 5 months (Louis) to 8 years (Pauline).

Today, in America we see almost hourly counts of confirmed cases, hospitalizations, recoveries, and deaths. Not only that, the "mainstream media" makes drama out of numbers of masks, protective gear, respirators, beds, and other factoids, and they seem almost gleeful if any of those commodities are scarce. We also know, for example, that the Coronavirus Pandemic is deadliest for the elderly and those with "underlying conditions" and other morbidities: that makes sense. When it came to identifying high-risk groups, the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918 made no sense: mortality was highest in three age groups: toddlers and infants younger than 5; young adults 20-40 years old; and the elderly (65 years and older).[27] So, in the Lavergne farmhouse in Plaquemine Point, parents Clarville and Aline, and children Joseph, Alton, and possibly baby Louis (who may still have been benefiting from his mother's passive immunities) were most at risk. Of course, no one will ever know how the malady actually entered their home. The incubation period for the Spanish Flu was anywhere from two to five days and the sickness itself typically lasted from three or four days to a week. In homes everywhere there were four possibilities: (1) the patient never contracted the virus; (2) the patient contracted the virus and stayed asymptomatic (never knowing he had contracted the virus); (3) the patient contracted the virus, showed symptoms, and got better; or (4) the patient contracted the virus and died.

This is speculative: most likely the first to become gravely ill was two-year-old Alton. Perhaps simultaneously, four-year-old Joseph became ill. Clarville, Aline, and Grandmother Aurelia could not read or write, but they probably heard from neighbors what had been written in the local newspapers. Rumors they certainly hoped to be true were that the flu in the South was not as bad as in the Northern and Eastern seaboards. The weekly *St. Landry Clarion* reported that while churches, schools and picture shows were all ordered to close, the epidemic was "not very apparent" in Opelousas. "The danger here is slight" the news said, and there are "only a few cases."[28] In the very next issue, headlines called for nurses and anyone else with any experience treating patients to "report to the present emergency." The paper explained that "It is an epidemic in every state of the Union and the infection and death rates are becoming alarming."[29]

By the third week of October, Opelousas was in chaos. The Red Cross opened a soup kitchen they called a "Canteen Service." (In nearby Lafayette the Boy Scouts donned their uniforms and delivered buckets of soup to those unable to reach a kitchen that had been set up in a local hotel.) Opelousas automobile dealers volunteered their cars to deliver soup to those too sick to leave their homes. Others with cars chauffeured flu patients to free healthcare at a hospital funded by local donations and service organizations like the Knights of Columbus and Masonic Lodges. Dr. Frank Shute turned over his

[27] Influenza Encyclopedia, accessed April 9, 2020.
[28] *St. Landry Clarion,* October 12, 1918.
[29] Ibid., October 19, 1918.

Opelousas Sanitarium to local officials. Soon, all the beds were taken and, even then, some died helpless and alone or with families utterly baffled by what was happening.[30]

Generations of Lavergne family lore had it that Joseph and Alton died during the "flu epidemic of 1918" on the same day at their home in rural St. Landry Parish. That is not totally accurate: The Louisiana State Death Index places Alton's date of death as Saturday, October 19, 1918. The same source shows that Joseph died two days later, on Monday, October 21, 1918.[31]

I am haunted: it gives me the *frissons* to think about what it must have been like to be in my grandparent's house, in a setting that should have been serene and pastoral, during that terrible week. If Joseph and Alton died at home, it is highly unlikely that they received any professional medical care while Opelousas was in such turmoil and all doctors and nurses were called to report to packed free clinics. If the boys died of the flu itself, given the symptoms, their deaths must have been a horrific sight. It would have been only slightly more merciful if they died of pneumonia—merely gasping for breath. Perhaps Clarville and Aline called upon a local *traiteur* in a desperate attempt to save their boys. Maybe they soaked those boys in buckets of cool well water to relieve a high fever or calm delirium. I grieve to imagine MaMom clutching her dying boy, Alton, and watching him die in her arms. And then, doing it again with Joseph two days later. Or maybe, while the U.S. Public Health Service was warning people that "no one but a nurse should be allowed in a room with a patient,"[32] the Lavergnes faced those heartbreaking deaths by quietly kneeling nearby and praying rosaries, the whole time wondering whether the Malady would proceed to others after taking Joseph and Alton.

What happened to Old Pop and MaMom puts a toilet paper shortage in perspective. And I cannot help but wonder how the America of the current Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020, "stuck" at home eating potato chips, watching Netflix, and having food delivered to their door, would handle such 1918-like horrors.

This will go away.

During the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020, in his own inelegant way, President Donald Trump sought to reassure the American people that "This will go away." In late October and early November of 1918 in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana the Malady exited almost as quickly as it entered. Even before the end of that month the *Lafayette Daily Advertiser* ran a headline that "The Sun Is Shining and the Flu Is Fleeing."[33]

[30] Ibid. & October 26, 1918; *Louisiana Morbidity Report,* page 1; *Opelousas Star-Progress,* October 26, 1918; *Lafayette Daily Advertiser*, October 21, 1918.

[31] The Louisiana Death Index, 1819-1964 accessed through Ancestry.com.

[32] The quote is taken from a reprint of a U.S. Public Health Service Announcement published in the *St. Landry Clarion*, October 12, 1918.

[33] *Lafayette Daily Advertiser*, October 24, 1918.

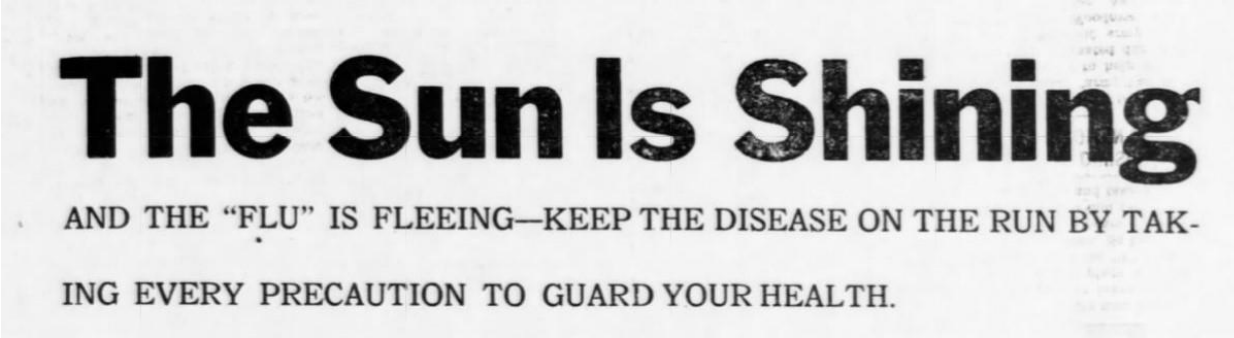

Figure 9: Headline from the *Lafayette Daily Advertiser*, October 24, 1918.

During the first week of November, Army camps, where it all started and what was the primary vehicle for spreading the disease all over the world, reported that the flu has been practically "stamped out." In Opelousas, on November 11 the Red Cross closed the emergency hospital and returned the sanitarium to Dr. Shute; St. Charles College in Grand Coteau reopened and became, once again, a Jesuit School. St. Landry Public Schools reopened on Monday, November 18 to a six-day week to catch up on the five-week closure. Pupils from homes that had the flu had to secure a doctor's certificate of good health in order to re-enroll.[34] (The irony is that now we know that these children probably carried new antibodies that protected them and others from the Spanish Flu and related viruses for the rest of their lives.) But perhaps the "official" end of this deadly episode was Armistice Day. "Opelousas Goes Wild" and "Glorious Peace Day Marked by Greatest Celebration in the History of This City" headlined the end of World War I.[35] There would be another influenza "wave" in early 1919, but with millions now carrying antibodies, it was not like October of 1918.

October of 1918 was the deadliest month in American history: 195,000 Americans died. The three waves of the Spanish Flu Epidemic (spring 1918, fall 1918, and spring 1919) killed approximately 675,000 in the United States alone; almost six times the number of deaths America suffered in *all* of World War I. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control estimated that about 500 million people, or one-third of the world's population, became infected with the virus that caused the Spanish Flu. The number of deaths worldwide was estimated to be at *least* 50 million, but as I already stated (see above in footnote 21), geopolitics, non-standard or sub-standard reporting, and sloppy statistics may very well have resulted in the under-reporting of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. The actual death toll could have been as high as 100 million worldwide.[36]

Final Thoughts

Josef Stalin, a truly evil man, was reported (perhaps inaccurately) to have said, "The death of one man is a tragedy. The deaths of millions is a statistic." In 1918, my Uncles Joseph and Alton Lavergne were treated as statistics. While researching this essay, I found it difficult to find any record of their existence. Through a subscription to Ancestry.com I accessed the Louisiana State Death Index; it lists their birth

[34] *Lafayette Daily Advertiser,* October 24, 1918; *Opelousas Star-Progress,* November 16, 1918; *St. Landry Clarion,* November 2 & 16, 1918.
[35] *Opelousas Star-Progress,* November 16, 1918; *Lafayette Daily Advertiser,* November 12, 1918.
[36] https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/reconstruction-1918-virus.html accessed April 10, 2020; https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html accessed April 10, 2020; https://www.ecohealthalliance.org/2018/05/outbreak-pandemic-strikes , accessed April 10, 2020.

years and dates of death and nothing else. Alton is incorrectly listed as “Elton.” There is a baptismal record for Joseph in the archives of the Catholic Church in Church Point. I have resources and the expertise to do a thorough search, and I am very good at this stuff, and there are no other archival references to those two little boys that I could find. Perhaps I need to go home, to the prairies of St. Landry Parish, to put on white gloves and search old pages scribbled upon by human hands, to find my lost uncles.

Joseph and Alton Lavergne were buried side-by-side in what is today St. Bridget’s Catholic Church Cemetery in Lawtell, Louisiana. They would have been one of the first to be buried in what was a new cemetery. The exact location of their plots is not certain. They are lost to time. And even if St. Bridget’s has a cemetery grid to identify exactly where they were placed in 1918, their bones may have been moved because of a common practice of burying family members “on top” of one another. There are no headstones for Joseph and Alton. My late Uncle Ben, an older brother, once told my cousin Jimmie that an old metal cross, which is still there, had been placed on either Joseph or Alton’s grave. But clearly the little cross had been moved. (See Figure 10 below) Surely, there must have been two crosses standing side-by-side and one of them has been lost to time. Joseph and Alton probably lie beneath their brothers, Jean Willis and Louis, or beneath other close relatives in that section of Lavergne graves.

Figure 10: The metal cross believed to have marked the grave of Joseph or Alton Lavergne in St. Bridget’s Cemetery in Lawtell, Louisiana.

Towering above the other tombs is a two-tiered crypt and there lies Aline and Clarville Lavergne. Clarville died of cancer at home on Gerald Street in Opelousas on September 17, 1958, one month shy of 40 years after his boys Joseph and Alton. (MaMom’s name had not been added to the grave until I bought her a headstone over a decade after her death.)

Figure 11: John Clarville and Aline Olivier Lavergne, circa 1955.

Aline “MaMom” Olivier Lavergne spent her last years in a small house on Gerald Street on the western edge of Opelousas. The home, which has since been removed, had been purchased with GI Benefits earned during World War II by her son Jean Willis. He was a very large man we all loved and called “Uncle Coon.” She outlived him, too.

I remember MaMom as a hard woman who looked the part of an old Freddy Powers country song: “*The lines in her face tell the story of an uphill fight.*” She walked with a cane with a white knob worn smooth by her wrinkled hands. She refused to be helped by anyone. After Uncle Coon died in 1974 she often slowly crossed the quiet street she lived on to visit her daughter. She would crawl on all fours up the steps to enter the house and would slap the hand of anyone who tried to help her. Some of us remember how she would beat her antiquated cotton-stuffed mattress with her cane to flatten out the lumps. Her world had always been what she could see from her front porch, only now the porch was in a neighborhood. She once lamented that some “Americans” had moved nearby. She wore a whistle and blew it if she needed something. Eventually, she moved across the street with my Aunt Aurelia Lavergne Saucier, and towards the end, she spent a lot of time nervously tapping the arms of her favorite rocking chair. None of her surviving grandchildren remember her venturing further than Lake Charles, Louisiana, less than 100 miles away, to visit my Aunt Pauline. She had a flock of grandchildren who visited often and they made a lot of noise, but it never seemed to get on her nerves. “It’s good to hear the children laugh,” she said. On one occasion, she observed that one of her grandsons “looked just like Alton.” Perhaps at that moment she thought to herself, “Don’t be discouraged, put your heart to the wind.”

Aline “MaMom” Olivier Lavergne died in Opelousas General Hospital on November 3, 1977. She was 86.

About the Author

Gary M. Lavergne is a retired Director of Admissions Research and Policy Analysis for The University of Texas at Austin. He has authored four books and is the winner of the Writers' League of Texas Award for Best Book of Non-fiction, the Carr P. Collins Award for Best Work of Non-fiction by the Texas Institute of Letters, and the Coral Horton Tullis Memorial Prize for Best Book on Texas History by the Texas State Historical Association. He has also written for the New York Times, CNN, and numerous magazines and scholarly journals. He is an elected member of the Texas Institute of Letters and has appeared on DATELINE NBC, the Today Show, Good Morning America, the History Channel, Biography, American Justice, The Discovery Channel and many other network and cable news shows.