

First Names in French Louisiana

E. D. JOHNSON

WHILE FAMILY NAMES IN THE FRENCH SPEAKING AREAS of Louisiana have undergone changes in form over the past two centuries*, the forenames of these French-Americans and their descendants have also shown an interesting development. In the beginning, of course, French name-forms prevailed. The Acadians, for instance, who came into Louisiana after 1755 show a remarkable consistency in their use of common French forenames, with Alexandre, Armand, Jacques, Jean, Paul, Pierre, and Simon being the most used among men's names, while Anna, Annette, Cecile, Marguerite, Marie and Susanne were the most popular feminine names. In fact, out of two hundred women's names on the Ascension Parish church rolls in the 1770's, no less than 73 had Marie as all or part of their forenames, and all but 28 had one of the six names mentioned above.

In the early nineteenth century, however, an interesting change in forenames took place. Although the ordinary French names remained popular, an increasing number of French Louisianians began to give their children names from Greek and Roman mythology and history. This was particularly true for boys. Such ancient Greek names as Alcibiade, Alexandre, Alphe, Aristide, Hypolite and Ulysse began to appear, along with such good Roman names as Aurelien, Agricole, Junius, Martial, Ovid, Valerien and Victorien. It should be noted that many of these classical names were also fairly common in France and French-Canada, so there is some doubt as to whether the French Louisianians were adopting classical names as such or merely showing a preference for the French names of classical origin. In either case, the prevalence of these forms in

* See "Family Names in French Louisiana", *Names*, III (Sept., 1955), pp. 165—168.

nineteenth and early twentieth century forenames is distinctly noticeable.

Together with the classical forms, there was also a wide use of forenames adapted from the classics, or sounding like classical names. Among these were Alcée, Alcide, Aristile, Arcis, Belizaire, Cleus, Cyprien, Eraste, Euclis, Jeneus, Julo, Odile, Odon, Onezime, Oleux, Ovey, Sosthene, Theophis, Valmir, and Zepherin. Although there were few strictly classical names used for women, there were many that indicated a classical influence. Such girls' names as Aspazie, Elidia, Elphege, Alphosine, Duila, Meridie, Nydia, Palmyre and Philomene would certainly fall in this class. As the nineteenth century progressed, some parents went even farther afield in their search for the unusual and came up with such oddities as Euphemond, Hervillien, Balthasard, Onesiphor, Solastille, Ursin, Valmon and Zenon.

As the twentieth century approached, and indeed during the first two or three decades of this century, the boys' names began to become really distinctive. The tendency toward classical names seems to have been dying out, and the later trend toward the use of English forenames had not developed. The usual French forenames did not suffice in an area where dozens or even scores of people in the same community might have the same surname. Hence, inventiveness ran wild, and such forenames appeared as Arcis, Armide, Alronver, Clebert, Clodis, Emic, Ezaro, Euel, Dolze, Elius, Exalt, Hervin, Gladu, Lessin, Loudice, Dassas, Lailor, Linex, Ferjus, Olestie, Ozeme, Oray, Lazard, Osta, Reul, Romeal, Rettol, Regile, Ruvian, Ulinor, Valex, Warman, Zedore, Ozare, and Zerben. Variations on standard spellings also created a number of new names, with Ulysses, for example, appearing also as Ulysse, Ulys, Ulis, Eulis and Eulice.

Another twentieth century trend, however, has been the almost overwhelming use of common English forenames to go with the still French-formed surnames. This is understandable, considering the strong trend of Anglicization in the area, with only English taught in the elementary schools, and virtually all newspapers, radio and television in English. As an indication of this tendency toward English forenames, a count of three hundred names of college students with French family names, taken at random from an area college student directory, found nearly seventy-five percent to

have English first names. Some of these, of course, have the same form in both French and English, as Charles and Robert, or are very similar, as Henry (Henri) and Edward (Edouard). However, it is noticeable that these are pronounced in the English manner, even when the speaker is using French.

Among these with French forenames, oddly enough, the trend is away from the old standbys, and toward such names as Anatole, Marcel, Maxim, René, Émile, Maurice, Étienne and Raoul, which were seldom if ever used in the nineteenth century. This is also true among girls' names and such new ones as Adrienne, Claudette, Dénise, Eugénie, Jeanne, Jeannette, Genevieve, Madeline, Nannette, Renée, Yvette and Yvonne are becoming relatively common. It should be noted, however, that these feminine forms are almost as popular among the English-speaking natives as among the French.

Among boys' names in the French families there has been an increasing use of less common English forenames, with Allen, Alton, Belton, Byron, Curtis, Ernest, Leslie, Lloyd, Milton, Malcolm, Preston, Shelton, Russell and Warren being frequently used. This trend is not noticeable among feminine names, but there is a comparable use of Spanish or Spanish-sounding names, such as Celestina, Consuella, Dolores, Rita and Teresa. Since there are a number of families in the area with Spanish background, this is not surprising. In the case of both boys and girls there are very few forenames taken from the names of prominent people. An occasional girl is named for a movie star, and a few boys born in the 1930's were named Huey or Huey P. for Governor Huey P. Long. Among the generation born during World War I there is an occasional Wilson, Pershing, or Foch, but these are extremely rare.

Like their English neighbors, the girls of French Louisiana are often given double forenames and called by both. Such names as Eva Lee, Betty Sue, Dorothy Mae, and the like are frequently seen, but they are often accompanied by less common combinations such as Tommy Sue, Sammy Lou, Edie Mae, or Micky June. Sometimes this trend becomes inventive and such forenames as Aura Belle, Delta Lou, Donna Dieu, Fronnie Lee, Melda Lyn, Meta Ann, Vena Mae, and Wava Sue can be found. On other occasions two names, or parts of two names, are joined to form a single forename, with varying results as far as euphony is concerned. Some of these are Mollieann, Shirleen, Marigayle, Evadell, Janell, Raylynn, Jolayne,

and Loralie. More original, perhaps, but in the same vein, are Arlyn, Arvelle, Eldene, Euradel, Enola, Ellodie, Maeola, Monita, Orelene, Rhynette, Sylveen, Walleen and Wunita. Occasionally, the desired effect of originality is achieved by a variant spelling of an ordinary name. These vary from Marye and Jayne through Jaclyn, Jacklynn and Wanita, to Elloyse and Eyeleen. Very infrequently one finds an unusual common noun, such as Sable, Palace, or Merit used as a forename, but the New England standbys of Faith, Hope and Charity seem to be entirely unknown in this area.

The use of the mother's family name as a first name for sons is another rarity among French speaking families, and it is only in the last generation that the use of the father's forename with Junior added for a son has come into fairly common use. However, there are several French family names that are sometimes used as forenames and among these are Dupré, Dupuis, Mouton, and Voorhies. The latter is actually a Dutch family name, but it belongs to an old area family that has been "French" for generations. Quite a few French names, of course, are widely used as both first names and family names so that they cannot be said to be exclusively either. Among these are Vincent, Richard, Victor, Roy and Simon. Rousseau, oddly enough, is almost unknown in this area as a family name, but appears occasionally as a first name.

An odd fact that is noticeable to newcomers in French Louisiana is that while French family names are given French pronunciations even by their English speaking neighbors, forenames are almost invariably given English pronunciations even by French speakers. For example, Vincent as a first name is usually heard as Vin-sunt, but as a surname it is Va(n)-sah(n). Similarly, Richard is either Ritch-ard or Ree-shard, and Simon can be either Sigh-mon or See-mo(n). The surname Hébert is so commonly pronounced A-bayre that it's pronunciation as Hee-bert by a contestant on a local television program brought prolonged laughter even in the studio. Yet Herbert, Hubert, Robert, and many other forenames are still given English pronunciations in both French and English. Strictly French forenames, however, such as Pierre, René, Émile and Maxim, are just as commonly given their French pronunciations even by English speakers.

Both French forenames and classical forenames seem to be declining in popularity, and it is quite possible that another generation or two will see them disappear, but as long as local ingenuity holds out, the "invented" names can be expected to survive. They may sound a little unusual to outsiders, but they serve their purpose, and they add a distinctive regional characteristic to the general name patterns of the United States.

* * *

Fremont, California.—Next to Aaron Burr, John C. Fremont is probably the most controversial character in our national history. Praised by some as the greatest explorer of the North American West, despised by others as a foolish adventurer, he has left a definite mark in history and was the most spectacular character in California at the time of the American conquest. In early days the geography of California was dotted with places called Fremont, but until recently no major geographical feature preserved the name of the great "pathmarker". In January, 1956, however, the residents of Centerville, Irvington, Niles, Mission San Jose and Warm Springs voted to incorporate their communities into a new town to be called Fremont. Fremont will have 25,000 inhabitants, but next to Los Angeles, it will cover probably the largest area of any California city—almost 100 square miles.

E. K. G.