

Lot 13, Block 1 Plan of Rayne

"That fellow that owns his own home is always
just coming out of the hardware store." — Barbed Wire

By Sidney Stutes
Special to the Tribune

In 1950, Walter J. McBride at age 59, on the occasion of his first daughter's wedding, paused to assess his own life. All who knew him would say that Walter J. McBride would never openly speak of his accomplishments; but, by any account, he had to be adjudged a success in life.

Born a member of one of the founding families of Rayne, he had graduated from Rayne Graded and Training School (RHS), loved his U. S. Navy tour of duty, then apprenticed and became a certified pharmacist and even a barber, served a very productive term on his city's council, married a talented lady and had two beautiful daughters, Jeraldine and Robin. (Robin would later marry Gabriel Alvandian, to live most of her life in New Haven, Connecticut with her husband and her three boys, Gabriel, Daniel, and Gregory).

And by 1950, McBride's Drug Store, in the middle of that first block on S. Adams, had so much more to offer beyond pills and potions, though Mr. Walter no longer "cut hair." One wonders today how many people sat in that rear ante room awaiting the arrival or departure of a Greyhound bus at the Devil's Alley entrance through the years when bus travel was at its peak in America.

And, too — one wishes a record would have been kept of all the young guys who entered the world of work as "soda jerks" at McBride's Soda Fountain with "fizzes and scoops" and chairs at the plate glass window where one could drink his chocolate malt or eat a banana-split while watching the world go by on Highway 90.

And always, there was Miss Ella, Walter's sister who had destroyed Walter's Navy application form back in 1912. She had been with Walter when he first opened his "confectionary" at the Adams Avenue location, before he opened his drug store. And she would, in time, handle the "ticket office operation" for the Greyhound Bus Line.

But, through the years, Miss Ella was the "tour guide" who led customers along the shelving of patent medicines and display cases, always sure to point out, to one and all, a "unique feature" of a visit to McBride's Pharmacy.

There, at the left, far corner was an array of musical instruments from which families in Rayne purchased everything from clarinets and flutes to the smaller horns, trumpets mostly, but McBride's could order a baritone or a French horn from a "catalogue" — if that were one's pleasure.

Mrs. Eva Claire (Lancaster) McBride brought her musical talents with her to Rayne when she married Walter J. McBride, and was at McBride's pharmacy "to encourage the arts" at every opportunity. And more, a family didn't just buy an instrument for a youngster, Mrs. Eva Claire was there to give "first lessons" on any instrument in the store.

But the one instrument that had "intrigued" young soda-jerk and shoe-shine boy, Leroy LeBlanc, was this guitar, which Mrs. McBride always "strummed" at her every visit to the store.

Leroy LeBlanc would build up his courage one day to ask if "Miss Eva" might teach him "a chord or two" on the guitar. She would! And thus began Leroy "Happy Fats" LeBlanc's musical career, after he paid for the guitar with a "sack of rough rice" given to him by his mother, who worked at the local mill.

"Happy" played his guitar on street corners up and down Adams Avenue, formed his Rayne-Bo Ramblers, performed at the Louisiana Hayride and the Grand Ole Opry — even recorded for RCA Victor, wrote and published music in both English and French, and associated with the likes of Tex Ritter, Hank Williams, and Louisiana's "You are my Sunshine" Governor, Jimmie C. Davis — even to have a weekly television show in Lafayette.

But no visit by "Happy" to Paco's for coffee, biscuits, and a "little politics" ever ended without a walk, two doors up, in hope of seeing "Miss Eva", who had taught him to strum his first chords on a guitar at McBride's Drug Store.

In years, much would change on that first block of S. Adams where McBride's was located at the near center. Bars periodically flanked the pharmacy on both sides. Lynn LeBlanc's Liv-
ing would eventually become a shoe

repair shop. At the current Rayne State Bank corner, Delma Hanks's saloon and pool parlor turned into Robichaux's Meat Market, and the far south corner became the site of the Plattsmier-Hulin Grocery, the building still standing today.

In any review of the history of Rayne — amongst the frogs, mills, municipal offices, doctors, schools, and churches — one always finds mention of some great disastrous fire; and Rayne certainly had its share that destroyed some of its more prosperous business houses: the Valverde Hotel, Davis Levy's Emporium, Donat Pucheu's Rayne Drop Inn, etc.

However, when one considers the location of these major fires, one "corner" of the Depot Square was singularly spared any great loss and that was Block 13, where Walter J. McBride had his pharmacy since 1914.

But, there was this one afternoon when Block 13 could easily have gone up in smoke, had it not been for the actions of Walter J. McBride, himself!

The whole episode started out innocently enough. Mr. Walter was at the soda fountain, demonstrating, for the third time, how to make a "banana split" to young soda jerk, Max Baer, the third of Louis Baer's boys to work the soda counter there (Bernard and Philip had preceded).

If truth be told (and Max admits this now), Max Baer had mastered the art of "banana split making" on his first day at work. It was just that Mr. Walter had told him he could "eat any mistake" he made at the soda counter, and this had clearly "helped" Max in developing periodic "memory lapses."

Now, Mr. Walter, having observed yet another "botched banana split," was busy demonstrating the art himself — "one more time!"

In the process, Mr. Walter had not noticed that the scheduled 3:00 p.m. Greyhound bus had come up Devil's Alley, picked up its riders, and left. But what Mr. Walter did suddenly smell was a wisp of smoke, and it seemed to come from the "bus waiting room" at the rear of the store.

He ran into the back room to find that several cardboard boxes, stored at the far east wall, were on fire. (He would later learn that a bus passenger had carelessly flipped a lighted cigarette just as he had boarded the bus). And the fire was flaming.

In that instant, Mr. Walter made a keen choice. He ran past the flames and out the back door, and down Devil's Alley, some fifty yards or so, to the Fire Station located at the corner of Devil's Alley and S. First Street (now Rayne Glass Company).

There, a volunteer fireman just happened to be washing the fire truck, and he looked up to see a streaking Walter McBride screaming about a fire at his drug store. The fireman jumped into the truck and started up Devil's Alley, arriving at the "bus station" entrance within seconds.

It was then that he realized that Mr. Walter had also hopped onto the truck and had ridden the fire engine back to his place of business. The blaze was extinguished in time to prevent its spread, the whole matter becoming yet another anecdote in the lore of Rayne — "That Walter McBride ... he belongs in Ripley's Believe it or Not ... he's the only fella who ever went to get a fire truck for his own fire."

That Walter J. McBride would retire in 1960 after forty-six years of "drug-mixing" at his pharmacy on Lot 3 of Block 13. Price Hains bought the business.

In a wide-ranging interview with a Tribune reporter, Walter J. McBride recalled his "early days as a druggist."

We had no cosmetics to speak of then. Women didn't use any. They used to buy prepared chalk to use for face powder, and put it on with chamomile skins.

There were no tinted face powders, no hair dyes or permanent waving solutions.

Women bought oil of copaliba to use as a deodorant, and henna was the only known preparation for changing the color of hair.

In those days, most men used straight razors. A safety razor was a newfangled gadget, and cost \$5.00. Men shaved with lather from cup soap and bay rum was the only shaving lotion.

And Mr. Walter revealed he had had a thriving business concocting so-called "conjures" — odd-ball mixtures of oils and powders used by believers to cast "magic spells," more or less for "sinister purposes." The most common ingredients he recalled were snake root, chinchona root and



Leroy "Happy Fats" LeBlanc, at left, and his RayneBo Ramblers performed at the Louisiana Hayride, the Grand Ole Opry, on television and throughout the area. "Happy" was a published songwriter who has association with the likes of Hank Williams and Tex Ritter, but always came back to visit "Miss Eva" McBride who had taught me his "first chords" on a guitar.



Mr. Walter McBride is shown with his "wealth" in unusual coins and bills collected over a lifetime and which enabled him to say he had "never been broke."



The soda fountain at McBride's was added to the pharmacy and bus station in May 1940 and quickly became a gathering place for old and young alike, a training center for the many "soda jerks" who worked the trade there.

"gum olebanium" used to "burn in the house to scare off conjo spirits."

Moreover, he recalled the widespread use of the root and seed of the Mamou plant, believed to cure colds and influenza. Then too, there had been "iron rust" used in tonics to "put iron in your blood." And most people then ate raw garlic or took garlic-powder pills for high blood pressure. And the retiring pharmacist would add:

Those were the days when patent medicines such as Wine of Cardui and Dr. Doan's kidney pills were popular favorites, and peroxide was an anti-septic, not a hair dye.

More than that, Mr. Walter had earlier been interviewed by Mary Alice Fontenot, the Acadian historian; this time, about the "millions" he had accumulated in money. Denied a navy career by his sister Ella, Walter related that he had, nevertheless, "salvaged" something from his brief sea duty while "touring" the Caribbean and the Pacific with the U.S. Navy Department in 1910-1912. He had picked up and saved a considerable amount of "change in foreign currency, fancy bills and odd-looking coins."

Though he never bought anymore from collectors, Mr. Walter had added to his "cache" through the years from friends and customers; now, in 1960, to amount to some 300 coins and 100 different bills. His collection was often borrowed by teachers and kids for school fairs and displays, to fascinate one and all, especially with this authentic million mark bond (issued by the German government in 1923) or the replica of the \$25,000 check issued to Charles Lindbergh after his solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927. Then too, the collection included \$10 and \$100 bills issued by the Confederate States of America in 1862 and a \$5 bill printed by the State of Louisiana during the Civil War — even a 1923 U.S. dollar bill, twice as large in size as present ones. Admitting that his "millions" were near-worthless in

"street value," Mr. Walter concluded, nevertheless, "I've never been broke in my life."

In retirement, Walter J. McBride remained active in his profession, substituting at a number of area pharmacies. Unfortunately, he would have only four years to enjoy the fishing he had so wished to do.

From his home at 306 Wiltz, he frequently walked the two blocks or so to McBride's Office Supply house, there to visit with his nephew, Warren McBride. The Tribune briefly stated what happened in the late afternoon of June 25, 1964:

Walter J. McBride, lifetime resident and former owner of McBride's Pharmacy died suddenly at 4:45 P. M. at McBride's Office Supply on W. Texas Avenue. According to unofficial reports, Mr. McBride died while reading a magazine.

He was four months shy of his 73rd birthday.

His wife of 43 years, Eva Claire (Lancaster) McBride petitioned the court for a settlement of her husband's affairs. In part, the official probate record read:

Upon his death, Eva Claire knew of a safety deposit box at the Bank of Commerce ... and thought that Walter had left his will there, but a search of the box revealed business papers, BUT NO WILL.

The estate was, however, found to be "free of debt" and Mrs. McBride was awarded half of the property, with usufruct of the other half. Walter J. McBride was also survived by his two daughters, Jeraldine (Mrs. A. E. "Shorty" Raymond) and Robin (Mrs. Gabriel Alvandian). Six grandchildren mourned his passing, Steve, Walter, and Mary Ann Raymond and Gabriel, Daniel, and Gregory Alvandian.

NEXT: A probate and look back at blacksmith Walter Scott McBride and "early" Rayne.