HE FREED A GREAT FREEDOM...

PUBLIC EDUCATION

BY JOE GNERRE

When the nation celebrates Independence Day on July 4th, Louisiana might find another reason to cherish this date. It was on the Fourth of July in 1843 that the man often considered Louisiana's greatest educator was born.

Unlike the story of the Declaration of Independence, the story of John McNeese is little known, but it is no less significant to the people of Louisiana. While the Declaration gave the Colonists hope for new freedoms, it was the efforts of McNeese a century later that freed education in a great southern state from its darkest age.

The story of John McNeese begins with the unhappy combination of depression and drought. These factors made McNeese a highly unsuccessful cattleman and caused him to follow a career in education that was marked by the fostering of reforms—reforms that gave rise to Louisiana's modern system of public education.

The panic of 1873 had taken its toll of western businessmen, among them the former Federal soldier, John McNeese of Maryland. McNeese had settled near San Antonio after the Civil War, engaging in the merchantile and cattle business. He had also become court clerk of Menard County, Texas. Depression forced McNeese to give up his mercantile business and resign his clerkship. With five other men, he began a long trek toward the New Orleans cattle market to sell his stock.

An untimely drought scorched the trail to New Orleans, and when the large herd reached the Sabine River, disaster struck. Thin and starving for food and water, the herd went into an eating orgy on a luxuriant growth of switch cane that covered the banks of the river. Unaccustomed to switch cane, the cattle ate the cane stalk as well as the leaves and most of the herd died from indigestion.

McNeese sold what few cattle survived and found himself in Calcasieu parish, Louisiana, nearly penniless. An educated man, he sought to sell his services there as a school teacher. He established a singing and penmanship school near Lake Charles, and became known as "Professor" McNeese. Shortly later, he married Susan Bilbo, daughter of Columbus Bilbo, pioneer settler of Southwestern Louisiana. In keeping with the patriotic sentiments of McNeese, former soldier born on Independence Day, the couple were married on the Fourth of July in 1876, the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration.

In 1883 McNeese was appointed to the Calcasieu parish school board and he soon became secretary. At the time, Louisiana had no coherent school system outside of New Orleans, where the beneficence of John McDonough had made public education possible. Those who wanted education had to pay for it themselves, and the attendance in private schools in the state far exceeded that in the public schools.

The situation in Calcasieu was even more deplorable. The parish, then known as Imperial Calcasieu, covered an area of over 4,000 square miles and included the territory that is now Jeff Davis, Allen, and Beauregard parish. There were four or five public schools in the entire parish, and these schools were solely dependent on the educational interests of local police jurors. The funds for the support of these schools came from no recognizable source and were often inadequate. School terms were from four to six months long, depending upon how well the funds held up. Besides, the state did not furnish either financial aid or incentive to the southwestern parish.

As secretary of the Calcasieu school board, McNeese had his work cut out for him. He had to crusade on many points in the interests of education — in procuring buildings, in raising the standard of teaching, in securing decent pay for teachers, in obtaining revenue to establish new schools, and in awakening the communities to the importance of education itself.

McNeese was appointed as Superintendent of Education of Imperial Calcasieu parish in 1888. In two years he raised the total of public schools to 24, and by 1892 the figure swelled to 114. By begging, threatening, and even cajoling parish officials and citizens for revenue for school purposes, McNeese carved out a public school system for Calca-
The Office of John McNeese, superintendent of education of Calcasieu parish in 1900, with McNeese pictured at his desk. He served 25 consecutive years as superintendent, from 1888 to 1913.

The crusading educator replaced the ineffective hit-an-miss school “system” previously in existence by introducing the idea of central ward or township school, a realistic method of public school organization and administration based on actual needs. McNeese systematized the procedure for making out school reports, and he sent uniform examinations from his office. He organized summer normals to instruct teachers on the rudiments of their subjects as well as how to teach them. McNeese attempted adult education by night, and that became the genesis of a statewide program years later. In co-operation with the United States Department of Agriculture, he organized many agricultural clubs among school boys and girls.

Before long, parishes throughout the state were copying, adopting or incorporating into their school systems many of McNeese’s innovations and methods. In fact, by 1895 the State Board of Education was advocating that all parishes model their school systems after the one McNeese had established for Calcasieu.

One of McNeese’s greatest contributions to the cause of education involves his struggle to procure decent pay for teachers and additional funds for school purposes. Rejected in his appeal to the local police jurors, McNeese set out for Baton Rouge where he broached the idea of special taxation, an idea new to Louisiana. He appealed to Governor Foster Murphy who was preparing the ground work for the constitutional convention of 1898. The chroniclers of the time say the conversation went something like this:

Governor Murphy looked up and said, “Mack, what brings you here? You’re not a politician.”

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John McNeese was never without a beard which covered a scar on his chin, the result of tuberculosis. The portrait of his wife depicts the patriotic sentiment of the family. Mrs. McNeese holds a flag to celebrate her wedding anniversary on Independence Day.

The Office of John McNeese, superintendent of education of Calcasieu parish in 1900, with McNeese pictured at his desk. He served 25 consecutive years as superintendent, from 1888 to 1913.

McNeese’s modest grave in Orange Grove Cemetery in Lake Charles. In this unpretentious resting place lies Louisiana’s Father of Public Education.
THE BORDEN STORY—
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farmers throughout the 16 parishes of Southwest Louisiana.

Borden's of Lake Charles cooperates 100% with the parent company in all educational programs. The latest promotion, and perhaps the best known, is the tour of Elsie and her set of twins. Never before has anything gripped the nation's imagination has Elsie and her family. The recent contest to name the twins has resulted in the Borden Company receiving about 3,000,000 suggestions.

The winner of this contest will be announced sometime in June and will coincide with the national program of publicizing the month of June as National Dairy Month. Locally the Borden Company will have the names of the winners available.

Tomorrow morning or the next morning when you sleepily open your door and reach for your familiar carton of Borden's milk, you can rest assured that hundreds of people have been working in the late hours and the wee hours to place your individual order at your door or on your favorite grocer's shelf... The finest and most healthful milk it is possible to obtain. IF IT'S BORDEN'S—IT'S GOT TO BE GOOD!

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McNeese replied, "I want something in the new constitution authorizing parishes to levy taxes on themselves for school purposes."

"Is that all you want?" exclaimed the governor.

"Yes!"

"Well you can go home, Mack. Your request shall be granted."

That was a boon to Louisiana's public school system. It awakened the people of the state to the importance of education itself, and it championed McNeese as an educator.

The increased revenues en-
New Improved Services Announced

Schedule changes designed to improve their service in the Caribbean and West Indies were announced recently by R. E. Berkefeld, Traffic Manager of the Caribbean Division of Lykes Bros. Steamship Co., Inc. Effective immediately the Lykes Caribbean Line will provide weekly sailings from Lake Charles, Houston and Galveston to Venezuela. The ships will sail from Lake Charles every Monday, from Houston every Wednesday and from Galveston every Friday. This service was formerly operated on a fortnightly basis. The increased sailings designed to provide Lake Charles Houston and Galveston with added service to Venezuela to meet an increasing volume of export cargoes now moving to Venezuela as a result of a greatly expanded oil exploration program and generally improved economic prosperity.

The Lykes Lines service to Puerto Rico is also being improved in that all weekly sailings will be direct to Puerto Rico, eliminating the previous intermediate stop at Santiago Cuba on alternate sailings. The Lykes Caribbean Line will continue to maintain fortnightly direct service to Santiago as well as fortnightly service to Haiti, Dominican Republic, Havana, Colombia and the Canal Zone.

HE FREED—

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abled Superintendent McNeese to import college graduates as principals and teachers for his schools. They provided the students with a better grade of instruction, and when superintendents of other parishes followed suit, Louisiana became one of the most progressive states in the south in public education, and remains so today. According to the 1955 report of the State of Louisiana Governor's Conference on Education in connection with the White House Conference on Education, Louisiana invests more money per pupil in average daily attendance than any other state in the south. Louisiana also leads the south in average annual salaries of public school teachers.

In 1941, 27 years after the death of John McNeese, Governor Sam H. Jones paid official tribute to Louisiana’s patriarch of public education. Jones was instrumental in changing the name of Lake Charles Junior College to John McNeese Junior College. Now it is a four year institution carrying the name of McNeese State College.

In the dedicatory ceremonies of John McNeese Junior College, Jones proclaimed, “John McNeese was a realist of a type this state needed sorely in his time and could use in greater quantity today. John McNeese simply created a public school system for southwest Louisiana, single-handed and out of nothing. He saw the flame and had the fire. He was such a leader that his energies and his ideas spilled over into the whole educational life of state, which he revitalized and to which he gave new form and purpose. He was solely responsible for the dozens of reforms and innovations — new efficiencies and new services to the public school system of the state. John McNeese was a great educator and a great man.”

Today there is little reverence in behalf of John McNeese. His deeds are seldom noted and rarely publicized. He dedicated 37 years of his life to the cause of education with no great remuneration, for he died a relatively poor man. He earned the title “Father of Public Education” in Louisiana, but very few people are aware of him or his contributions. No other educator has been able to equal the services McNeese gave to his generation. For this reason, when the people of Louisiana commemorate the declaration of their freedoms on the Fourth of July, they should make room in their thoughts also for the man who made it possible for millions of school children to better appreciate those freedoms—John McNeese.

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