

# The forgotten legacy of Almadane

By Lia Russell  
Staff Writer

Southwest of Leesville, just past the town of Evans, only vestiges remain of what used to be a thriving plantation community called Almadane.

Almadane was established in the 1880s. At its peak at the turn-of-the-century, it had several homes, a general store, a post office, a sawmill, a school, a cotton gin and a cemetery. Of these, only the cemetery and one home remain. The cemetery consists mostly of graves of African-American plantation workers.

The remaining home, the Knight-Branch House, was built by a pioneer landowner named Dan Knight. Knight, along with fellow pioneers Al Damereau and Mann Huddleston, settled in the area, which originally consisted of 900 acres. The name Almadane comes from a combination of the first names of the three original settlers, Al, Mann, and Dan.

Although few historical records of the plantation remain, it is believed that approximately 100 people lived in Almadane in 1900. Its glory was short-lived. In the 1920s, the post office, cotton gin and the sawmill shut down, and many of Almadane's inhabitants moved away. The community lost its prime source of revenues as the timber industry collapsed, and the remaining inhabitants simply farmed the land.

As late as the 1950s, a school for the black children of Almadane and Knight (another small community nearby) was in operation on the property.

Alma Brown, a Leesville resident, remembers teaching at Almadane's segregated school in 1961, her first year out of college.

"Until my assignment to teach there, I knew nothing of this small hamlet, with its one-room school that served grades 1-7. At that time, there were about a dozen families living in the area," she said.

Brown taught 16 students, and her husband, Alex Brown, a Leesville businessman, drove her 30 miles each direction daily from Leesville. That added up to 120 miles a day for him, and he also served as the school's unofficial bus driver. He actually traded in his sedan for a larger vehicle so that he could accommodate all the children.

"He did not ask for pay, and was not offered any," said Brown. "My take-home pay was \$329 per month. Our vehicle didn't run on water and the notes had to be paid, so you may say that I donated my service. But I have never regretted it."

White children from the Almadane area were transported by bus to schools mainly in Leesville and DeRidder. Almadane is in Vernon Parish, and, at the time, the school board did not feel compelled to provide any special services to the segregated Almadane school.

No new books were provided to the children of the Almadane school. Mrs. Brown took it upon herself to go to the Leesville schools and pick up discarded used books for her students.

During those years of segregation, Mrs. Brown did not find such circumstances particularly odd. She marvels at how far society has come in the last 50 years.

"Today the school board is dedicated to providing a fine education to all children of Vernon Parish, black and white alike," she said.

Brown left the Almadane school after one year, when she was offered a position at the Vernon High School, where she taught economics, general science and biology.

She remembers the children as eager to learn, and willing to help out with the basic chores of the school, like starting a fire in the winter, and cleaning the outdoor "privy."

That strong work ethic was passed down from some of the earlier inhabitants of the Almadane area who worked hard for a living, like Dan Knight, who settled the plantation. Knight built the beautiful home which is one of the few reminders of the area's history.

The Knight-Branch House is one-half mile from the Sabine River. The current owners, Doug and Mary Branch, purchased the house in 1994 from Huey P. McElveen, a great grandson of the Knight family. A Knight family member lived in the house from the time it was built



Doug and Mary Branch, along with their three children Caleb (far left), Cody (center), and Lindsay (right), bought the former plantation home and 165 acres of land in 1994. They are currently renovating the house.



Branch hopes to restore an old slaughterhouse on the property.

until 1993. The continuity of ownership probably contributed greatly to the excellent maintenance the house has received over the years.

It is a pristine example of a Dogtrot house — it has an open breezeway which runs through the middle of the house with rooms on each side. The design is functional for cooling in the summer.

An interesting feature of the house is a pair of stone statues of dogs which flank the front entrance.

"When I was four years old, I recall driving to Toledo Bend with my dad to go fishing," said Branch. "I remember seeing the dog statues in front of the Knight House and knowing we were half way to Toledo. When I told friends that we were buying this house, they didn't know what I was talking about, and then I would say 'It's the one with the two dog statues in front' and they would know which house I meant. People know those dogs."

The Branch's owned 30 acres of land in DeRidder and were getting ready to build a new house when they heard that McElveen was planning to sell the Knight House.

"It was initially my wife who mentioned it and suggested that we buy it. We came out and saw the house and that was it ... we never looked back," said Branch.

They purchased 165 acres and the original house. On the property is also an old slaughterhouse, which Branch hopes to restore one day.

The house itself is currently under renovation. The Branch's, along with their three children Cody, 10, Lindsay, 9, and Caleb, 6, and pet Dalmatian, Abby, needed to make the home more functional.

"We wanted to maintain the historical integrity of the house, but we really needed more room and a more accommodating floor plan," said Branch.

A large addition on the back of the house has already been removed.

"It was all pieced together and falling apart," said Branch.

They are putting on a new addition which will contain the kitchen, living room and dining

room. Branch is taking great pains to ensure that the addition matches the architectural style of the original house. The front portion of the house contains four bedrooms. The attic will be converted into two loft bedrooms and the two false dormer windows in front of the house will be replaced by real ones. The four-foot overhangs around the house will be changed to 3 feet for greater stability.

A covered porch will be built along the entire length of the house's south side and along the back end.

The Branch's have removed the two brick chimneys on each side of the house, but they plan to utilize the original bricks in the construction of stairways leading up to the front porch. The two dog statues, which have been stolen and recovered several times, will remain on sentry duty in front of the home.

In the process of renovation, the Branch's have discovered a plethora of treasures which were buried on their property. Depression era glass, beautiful pieces of pottery, and even a sign with the words "Dr. F.P. Jones - Almadane" written on it. Dr. Jones was known to have practiced medicine in Leesville, but apparently he also practiced in Almadane for a period. The sign was found underneath the foundation when it was repaired.

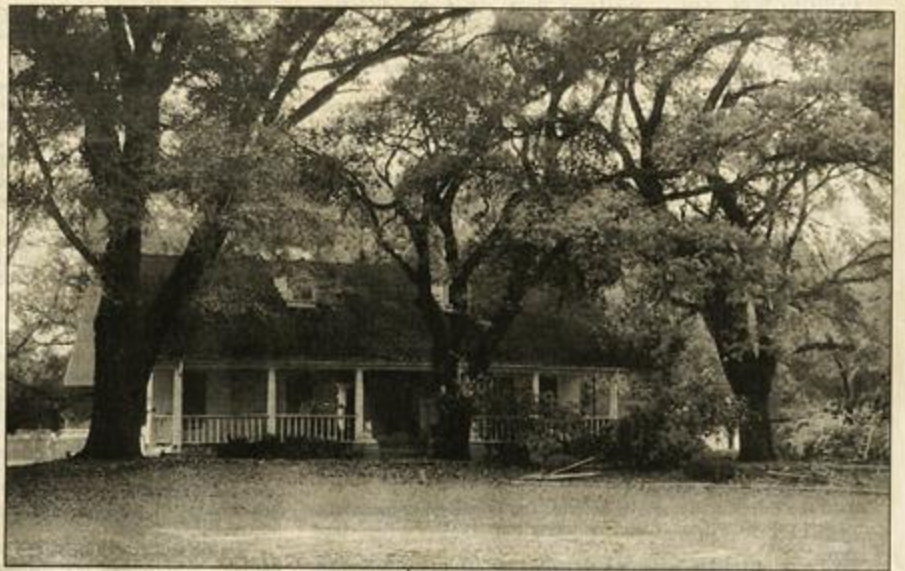
Branch said he had also heard rumors of ghosts residing in the house, so he spent a few nights out at the property alone after he purchased it.

"I didn't hear or see anything," he said, "If there were ghosts here, I guess we ran them off."

The Branch's are doing all of the construction themselves, and hope to complete the house by June 2002. Two of Branch's coworkers from Boise Cascade help out in their spare time.

In addition to his paper mill job, Branch ranches on his Almadane property. He currently has over 20 head of cattle, 60 registered Boer goats, donkeys, horses and chickens.

"I love it out here," said Branch, "It's so quiet and peaceful. Of course, we work hard, but living out here makes it all worthwhile."



The Knight-Branch House, built in the 1880s, is an example of a Dogtrot design. It has an open breezeway that runs through the center of the house for efficient cooling.



The pair of dog statues which flank the front steps leading to the house's main entrance have been stolen and recovered several times. A famous trademark of the property, the Branch's plan to keep them on duty for years to come.

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