

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Ponthieu Store/Big Bend Post Office, Avoyelles Parish, LA

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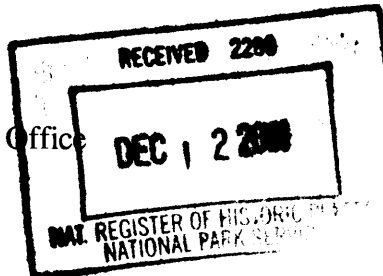
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Ponthieu, Adam, Store/Big Bend Post Office

Other Name/Site Number:



1490

2. LOCATION

Street & Number 8554 La. Hwy. 451

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Big Bend

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: Avoyelles Code: 009 Zip Code: 71355

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: Statewide: Locally: X

Signature of Certifying Official/Title Laurel Wyckoff, LA SHPO, Dept. of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

December 10, 2001 Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
Determined eligible for the National Register
Determined not eligible for the National Register
Removed from the National Register

Other (explain):

Edson H. Beall
Signature of Keeper

1-24-02
Date of Action

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private:
Public-Local: X
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property
Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing
1
1

Non contributing
buildings
sites
structures
objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic:	commerce/trade government	Sub:	department store post office
Current:	recreation & culture	Sub:	museum

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: no style
Materials:

Foundation: brick
Walls: metal
Roof: metal
Other:

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Adam Ponthieu Store/Bend Post Office (1927) is an unstyled, one-and-one-half story building with pressed metal siding. It stands across Louisiana Highway 451 from Bayou des Glaisses within the rural community of Big Bend in eastern Avoyelles Parish. The Sarto Bridge (National Register) crosses the bayou nearby. The building was moved a very short distance in 1946. The formerly deteriorated store has recently experienced a careful restoration and, thus, retains its original appearance and National Register eligibility.

The store was built by Byron F. Lemoine, Sr. in 1927 (see Part 8). When Lemoine sold the business to Adam Ponthieu in 1946, he retained the land upon which the building stood. Because Ponthieu was able to obtain the parcel next to Lemoine's land, he was forced to move the store only a few yards north of its original location. Thus, the store's relationship to the highway, the bayou, and the nearby bridge are almost unchanged.

The store's unusual asymmetrical massing conveys the appearance of a standard gable fronted building that was somehow "chopped off" on one side. However, all evidence indicates that it was actually built this way. (Long-time residents recall the building always looking as it does now. Their earliest recollections are from the late 1930s.) One wonders if the roofline was configured in this manner to provide additional storage space without having to build a full second story. And, indeed, the upper space was used for storage.

The building's lower floor contains three spaces – a sales room filling the entire south side of the building, a post office occupying the north front corner, and a narrow store room located behind the post office (and filling the rest of the building's north side). The second level contains a storage loft located above the sales area.

Except for the roofline, the store's exterior is fairly typical of the era. A vent for a cast iron stove rises from the roof ridge. A one-story shed roof porch supported by square posts spans the façade. A double door with a transom leads to the sales room, and a single door (apparently used only for ventilation—see below) opens to the corner post office. A single door opens into the sales room on the building's south side and a similar entrance provides access to the storeroom on the north. Two barred windows pierce the façade's lower level. The store's front and rear gables feature regular sash windows installed horizontally instead of vertically. As a result, these windows slide sideways in order to open. A large advertising sign hangs from a pole projecting from above the front gable window. As previously mentioned, the exterior is sheathed in pressed metal siding.

Containing merchandise and equipment appropriate to the period, the store's interior is a time warp. Although one display case has been replaced, all of the sales room's paneled counters and shelving is original. The shelves line the walls on three sides, and the counters follow this "U" shaped layout. Space between the counters and shelves allows easy access to the articles displayed. The store's walls are visible behind the shelving and consist of flush boards placed vertically. These boards, and those composing the cross walls, support the second story loft and roof. The loft receives extra support from exposed joists visible just below the first floor ceiling.

The small post office is accessed from the sales room rather than from outside. The space is totally closed off from the store by a wood and wire partition through which the postmaster conducted

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business. The public never entered the postal area. The original counter, letter boxes and various pieces of equipment survive.

The storeroom is the only area of the original interior to have received alteration. Although its rough vertical plank walls survive, the room has been revamped to serve as a meeting room and gallery for displaying historic memorabilia. A new beaded board ceiling, a wall separating the room from the loft stairs (and creating a closet), and appropriate lighting were added in this area. Other alterations include the following:

1. replacement of the deteriorated original sliding windows in the gables with exact replicas,
2. the addition of a small bathroom attached to the building's rear wall,
3. the construction of new steps (required by the fire marshal) leading to the doors on the north and south sides of the building,
4. the construction of a concrete handicap parking pad and curved ramp leading from the parking pad to the store's porch, and
5. the loss of the store's gas pumps, which were located approximately twenty feet from the porch.

Assessment of Integrity:

As explained above, the building's move has not adversely affected its context, and the minimal alterations outlined above also have not negatively impacted the building. There is no doubt that any employee or customer of the store/post office would recognize the building should he or she return to the Big Bend community today. As a commercial and social focus for the area and a rare surviving country store within Avoyelles Parish, the Adam Ponthieu Store/Big Bend Post Office building is a strong candidate for National Register listing.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National Register Criteria: A X B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A B X C D E F G

Areas of Significance: commerce; social history

Period(s) of Significance: 1927-1951

Significant Dates: NA

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: unknown

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Adam Ponthieu Store/Big Bend Post Office is locally significant in the areas of commerce and social history. Its commercial significance arises from its critical role in providing goods to rural householders in the Big Bend area and its status as a rare survivor of a once common archetype within Avoyelles Parish. Rural emporiums such as these played a significant role in meeting the material needs of the general public until well into the twentieth century but have now largely vanished or are vacant and deteriorated. The store's social significance is based upon its role as the focus of community life for the Big Bend area during the historic period. The period of significance ranges from 1927, the year of the store's construction, through 1951, the fifty year cut-off. Although rural stores generally declined in importance after about 1940, the candidate continued to play a significant role because of the isolation of the area it served, as demonstrated by long-time residents interviewed for this nomination. Their recollections of the store's role as a commercial and social focus are from the 1930s and '40s. The candidate continued to serve as a rural store and post office until 1994.

Background

A post office opened in Big Bend in 1847, but its exact location before 1920 is unclear. In that year Byron F. Lemoine, Sr., operator of a rural mercantile established by his father-in-law Thomas Hall Carruth in 1900, became postmaster. Soon thereafter Lemoine made room for the post office within his store. When the building was destroyed by the flood of 1927, Lemoine built the candidate to replace it. In 1930 Adam Ponthieu, Sr. began working for Lemoine; after a trial period he became the store's general manager. However, Lemoine continued to serve as postmaster for many years. Ponthieu purchased the store from Lemoine in 1946 and became the Big Bend postmaster the following year. As related in Part 7, Ponthieu was unable to acquire the land upon which the building stood and was forced to move the structure a short distance onto his own property.

In order to comprehend the importance of the Adam Ponthieu Store/Big Bend Post Office, it is necessary to understand the exceedingly rural nature of Avoyelles Parish and the isolated location of the Big Bend area. Avoyelles' parish seat in 1930 had a population of only 1,527. The "big" town of Bunkie, with a population of 2,464 in 1930, was on the other side of the parish, about 25 miles "as the crow flies" from Big Bend. Big Bend is a rural community whose farming operations have focused on cotton and livestock production for years. The settlement stretches for approximately eight miles along the western bank of Bayou des Glaises, a lengthy waterway which defines the topography of eastern Avoyelles Parish. The bayou begins slightly west of Moreauville in south-central Avoyelles, then flows in a northeasterly direction across Louisiana Highway 1 to Bordelonville. From there the bayou moves into eastern Avoyelles Parish before curving to the south and then back to the west before finally heading south to Simmesport on the Avoyelles/Pointe Coupee Parish line. When viewed on a map, the bayou's twisting path resembles a roughly shaped oval open on its western end (see attached map). The Big Bend community is located at the eastern edge of this oval, which is known locally as a bend or a loop. No towns or businesses of any size are located along the bend or within the land the bayou encloses. In fact, the area encircled by the bayou is filled by the Pomme de Terre Wildlife Management Area, through which travel is not possible. The only significant road follows the curving bayou, forcing residents to drive many miles before they are able to reach a major highway. During the historic period, the bayou road was

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unimproved. Due to all of these factors, the Adam Ponthieu Store/Big Bend Post Office was an extremely important commercial and social focus for community members.

Commercial Center

As a general mercantile, the Adam Ponthieu Store carried a variety of items needed by farmers and other rural residents. Tobacco, animal feed, and foodstuffs were a given. One former customer remembers being impressed by the store's stock of bakery-prepared bread, which was kept in a wire mesh box atop one of the counters. For this man's family, bread baked in a factory was an unaffordable luxury. Another customer remembers that his family purchased flour once a year in bulk. Clothing was another necessity furnished by the store. In addition to ready-made clothes and shoelaces, fabric and thread were offered. Meeting the needs of hunters was another of Ponthieu's priorities. Although the store does not seem to have carried guns, bullets and shotgun shells were sold. Veterinary supplies were offered to help care for farm animals. Also part of the inventory were tires, gasoline, oil, and kerosene. The latter item was very important, for it was burned to provide light in the area's many homes which lacked electricity.

Like other rural stores of the era, Ponthieu's establishment granted long-term credit to its customers. Some accounts were carried from planting in the spring until harvest in the fall. Parents often sent their children to the store with a shopping list and the request that the storekeeper charge the items to the family's account. Ponthieu maintained records of the charges in a series of ledgers, many of which still exist in the store. He would cross out the appropriate entry when the account was paid in full.

In addition to selling goods to local residents, the Adam Ponthieu Store offered check cashing services. The cash came from a bank in Bunkie, located on the other side of the parish about 25 miles away ("as the crow flies"). Ponthieu traveled to Bunkie (sometimes with a body guard) once a month. There he obtained \$3,000 or \$4,000 in one dollar bills, which he carried back to Big Bend in a suitcase. The merchant charged no fee for the check cashing service, but expected his customers to spend some of their cash in his store. Another of the store's commercial services to the community was its role as a collection point for the payment of utility bills. In addition, it was here that residents left their names when they wanted to sign up for newly available utilities such as electricity or telephone service.

Social Center

The social function played by the Adam Ponthieu Store/Big Bend Post Office was just as important as the economic role it filled for Big Bend residents. The establishment was the area's major location for social interchange. Everyone in Big Bend knew what time the mail arrived at the post office each day, and what time the postmaster would have it ready for distribution. Residents purposely retrieved their mail when they knew other people would be present so that visiting could take place. As a result, late morning found people sitting on the store's counters, as well as on feed sacks, milk crates, and any other available surface as they exchanged the gossip of the day. In good weather, they also frequented a bench located on the store's front porch. In addition to local news, residents also learned about the outside world through their visits to the store and post office. Ponthieu subscribed to a newspaper (probably the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*), a luxury which the majority of Big Bend's residents could not afford. Because the storekeeper shared the journal with

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his customers, it was through their visits to the mercantile that locals learned about state, national and world events.

On Saturday nights during the 1930s, the store helped bring entertainment to locals by serving as an outdoor movie theater. With Ponthieu's and Lemoine's permission, an enterprising youth painted a screen on the side of the building, borrowed benches for seating, and showed movies to good-sized crowds. The film was always a western!

Another activity the store made possible was the political gathering. Ponthieu actively solicited the friendship of local and state politicians. They, in turn, always stopped at the store during their campaigns for office, addressing Big Bend's residents from the mercantile's porch. These meetings obviously gave people a chance to socialize as well as to gather information concerning various political candidates and races. One Big Bend resident remembers Earl Long coming through with a three piece bluegrass band in tow. Another remembers an appearance by Governor Jimmy Davis, the popular writer and performer of *You Are My Sunshine*.

Rare Survivor

In assessing the significance of the candidate, it should be noted that rural stores, a classic archetype, are rapidly becoming rare survivors. Changes in agricultural patterns, population shifts, and the rapid increase in automobile ownership contributed to their decline after the 1930s. Through the years, the majority of country stores have either been demolished, allowed to deteriorate and fall down, or in some cases removed from the property. Those which survive are usually vacant and deteriorated and hence face an uncertain future. This general state of affairs is certainly true in Avoyelles Parish. In preparation for this nomination, the applicant checked on each country store recorded in a 1979 historic structures survey of Avoyelles. Sadly, more were gone than had survived, and most of the survivors were long vacant and often deteriorated. In terms of the classic archetype, a truly rural store not within an incorporated area, the only survivors are the candidate and one in Gold Dust which is vacant and dilapidated. Widening the scope to the small rural incorporated communities of Cottonport and Mansura, one finds four more survivors, all vacant.

Happily, the Ponthieu Store has a secure future. In 1996, Adam Ponthieu, Jr. donated the store to La Commission des Avoyelles, the parish's historic preservation organization. In 1999 title was deeded to the Avoyelles Parish Police Jury. Within the last two years La Commission spearheaded the restoration of the building and its opening as a local history museum and tourist attraction. The facility is open on a regular basis five days a week and other days by appointment. Entering the front door, the visitor is transported back to a time when country stores were centers of commercial and social life.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Interviews with Carlos Mayeux, Alan Jeansonne, Maggie Charrier, Bertie Lemoine and James Lemoine, October, 2001, transcripts in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Avoyelles Parish Historic Structures Survey, 1979, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: approximately .2 acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	15	615090	3438200

Verbal Boundary Description:

A certain lot of land, together with all buildings and improvements thereon situated, including the building known as the "Adam Ponthieu, Old Big Bend Store and Post Office Building", which lot contains .20 acre, more or less, situated in and forming a portion of Section 7, Township 1 North, Range 7 East, Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana; which lot is more particularly described as having a frontage of 94 feet on the west side of Louisiana State Highway #451, by a depth on its north side of 96 feet, a width on its rear or west line of 70 feet, and a depth on its south line of 107 feet, and is bounded on the North and West by Jerry Anthony Adams, East by Louisiana State Highway #451; and South by Bertrand Lemoine.

Boundary Justification:

Boundaries follow the property lines of the parcel on which the candidate has stood since 1946. It is impossible to follow the original boundaries because the building was moved a short distance in 1946.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: National Register staff (assisted by La Commission des Avoyelles, Carlos Mayeux, President)

Address: Division of Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

Telephone: (225) 342-8160

Date: October 2001

PROPERTY OWNERS

Avoyelles Parish Police Jury
312 N. Main Street
Marksville, LA 71351

BAYOU DES GLAISES

Ponthieu Store/Big Bend Post Office
Avoyelles Parish, LA

