

## REGIONALISM

## The Cajuns of Louisiana

by Roger L. Busbice

In the 1980's, "Cajun" suddenly became "cool." From rotund Chef Paul Prudhomme and high-rolling Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards to the music of Beausoleil and "blackened" redfish, anyone and anything associated with the remnants of French culture along the Gulf Coast was "in." The nation eagerly embraced the battle-cry of the Cajun: "Let the good times roll!" In the popular imagination, south Louisiana became the land of bayou-dwelling fiddle-players, endlessly stirring giant kettles filled with spicy jambalaya. To many Americans, "*La Louisiane*" was the ultimate laid-back, fun-loving, lackadaisically governed society, where a prominent political boss once observed that "corruption done with a jest" is applauded. French-Louisianans basked in their new prominence, rejoiced that free enterprise is the American way, and thanked God that their ancestors reached the swampy "Eden," as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called it.

As always, the reality is somewhat different from the perception. The true story of the Cajun is a bitter and sometimes bloody narrative of hope, betrayal, renewal, despair, and survival. The myth of gumbo, Spanish moss, and perpetual joy is rooted in fact but fails to capture the essence, the lingering nobility of the Cajun people. Because of the Cajun, South Louisiana does indeed remain an outpost of Old World charm, culture, and language. The ties to France and to French Canada are strong, and the Gallic legacy of the Cajun past is never forgotten. In fact, perhaps to a greater extent than elsewhere, the past has molded the present.

In 1608, Samuel de Champlain established the first permanent French colony

in North America at Quebec, overlooking the St. Lawrence River. However, the first French involvement in what became known as "Acadia" happened four years earlier. Drawn by the spirit of adventure, the French found fish, furs, and fertile land in the region. The name "Acadia" or "La Caddy" was possibly derived from a Micmac word meaning "piece of land," and settlement soon followed exploration. The area became a constituent, albeit "fringe," part of New France. The present Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, as well as part of Maine, composed the quickly booming agrarian Acadia.

As New France grew and prospered, so did New England and the British colonies to the south. Inevitably, conflicting territorial claims led to war . . . and war . . . and war. The French were at a disadvantage because, with the exception of the agricultural Acadians, they had favored itinerant trading over settlement. New France largely remained a society geared toward commerce in furs, while the British Colonies became a "homeland" in their own right. The result was that the British settlers greatly outnumbered the French in North America, and they were motivated by a desire for land which exceeded the French desire for animal pelts. The French view, naturally, endeared them to most of the Indian tribes; but in four bloody conflicts, from 1689 until 1763, the French and their Indian allies were decisively defeated. During the second of these colonial wars, French Acadia was seized by the British, and their possession of the region was legitimized by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. The Acadians remained on their farms and in their villages, tolerating Britain's rule. In general, the farmers and fishermen were content to adjust to new realities as long as their Catholic faith and their culture were not endangered. While willing to accept de facto British control, the Acadians were not willing to swear allegiance to the British monarch. In short, they would not disown their heritage.

What the French in North America would call the "War of the Conquest" and what the British settlers would refer

to as the "French and Indian War" began in 1754. The next year, the British insisted on a declaration of loyalty from the Acadians; when many refused, their property was confiscated and they were forced into exile. Families and friends were separated, villages were abandoned, fields and livestock were destroyed, homes were burned, and the long, dark night of the Acadian *diaspora* began. Approximately 6,000 men, women, and children were sent by ship to the British colonies of the Atlantic seaboard, and eventually some reached France. As a people, the Acadians endured and, after the Peace of Paris ended the war in 1763, journeyed in large numbers to Louisiana.

The Gulf Coast colony, the "Land of Louis," had been established by Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, in 1699, and New Orleans, founded in 1718, had become a potentially important port city. During the war, Spain had served as a faithful French ally and, in so doing, lost Florida to the British. To compensate Spain for Florida, France presented Louisiana to the Spanish Crown. The exiled Acadians, yearning for French rule once again, found themselves entering a newly designated Spanish colony. However, the culture, the language, and the administration of Louisiana remained overwhelmingly French.

The Acadians had little interest in New Orleans, for they longed for land and for the freedom of an agrarian society. In short order, they settled along Bayou Lafourche, Bayou Teche, and in the prairies to the west. During the years that followed, the Acadians became an integral part of the population of Louisiana: isolated and self-sufficient, they preserved their heritage and their traditions. As trappers, fishermen, small farmers, and planters, they thrived in their new home. By the 19th century, numerous Acadians were prominent in government and in the professions, and, in 1861, like virtually all Louisianans, they rallied to the Confederate cause. Also like their fellow Louisianans, they endured the brutality of Union invasion and postwar "Reconstruction."

Gradually, the word "Acadian" was abbreviated into "Cajun." In the 20th century, the Cajuns continued to survive

floods, hurricanes, and economic hardship on a grand scale. In the late 1940's, the arrival of the offshore oil industry brought them and South Louisiana genuine prosperity. For the first time, Cajuns found themselves in the driver's seat. The proud people of 18th-century exile became the proprietors of a new Louisiana legacy. At that point, however, leaders in the Cajun community realized that prosperity, "modernism," and the growth of paternalistic government could lead to the destruction of the very culture which had sustained their ancestors during years of sorrow and wandering. Successful efforts were made to preserve and promote the French language; connections to France and Belgium and to Acadian communities in Canada were strengthened; and emphasis on self-sufficiency was renewed. The Cajun of South Louisiana today is well aware that his children are in danger of entrapment by the current culture-without-culture that prevails in American society; he is aware of the danger inherent in the loss of tradition and heritage; and he knows that he must actively defend his own history.

We have now reached the point where reality meets myth. No, modern Louisiana Cajuns do not paddle *pirogues* down the bayou on a daily basis. No, Cajuns do not spend all of their spare time dancing Gallicized polkas to authentic folk music. No, Cajuns do not live exclusively on a diet of rice, seafood, and Tabasco sauce. No, not all Cajuns speak French. The Cajun is as sophisticated, well educated, and economically viable as any other Southerner, as any other American, in these years of the Pax Americana. Yet, the Cajun is different. Cajuns still take pride in their past. They want to maintain a sense of "uniqueness," and they believe their European heritage is a living, vital part of their existence. Cajun French is said to be close to pure 16th-century French, Cajun music is a lingering evocation of the reels and ballads of Brittany and Normandy, and Cajun food epitomizes that zest for flavor which characterizes the Franco-phone world. The Cajun is also different because he still feels the centuries-old bond to the Old World and revels in that historic connection. Traveling through South Louisiana, one will see towns and villages resembling communities in France and in Quebec. Parishes, not counties, divide Louisiana into local governmental units. Cathedrals and road-

side shrines are easily found. Festivals call attention to the French heritage, and the Acadian flag—bearing the *fleur de lis* of France and the castle of Spain—flies over schools, museums, and businesses. When speaking French, Cajuns frequently do not refer to themselves as "Cajuns" or as "Acadians" but simply as "French." Most importantly, Cajun culture survives and endures because of the family-based tradition of historical memory. The Cajuns know who they are and whence they came. The provincial motto of Quebec, ancient neighbor of Acadia, explains it all: *Je me souviens*—"I remember."

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## Creole Culture

by Ben C. Toledano

Though more reminiscent of the Middle Ages than of recent times, the marriage ceremony of General P.G.T. Beauregard's niece, Bertha Hall, the daughter of Angele Beauregard and Frederick Hall, took place in St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans only 100 years ago. According to a contemporary newspaper account, the "evening was a scene of much social splendour and religious dignity," and

united in the ties of marriage two of the most distinguished Creole families in Louisiana, whose names have been honored for many generations in family dignity, wealth and deeds of valor. . . . The most prominent people of American and Creole society were seated within the Cathedral to witness the marriage ceremony. . . . Within the sanctuary was a dense foliage of palms and ferns. The bridal pews were barriered with a rope of smilax entwined with white roses. Miss Escobal, the talented organist of the St. Louis Cathedral, played Goronden March as the bridal procession walked up the aisle, with the Suisse in gold-braided red uniform leading the way, swinging to and fro his baton of gold.

As the 12 ushers reached the altar, "They separated and formed a company of honor, through which the bride passed." At the altar steps, the groom

took the bride's hand, placed it within his arm, advanced towards the altar where Very Rev. Father Mignot, Father Scotti, Father Gireand and a circle of acolytes awaited to perform the religious service of marriage. Father Mignot delivered a nuptial sermon of tender thought and graceful words. He spoke of the honored names of the bride and groom, of their families' loyalty and efforts in propagating the Catholic faith in Louisiana, but above all the glory of virtue and honor that had ever haloed the family heritage of bride and groom. In terminating his sermon Father Mignot said: "My children, God bless you both in being well born. Let this blessing be your incentive to humility of heart, Christian charity and loyal allegiance to the Catholic church."

Doesn't it seem odd to read of the union of two "Creole families," witnessed by "prominent people of American and Creole societies"? It seems so to me when I read those phrases now, though there was a time when it seemed perfectly natural.

On my father's side, I am descended from the original French and Spanish settlers in New Orleans. The groom in the ceremony described above was Edouard Alphonse Toledano, my grandfather. Most of the information I have of the old city, prior to World War I, came from listening to stories, however embellished, told by people of my parents' and grandparents' generation. By the time I began to hear them, my father's family had sought and found, at least psychologically, some comfort in remembrances of things past.

The topics of conversation seemed normal at the time, though not now. Everything was highly personal in a rather formal and proper way. Madame So-and-So's "secret" nips of brandy, the "friendship" her husband the judge had towards a younger woman of questionable station, the cotton broker's gambling debts, the card games, the operas, the ancient family portraits, the furniture and silver which had not yet been delicately "transferred" into other hands.