

## **Identifying Cajun Identity: Cajun Assimilation and the Revitalization of Cajun Culture**

*By Julie Elizabeth Hebert*

A French speaking people, the Acadians settled first in the area of Canada now known as Nova Scotia. To their settlement, they gave the name Acadie. From then on, people called them Acadians. Content in their forest home, the Acadians did not ask for much from their British and French colonial governments, nor did they wish to be bothered. A people more than happy to be neglected, the Acadians repeatedly came under siege in the wars of empire. Exiled and shipped to multiple destinations, the Acadians found a home in the swamps and bayous of South Louisiana. Here, they once again settled into a life of isolation and contentment. As the exiles adapted to life in America, they and their culture began to evolve. As the young country fought and won its independence, the Acadians established permanent settlements, settlements that remained untouched until the end of the Civil War and the dawning of the twentieth century. With the industrial revolution in full force, the Acadians battled assimilation. In the end, they stood on the brink of cultural annihilation, yet in the end they fought to reclaim their heritage. Cajun culture, a hybrid form of Acadian culture, resulted from this evolution. This is the story of the Cajuns, their assimilation, and their success in reclaiming their culture and their identity. The end of the Civil War marked the beginning of the Cajuns' battle to resist and reclaim the culture of their ancestors, the Acadians.

On April 9, 1865, the Confederate forces under General Robert E. Lee officially surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant bringing the Civil War to an end. For many Louisianians and Southerners in general, the devastating effects of the war on property, pride, and economy continued for decades. Louisiana's Cajuns, grateful for the end of the draft and fighting, unknowingly entered a period of their history in which their cultural identity suffered as a result of various American assimilation efforts throughout the South in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Only when Cajuns confronted their Americanization in the 1960s did a revitalization of culture occur. Assimilation, although a profound scar on Cajun ethnicity, functioned as a catalyst in a search for identity as Americans. Acknowledging the effects of modernization and assimilation provides the foundation for understanding the Cajun identity.

During the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras, the division between the Cajuns and other Louisianians increased. Several stereotypes which still accompany the idea of "a true Cajun" developed in these eras: lazy, ignorant, illiterate, and simple. Able to remain unassimilated for the most part, Cajuns continued to act in the ways they had before the war. Like all good Southerners, they still loved card games, parties, and communal get togethers, but unlike the Americans, Cajuns continued to work at their own pace, a work ethic which stood in complete contrast to the American idea of progress. James Dorman, in his work on the ethnicity of the Cajun culture, quotes several journalists of the day who described the Cajuns as follows: "a Utopian dreamer and idler...—one who sits on the skirts of progress," "the Acadian who overworks is indeed a rare avis [rare bird]," and "most of them are mere squatters on the Prairies."<sup>1</sup>

Southerners, in general, thought little of the Cajuns and their culture because their values negated the closely held American values of material wealth, the Protestant work ethic, and progress. Cajuns, themselves, thought little of American standards including those regarding education, and Cajun folk wisdom summed up the Cajun opinion on education: “My son is rascal enough without an education.”<sup>2</sup> Cajuns reveled in their illiteracy, and this attitude concerning education served as another reason why the Americans looked down upon the “poor,” “stupid” Cajuns of south Louisiana.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these qualities which fostered a negative stereotype of Cajuns, observers of Cajun communities repeatedly remarked upon two distinct Cajun ethnic qualities in a positive light: hospitality and family ties. Travelers in the South during the post-Civil War era commented upon the friendliness with which the Cajun family welcomed strangers into their home and their willingness to share what little they had with those in need. Motivated, not by a conscious sense of charity, but rather by an inherited trait of hospitality, Cajuns opened their homes to all who graced their doorsteps. Continuation of the strong family ties among the Cajun communities, the second positive quality of Cajun culture, survived through the institution of marriage. Cajun youth often married among their own kind. Women of Cajun descent usually married men of similar heritage; however, if a young Cajun woman decided to marry a German or Creole, the family ties, although slightly altered, still remained strong within her own family. According to most historians of this culture, the Cajun culture continued to flourish mainly because of the female population and the roles mothers played in childrearing and in the preserving of family customs and traditions. Cajun women reared their children while the men worked, and if the woman was Cajun, she reared her children to appreciate and respect their Cajun traditions and heritage.<sup>4</sup>

Cajun children with time grew apart from their mothers and their heritage and became susceptible to the lure of wealth and respectability. American culture in the post-Reconstruction era offered young Cajuns these promises in the form of education, and the Cajun children by their own preference began to speak and read English, the language spoken by their teachers and classmates in school. At this time the newspaper editors began to print their papers in English only, ending the former practice of printing the paper in both French and English. Cajun ethnic ties began to unravel as Cajun children and local Louisiana society placed greater emphasis on the English language, whereas before French represented an acceptable alternative to English on the bayous, swamps, and prairies of South Louisiana. The Cajun culture seemed to be losing some of its rural isolationism which it had valued above all things since landing in Louisiana, but the greatest blow to this isolationism came in 1880 when the Louisiana-Western Railroad finished laying its tracks connecting New Orleans to Houston.<sup>5</sup>

With this railroad came the development of small communities to “service the track and to make use of the rail facility for commerce and trade.”<sup>6</sup> These communities developed into towns which resembled the American “ideal of urbanization.”<sup>7</sup> They became equipped with all the necessities of a bustling mini-metropolis. This, of course, included professionals and healthcare providers. Schools and businesses sprung up everywhere laying siege to the little Cajun communities. Cajuns who remained in town quickly became urbanized:

Those who remained in the towns...quickly acculturated to the norms necessary for their survival in that setting, learning to speak English, for example, and to conduct business according to the dictates of the Anglo-bourgeois commercial world, and to take advantage of such urban institutions as the local public school, barroom, billiard parlor, playhouse, bank and barber shop. These were decidedly sophisticated civilities by contrast with “simpler” country life: Too much so for many.[8](#)

The majority of the Cajun country population remained alienated from these new surroundings. Many, in fact, chose to leave the city and return to the country and their simple agrarian existence. Rural Cajun folk became the preservers of the Cajun culture, while the urban Cajuns adjusted to city life and the American way of living. Once again a vital area of Acadian land came under siege, and the Cajuns, true to their Acadian roots, proved their ability to adapt and to maintain their ethnic dissimilitude. Urbanization failed to break the Cajun ethnic bond among the rural community in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Next came Huey P. Long with his “better farm-to-market” roads which posed yet another threat to Cajun isolationism.

Although Long made an early and effective pitch to the descendants of Evangeline’s people, noting their needs had long been too ignored by the state’s politicians, what Huey promised (and to a degree at least delivered)—free textbooks, improved schools, roads, hospitals, public services—were needed as much by Cajuns as by other disadvantaged rural inhabitants. But their delivery constitute yet another threat to Cajun ethnic survival.[9](#)

Even if Long failed to realize the effects of his actions, his efforts to give to the Cajun people what they “desperately” needed served as an assimilation technique. Those influenced by these improvements most likely did not realize the extent to which these improvements functioned as infiltrators of their isolationism and their ethnic culture. Despite all the necessary changes brought by the Long administration, one piece of legislation issued a substantial blow to the Cajun ethnic identity: the Louisiana Constitution of 1921. Through this document, the legislature denied public schools the right to instruct children in both French and English. Most Cajun rural folk and children were monolingual and able to speak very few words of English. Louisiana legislators through this law in essence denied Cajun children the right to education in their primary language forcing them either to learn English or remain illiterate. In effect this law further emphasized the language barrier between the Cajuns and the “others,” and most Anglo-Louisianians obtained another reason to believe in the inferiority of the French-speaking population. As the ethnic ties of the community as a whole continued to unravel, the negative stereotype in regards to French speakers remained a constant on the Louisiana social landscape. Through all of this, rural Cajun culture survived almost untouched, and observers of these decades described the rural Cajuns in much the same

way as others had described them in previous decades:

“Their homes are always spotless, and there is always a welcome and a cup of black coffee for any caller, even though he be a stranger,” a typical Cajun “lives in his own home, usually with several relatives, besides his immediate family. He keeps a cow, some chickens, and raises a few vegetables which he sometimes sells. Sometimes he helps keep a store in the nearby village,” and “an unsophisticated agrarian people who have clung tenaciously to their old customs and traditions.”<sup>10</sup>

Because of their “geographic, occupation, and language isolation,” the rural Cajuns achieved a social isolationism “greater than that of any other American ethnic group.”<sup>11</sup> People in the 1920s and 1930s identified this Cajun ethnicity and began to describe the Cajun culture based on its ethnic qualities. While the urban Cajun assimilated, the rural Cajun in his isolation preserved his cultural traditions.<sup>12</sup>

With the advent of the Second World War, another threat to Cajun isolationism emerged. Many young Cajun men drafted into the armed services began to be acculturated into mainstream Anglo-American values. Returning from the war, these men believed in the inferiority of their culture and impressed their opinions upon their wives and children so that the next generation felt more firmly than the first this shame of their Cajun culture:

Moreover, the evidence suggests that the Cajun people themselves came increasingly to internalize the negative value attachments to their ethnic status: They increasingly came to believe in their own ethnic cultural “inferiority.” That the qualities of negative ascription were often present among the members of the group (in the form of self-denigration and self-abnegation) has been confirmed through literally scores of interviews, formal and informal, that [the author] has conducted over the years since the beginning of the decade of the 1950s.<sup>13</sup>

In this era, bilingual parents refused to speak Cajun French with the children, and a new generation of Acadian descendants grew up never learning Cajun French. Cajun parents’ failure to converse with their children in their cultural language dealt the strongest blow to Cajun ethnicity and heritage. Cajuns of the 1940s and 1950s honestly believed that they were acting in the best interest of their children by rearing them with American values. Cajun values still seeped through, and many of the core elements of this ethnic culture ingrained in the Cajun subconscious survived. Most parents failed to realize that they unconsciously passed down their Cajun traits to their children through their own practices and beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

The Rural Electrification Administration, an agency of the first New Deal created in May 1935, delivered the final blow to the Cajun isolationism of the rural folk when it finally reached Louisiana in the late 1940s and 1950s. Initially an agency meant to place the rural farmer on the same level as urbanites with free government sponsored electricity in a time when poverty and the Great Depression plagued the nation and brought Franklin

D. Roosevelt into the White House, the REA broke the final barrier separating the rural Cajun communities from the urban centers; the core groups which had maintained the quintessential elements of the Cajun ethnic identity, language, customs, and lifestyle, succumbed finally, breached by Americanization. Many predicted the death of the Cajun culture:

As Professor Mathe Allain has pointed out, the onset of modernity in transportation, mechanization, and urbanization undermined the structural-functional need for the continuance of the old ways, both in material and non-material culture.[15](#)

With the advent of supermarkets, the need for boucheries deteriorated, and the variety of foods available in these markets expanded the Cajun palate which undermined the traditional cuisine. The bals de maisons found their replacements in the radio, the television set, and the movie theater. Cajun music came under attack, as well, and in the 1950s others called this music “Chanky-Chank” music “suggesting the simplicity of instrumentation and rhythm as well as the characteristically reiterative harmonic line.”[16](#) Modernization resulted in a definite decline in the rural Cajun ethnic culture.[17](#) Then in the 1960s, America experienced an age of ethnicity in which various people of varying ethnic cultures began to reclaim their ethnicity. For the Cajuns, a man by the name of Senator Dudley J. LeBlanc of Abbeville led this ethnic effort, and his book, in which he set out to revive the Cajun spirit, *The True Story of the Acadians* presented a concrete example for evaluating and recording Cajun ethnicity. By 1966, the publishers issued its third edition, and the Cajun revitalization movement shifted into high gear. A rebirth of the Cajun language, Cajun music, and Cajun cooking emerged. Revitalization of Cajun culture began at the top of the social ladder, and not at the bottom like most ethnic movements of this time in the United States. Leaders in the South Louisiana community worried about the disappearance of the French language in the area. In an effort to preserve this dying language and this so-called dying culture, these men worked with the legislative bodies of Louisiana to save all the elements of their culture that they possibly could by law. Ironically, these men refused to be labeled Cajuns and claimed to be true decedents of the Acadians and so Acadians themselves. Remarkably, the leading administrator of this program to reclaim the language of the area was a Canadian, not a self-claimed Acadian or Cajun, by the name of Dr. Raymond Rodgers. His efforts, supported by Congressman James P. Domengeaux of Lafayette, resulted in the formation of CODOFIL (“Council for the Development of French in Louisiana”) and other such legislation in the summer of 1968. The legislature created CODOFIL to:

further the preservation and utilization of the French language and culture of Louisiana by strengthening its position in the public schools of the State, and [to provide] requirements that the culture and history of French populations in Louisiana and elsewhere in the Americas, shall be taught for a sequence of years in the public elementary and high schools systems of the State.[18](#)

During this session the legislature passed a bill which once again allowed for the publication of State legal documents in French as well as English and agreed upon a resolution to “establish cultural ties with the French-speaking Canadian provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick.”<sup>19</sup> In 1969, the legislature designated twenty-two parishes of the “old French Triangle ‘Acadiana’.”<sup>20</sup> By 1974, the legislature officially adopted an “Acadiana” flag.<sup>21</sup>

Class division within the South Louisiana community again resurfaced in debates concerning the CODOFIL legislation, especially in regards to French linguistic education. Legislators in their creation of this act sought to preserve French culture in Louisiana which entailed the teaching of Parisian or Standard French in all elementary and high schools. Cajuns took exception to this because they felt that Standard French did not adequately represent the French culture of South Louisiana. Furthermore, the implementation of this legislation in the school system brought Cajun culture and Cajun French-speaking children under scrutiny. Unaccustomed to speaking Standard French, Cajun children suffered various reprimands from instructors and ridicule and derision from their classmates because of their accents and their cultural form of French. Cajuns, seeing this legislation as a derogatory element employed by the Establishment to attack their culture and their children, spurned CODOFIL.<sup>22</sup>

CODOFIL, however, brought about several positive results which benefited Cajuns and their efforts to reclaim their ethnicity like its association with other movements to revitalize the French culture of Louisiana. In 1968 CODOFIL took credit for bringing about the first conference “to foster a Great Reunion of the Acadian People, together with the French-speaking Communities of North America.”<sup>23</sup> In the propaganda for this event held in Lafayette on December 3 and 4, no mention of the word Cajun appeared, yet the festival did include elements of Cajun music and other aspects of Cajun culture on display. Cajuns of this area attended in droves:

The local population turned out in large numbers for the occasion. The South Louisiana area is renowned for its festivals, which provide an opportunity for revelry and bon temps nearly irresistible to the regional population, Cajun and otherwise. The participation of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of “just plain Cajuns” in this first festival given in honor of their “heritage” and featuring their “culture” unquestionably served to elevate the ethnic consciousness of a people whose subculture was close to extinction.<sup>24</sup>

The success of this celebration motivated the establishment of annual celebrations of ethnicity and culture. *Hommage a Musique Acadienne*, a festival to celebrate Cajun music folk traditions and lore sponsored by CODOFIL and the Smithsonian Institution also resulted from this celebration.<sup>25</sup> Cajuns came together to celebrate and had a good time as well dancing and eating good home cooking, while taking pride in their musical culture and celebrating “being Cajun.”

As a revitalization of this dying culture occurred, the word “Cajun” took on a whole new persona and connotation, one defined by the Cajuns themselves. A person can travel all over the world and see advertisements for Cajun cooking and Cajun humor, but what do

these advertisements actually represent? Quite simply they represent a culture's acceptance and pride of its heritage and its members.

This process of change still continues, and ironically, the efforts of CODOFIL have produced a renewed interest among the Cajun peoples of South Louisiana in their heritage and culture, an interest developed through a desire to set the record straight and to prevent the CODOFIL movement from totally ignoring the Cajun aspects of Louisiana French culture. Cajun history and culture also attracts the interests of outsiders which one can see in the Smithsonian sponsorship of the Cajun music festival. Motivated by profit the interest of some of these outsiders has not benefited Cajun efforts to preserve their culture, yet some outsiders do contribute insight and scholarship which serve to advance the Cajun ethnic search. Putting the label Cajun on anything seems to guarantee the marketability of the product. Why the word Cajun attracts so much attention possibly results from the pride that the Cajun people have in themselves and their culture. Experts must admit that CODOFIL plays a major role in renewing this pride by its demands, time and again, that the elitist values of the "Acadians," which some seem to equate with Parisian French values, be implemented and upheld while the Cajun culture and values should be overlooked and looked down upon. Louisiana Cajun population's reevaluation of its heritage and culture owes much to this legislation and the uproar its implementation brought about in the community.

Recently, Cajun adaptability became evident with the oil crisis of the 1980s. During the last few years of this decade, more Cajuns left the state than ever before as a result of downsizing and recession in the oil industry. A new diaspora of the Cajun population occurred in this decade because of occupational necessity and the greater emphasis placed on higher education in the work force. Increasing respect and demand for advanced education in the work force caused many young Cajun adults to leave the state to continue their education. Remarkably though, those who left often lamented their departure for various reasons but most commonly because of the loss of their Cajun family and community spirit. Other people of the United States seemed to lack the feeling of togetherness that the Cajuns managed to preserve throughout all their trials and assimilation. Many as well received condescending receptions because of their Cajun heritage, but unlike before, these men and women seem to respect their culture and heritage even more in the face of this adversity.<sup>26</sup>

Cajun culture thrives in these men and women. Acadian and Cajun scholars, who have produced most of the scholarship completed to date on Acadians, Cajuns, and their cultures, usually leave the state and return to continue their work in this field once they have earned their graduate and doctorate degrees. The University of Louisiana at Lafayette houses the Center for Louisiana Studies, currently the largest institution for Acadian and Cajun studies in the world.<sup>27</sup> Associate director of the Center and leading Acadian/Cajun scholar Dr. Carl Brasseaux, a Cajun, ironically left the state to attend graduate school and to work on his doctoral thesis and continues to publish several of his books through the University Press of Mississippi. Most historians of this field consider him to be the leading expert on Acadian and Cajun history. Other historians like Shane Bernard have taken interest in this field in their graduate and doctoral work which guarantees a continuation and expansion of this field of historical study. Scholars definitely consider Acadian and Cajun history one of the new and exciting historical fields of the last few decades of the twentieth century. Faced with near extinction, the

Cajun culture of Louisiana displayed its most profound ethnic trait by not only surviving, but prospering in the midst of adversity.

### Notes

1Dorman, James H. *The People Called Cajuns: An Introduction to an Ethnohistory*. (Lafayette, LA: U of Southwestern Louisiana P, 1983). p. 61.

2Dorman, p. 60.

3Dorman, p. 53-65; Lawrence E. Estaville, Jr., "Changeless Cajuns: Nineteenth Century Reality or Myth?", *Louisiana History*, Vol 28, (1987), p. 117-140; Glenn R. Conrad, "The Acadians: Myths and Realities" in *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983), p. 1-14.

4Brasseaux, *Acadian*, p. 106-111; Dorman, p. 59-62; Estaville, p. 117-119

5Carl A. Brasseaux, "Acadian Education: From Cultural Isolation to Mainstream America," in *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983), p. 133-142; Conrad, p. 10-14; Dorman, p. 62-63.

6Dorman, p. 63.

7Dorman, p. 63-64.

8Dorman, p. 65.

9Dorman, p. 69.

10Dorman, p. 71-72.

11Dorman, p. 72.

12Conrad, p. 1-14; Dorman, p. 69-72; James H. Dorman, "The Cajuns: Ethnogenesis and the Shaping of Group Consciousness," in *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983), p.233-246; Hosea Phillips, "The Spoken French of Louisiana," in *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983), p. 145-155.

13Dorman, p. 74-75.

14Conrad, p. 12-14; Dorman, p. 74-75; Robin Meche Kube, "Cajun Soldiers During WWII: Reflection on Louisiana's French Language and People," *Louisiana History*, Vol. 35, (1994), p. 345-349; Interview with Carl Brasseaux, Center for Louisiana Studies, Lafayette, Louisiana, June 10, 1999; Interview with Dr. Leo P. Hebert, Thibodaux, Louisiana, June 10, 1999.

15Dorman, p. 76.

16Dorman, p. 77.

17Conrad, p. 12-14; Dorman, p. 74-77; Interviews with Brasseaux and Hebert.

18Dorman, p. 82; Louisiana Revised Statutes, Act. Nos. 408-409, July 20, 1968.

19Dorman, p. 82; Louisiana Revised Statutes, Act. Nos. 256, July 19, 1968.

20Dorman, p. 82-83; House Concurrent Resolution No. 81, July 20, 1968. These parishes include Acadia, Ascension, Assumption, Avoyelles, Calcasieu, Cameron, Evangeline, Iberia, Iberville, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, Lafourche, Pointe Coupee, St.

Charles, St. James, St. John, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary, Terrebonne, and Vermilion.  
21Conrad, p. 1-14; Dorman, p. 76-83; Brasseaux, Education, p. 140-142; House  
Concurrent Resolution No. 496, 1969.

22Brasseaux, Education, p. 140-142; Dorman, p. 76-83; Interviews with Brasseaux and  
Hebert.

23Dorman, p. 86.

24Dorman, p. 86.

25Dorman, p. 87.

26Interview with Allen J. Danos, Jr., CEO of Danos and Curole Oil Field Contractors,  
Larose, Louisiana, November 23, 1999; Interview with Maria P. Hebert, New Orleans,  
Louisiana, December 18, 1999; Stephen Webre, "Among the Cybercajuns: Constructing  
Identity in the Virtual Diaspora," Louisiana History, Vol. 39, (1998), p. 443-456.

27Carl A. Brasseaux, "The Colonial Records Collection of the Center for Louisiana  
Studies," Louisiana History, Vol. 25, (1984), p.181-188.

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)