A Dialogue On Preserving Cajun Identity

THE PROBLEMS OF DEFINING CAJUN ETHNICITY

IT SEEMS LIKE THE DEBATE OVER THE Cajun identity is once again. The Louisiana Legislature recently passed a bill on set-aside programs (HB18) which contains provisions recognizing Cajuns as a minority along with blacks and women. Last year, a similar though broader attempt, Rep. "Lala" Lalonde's Cajun bill, failed despite widespread public interest and media coverage (or maybe because, since this year's text generated little of each). Then came the issue of counterfeit Cajun food pushed to unsuspecting consumers by unscrupulous companies. The dispute thickened even more with the publication of "The Truth About the Cajuns" and the ensuing controversy deftly fueled by the author during a recent talk to the Baton Rouge Press Club.

I love it. For the past six months, I have been working on a book on Cajun identity and some mornings the novice and doubt-ridden writer inside of me cannot help wondering if the subject is of any substantial interest to anybody. Well, it obviously is. That helped a lot, thank you. What did not was the content of these various attempts at defining the Cajuns.

The definition proposed by the legislators recognizes a "French Acadian" as a member of a descendant of the community of French Acadians who colonized Louisiana after 1755. Nowhere is the word Cajun to be found, and it is lucky because a lot of Romeros, Domengeauxs, Mills and Cheramies would not qualify. Even "Lala" Lalonde would face trouble since his ancestors came from Quebec, not Acadia! Soon, in order to benefit from the set-aside legislation, Cajun contractors will have to submit their genealogical tree with their bid proposals, an interesting prospect. Will Cajun women contractors—if there are any—get double the preferential treatment?

On the food front, the issue is just as confusing. I agree that adding spices to any industrial concoctions does not make them Cajun. But what about the Cajun potato chip, the Cajun beer and other Cajun products manufactured in Louisiana? And I am not even talking about Cajun Computers, Cajun Gutters, Cajun Pest Control, and the dozens of businesses that can be found around the state. Who will get the official "Cajun" logo and on what basis?

The March 22 issue of The Times sums up the dilemma: On page 17 Cajun imitators are rightfully berated and on page 18 the Cajun flair brought to Swedish cruises is proudly promoted. What is not mentioned is that the crawfish cooked by all-Cajun Enola Prudhomme are marketed by a Swedish-owned company, peeled in Mexico and sold in Scandinavia. Will the mudbugs still be Cajuns after the Louisiana promotion team heads back home?

Ultimately, in the American laissez faire tradition, the market will separate the authentic from the fake, unless the consumers' tastebuds are already destroyed by a diet of fast and frozen food with or without "Cajun" sauce. But I shudder at the thought of a culture, even part of it, defined by business rules.

I thought I would find the definitive answers in Trent Angers' book. After
years of research on the Cajun identity, I am still looking for it and "The Truth" was at hand for $11.95. Unfortunately, Mr. Angers tells us what is not Cajun, but does not tell us what is. According to the media and tourism agencies for the stereotyped image of exotic Cajuns is an easy task. Defining a Cajun is much harder and Mr. Angers does not attempt it. What is mindboggling is the fact. that the "image" he diana Profile, very image he now considers Since it's good business) and that tourists to Acadiana (which he likes development in the area while picturing Cajuns as fun-loving and exotic, the very image he now considers degrading!

All these attempts to confine Cajuns within a definition fall because they implicitly regard ethnicity as a state of being, not as an evolutionary process. Acadians and early Cajuns were exclusively Catholic and French-speaking: Today's Cajuns are not. Both criteria, which were the reasons why the Acadians were exiled from Canada and settled in Louisiana and were used to define them, are today largely irrelevant. Significantly, they are not even mentioned in the debate. Refraining to attach particular ethnic traits to the Voile de vivre or close-knit families are not helping much either since these traits are shared by many rural communities, ethnic or not.

Ethnicity is built everyday with the social and physical transformation of daily personal behaviors and practices into social patterns and their passage, or not, in tradition. The German accordion became a basic instrument of Cajun music, crawfish (unknown to the Cajuns is an easy task. Defining a Cajun was crowned an ethnic symbol and promotes the perception worldwide of Cajun-identity. Only now there are some type trademark or other legal protection to help ward off the poachers.

The everyday life of South Louisiana is culturally changing. The definition of the nouveaux Cajuns are being exploited and fraudulently represented should start in Great Neck, N.Y. or some other far away place. It started here at home. In Southwest Louisiana, the selfishness and greed of the Acadian/Cajun promoters has not left anything untouched. There are Cajun tacos, Cajun pasta, Cajun sunshine, Cajun snow (frost) and Cajun bar mitzvah. The pervasiveness of the Cajun image is far from over. It has spread the Cajuns' influence worldwide and promotes the perception worldwide that this is some sort of cultural and ethnic monolithic kingdom.

We support "Authentic Cajun." That way communities such as the Cajuns are being exploited and fraudulently represented should start with the USL athletic teams, the advertising and promotional packages of the area (at government expense), public buildings like the Lafayette Civic Center (bastardized as the Cajundome), our high schools and the very region which has been propagated into becoming "Acadiana," the ultimate fraud. Many USL athletic teams are predominantly African-American. We believe that the area could and should be promoted with something in it for all of its architects and builders, not just one.

Acadiana/Cajun are unique to a particular historical experience which is theirs alone. Southwest Louisiana is culturally

WHAT IS AUTHENTIC CAJUN?

IT APPEARS THAT THE ACADIAN/CAJUN craze is reaping nationally what it has sown locally. We refer to the recent clamor surrounding participation in the attempts of people outside this area to cash in on the hype. Now there is talk of some type trademark or other legal protection to help ward off the poachers.

The definition of the Cajun is simple. The Cajuns are defined as those people of Cajun ancestry and heritage. The Cajuns are those people who are of Cajun descent and culture.

The Cajuns are a unique people with a particular historical experience which is theirs alone.
pluralistic in every sense of the word with Acadians, Afrikans (30%), French, Germans, Puerto Ricans, Spanish, etc., who together made and make the area what it is. How dare the Cajuns co-opt, usurp and suck all of the honey! Could it be that the Acadians/Cajuns have so mastered the art of selective outrage that they are blind to their own hypocrisy?

We believe in "Authentic Cajun"—let's start at home.

J.J. "ADOFO" HARMON
PRESIDENT, UNCAJUN COMMITTEE

A MODEST PROPOSAL
I, TOO, AM OUTRAGED BY THE RECENT plethora of fake Cajun products damaging the Cajun name. Louisiana rightfully declares war on these usurpers. But, dog it, why not declare a holy war, much in the fashion of those Islamic book reviewers? I'm talking about putting out contracts on all those fakers and let justice be rendered.

Forget about lawyers and litigation, just put a price on the corporate head of "Shu-Nuff" Cajun seasoning and he will be just so much cayenne dust in the wind. And what's this? Cajun white wine from California? Why, a few Chilean grapes in their mash ought to stamp them out. This is serious.

But in order to appear convincing to these undesirables, we need a strong public figure to lead the crusade: The state Agriculture Department will not cut the Reese Creole Mustard. There's only one person who fits this bill. From the city that brings us "The Cajun Caper," New Orleans' own Kaper, Nonc Daveed Duke, would be our man to hold the minority whip. Our new Cajun Czar would come up with some Cajun Hot Sticks of his own burning on the lawns of offending companies from New Jersey to Los Angeles.

And what about a Cajun logo for Cajun products? Let us be bold. Coon Associates Products® gets the message across (we need not go into the graphics) and let the chicken-and-dumplings people from Shreveport get their own logo. This logo could be stamped on a variety of products in order to safeguard their authenticity. If a buyer in, say, Milwaukee does not see our logo at Cajun Window Tinting or Cajun Weed Eaters, let him beware: There is only one real Cajun.

Finally, when our bad name will have been cleared we may get down to more serious matters such as going after the grosse patate: Texas! We'll invite Jim Hightower and his friends to the Cajundome® and we'll have all these dirty, smelly crawfish and the Duke and Swaggart will come out and...

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SUPPORT FOR MOVING STATE OFFICES
YOUR RECENT COMMENTARY IN EDITOR'S Notebook concerning the proposed relocation of the state's offices to Brandywine contains several inaccurate assumptions, (The Times, April 5).

First, you imply that the clients of the state would not have access to the Brandywine location because it is located on the "periphery of the city far away from the hub of public transportation." Lafayette is not New York, Atlanta, or even Baton Rouge. There is no place within the city limits that is "far away" from any other place in Lafayette. More importantly, although not the "hub of public transportation," the Brandywine complex is served by public transportation. Thus, those state clients without their own means of transportation will have ready access to the state's offices if they are relocated to Brandywine.

Second, you state that it is "not fair to take away downtown Lafayette's marketing niche as a governmental center just because a building on the outskirts is available on the cheap." Is it fair to ask the taxpayers of this economically depressed state to spend one million dollars simply to preserve Lafayette's alleged "marketing niche"? I think not. Furthermore, downtown Lafayette's alleged "marketing niche as a governmental center" does not exist. A short perusal of the local telephone directory will show that numerous city, parish, state, and federal offices are located outside the central business district. Even the city's offices are located away from the downtown area.

Finally, why shouldn't the poor and disadvantaged be allowed to transact their business in a clean, attractive suburban location? For those who have cars, parking is free and readily available. For those without, there are buses. For all, there is a more attractive environment.

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