'Acadian,' 'Cajun' Usage Is Disputed

BY HOWARD JACOBS

THE ITEM about St. Martinville citizens having rejected the proposed slogan CAJUN CAPITAL OF THE WORLD triggered a number of letters from readers who object in varying degrees to the use of the word "Cajun." He submitted a number of circulars tracing the history of the museum, the area and its people, and his own contribution is a circular captioned LONG LIVE THE VALIANT AND FUN-LOVING CAJUNS. And even the articulate and erudite Van Voorhies cannot altogether escape the "Cajun" association, as evidenced by a clipping he enclosed from the Tulane Hullabaloo about the extensive Acadian Collection in the Howard Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane. An excerpt refers to him as "... an amiable Cajun from Southern Louisiana."

Rousseau Van Voorhies, director of the "Alliance Acadienne," expressed similar-and even more emphatic-views. "There is all the difference in the world between a Cajun and an Acadian," said he, "and an authentic Cajun will fight to the drop of a syllable if the moniker 'Cajun' is applied to him. It's like calling a German a 'Kraut' or a Frenchman a 'Frog,' etc."

One of the Teche country's best-known citizens is Andre A. Olivier, proprietor of the picturesque Evangeline Museum in St. Martinville, who is among the respondents. He makes no comment on the propriety of "Acadian" vs. "Cajun," but by implication shows no antipathy to the term "Cajun." He submitted a number of circulars tracing the history of the museum, the area and its people, and his own contribution is a circular captioned LONG LIVE THE VALIANT AND FUN-LOVING CAJUNS. And even the articulate and erudite Van Voorhies cannot altogether escape the "Cajun" association, as evidenced by a clipping he enclosed from the Tulane Hullabaloo about the extensive Acadian Collection in the Howard Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane. An excerpt refers to him as "... an amiable Cajun from Southern Louisiana."

Today, as perhaps never before, ethnic humor has two strikes against it. Depending heavily for its success on dialect, colloquialisms, mispronunciation and misuse of words, it often has affronted persons of those origins, no matter how innocently intended. Cajun humor of course is no exception, although its circulation has, up to now, failed to provoke mass expressions of disapproval and indignation.

Cajun talespinners have told us that they earnestly wish they could qualify every dialect yarn they spin with the reminder that the protagonist is by no means typical of anyone but himself. Racial humor, they point out, is of necessity a stereotype, and involves mainly those persons whose knowledge of conventional English is wanting, and who must improvise in order to express themselves. The truth of the matter is that the dialect and patois are fast fading, and eventually will survive only among the historians and raconteurs.