Ancient Acadians: Ancestors may be volatile, fun-loving Celts

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In the first centuries of the Christian era, the Roman Empire endured a series of crises derived from economic and political instability. These crises had their counterparts across the Rhine River, where Germanic tribes were being pressed by new peoples emigrating from Asia. Several of these Germanic tribes were pushed against the empire's weakened northern frontier, which finally gave way.

This was not a case of adventurous bandits raiding for plunder, but whole peoples seeking new homes. Goths and Lombards entered Italy. Burgundians crossed the Rhine and settled in Alsace. Visigoths wandered over Aquitania, finally settling in Spain. Franks settled in what is now northern France, along the lower Rhine and in Flanders.

During all of these folk wanderings the structure and civilizations of the Roman Empire survived without radical change, but a general impoverishment, and a decline of culture make itself felt. The rules of the new states which grew out of the barbarian invasions might have regarding the Roman system with admiration and respect, but they had not mastered the art of maintaining the political organization, or the art of keeping order in the outlying provinces.

Celtic culture not uprooted

These wanderers, for the most part, replaced the Gaul-Roman stock north of the Loire, but in the northwest of Gaul -- in Brittany and the lower Loire -- the older Celtic culture was not uprooted.

As there were no large estates or Roman culture far from the large economic centers of the major communications arteries, the old Celtic village social structures and traditional customs were preserved. Native nobles took the place of Roman officers and civil servants, established new principalities in place of the old provinces, and found themselves back at the roots of their Celtic culture.

This is demonstrated in a number of areas where sacred groves had been preserved. Sacred places dedicated to Celtic gods became sanctuaries of Mithra, the god beloved of the Roman legions. Then, two centuries later, the grove once more was dedicated to Celtic deities. There was also a strong continuity in agricultural practices, in custom and in language. As late as the Third Century, the Emperor Severus agreed that the Celtic language could be used as a vehicle for official and other legal documents. This implied that the nobility, at least, were bilingual, speaking Latin as officials, but their native tongue when at their leisure. Rural areas must have remained Celtic in speech.

Between 500 and 600 A.D., Gaul again became the center of an unusual Celtic invasion. A vast religious movement was originated in Ireland and Scotland, where the native Celtic populace had eagerly embraced Christianity.

Irish monks, and their Scottish counterparts, flocked to the continent to evangelize the pagan countryside. These dedicated monks from Celtic backgrounds accomplished one of the greatest missionary feats in Christendom.

St. Columbanus, St. Padrelin, St. Cilian, St. Gall and St. Colman were but the leaders of literally hundreds of Celtic monks who re-Christianized Gaul and Western Germany. And all of them, according to contemporary chroniclers, "preached in men of their own people, their own language and their own way."

Despite the political maneuverings, wars and pestilences, it seems that the sturdy agricultural stock remained much as it had been before the advent of the Romans, or the Franks or the Burgundians.

In the Valley of the Loire and in Brittany, where the ancient Acadians were recruited, there remained a tenacious Celtic substructure. It might be hard to defend in court, and historians who dote on footnotes would not doubt scoff at the idea, but there is a strong possibility that the ancestors of Louisiana's Acadians were not Franks or Burgundians, but were volatile and fun-loving Celts, first cousins to the Irish and to the Highlanders of Scotland.

Perhaps it was here, then, that people first said, "Laissant Le bons temps rouler!"

(Editor's Note: Truman Stacey, a journalist for half a century, is the author of Louisiana's French Heritage, a number of articles in newspapers and historical journals. This is the final of a six-part series.)