In defense of the Cajuns' good name

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a three-part series from the book, "The Truth About the Cajuns," copyright 1989 by Acadian House Publishing, Inc.

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Exclusive to The Advertiser

Since the beginning of the 1980s, reporters have been coming out of the woodwork to write stories about the Cajuns of south Louisiana.

They've arrived by plane and bus, by car and by train from every corner of the globe, from every state in the Union. They have come with pad and pen and camera, all to get the scoop on one of the most highly publicized, most often distorted subjects in the media in America today.

Some of the feature articles produced in this frenzy of activity have been fair, well-balanced pieces that are a credit to the profession of journalism and a compliment to the Cajun people. But, unfortunately, a larger portion of the stories has been an embarrassment to professional journalism and an assault upon the dignity of the Cajun people.

For better or for worse, all the publicity has been good for the tourism business. Every tourist attraction imaginable has been written about again and again, from this angle and that. That's because a larger percentage of these reporters are travel writers, whose stuff is published in national travel-related magazines or in the travel sections of metropolitan newspapers.

The number of tourists these articles have attracted to south Louisiana is incalculable. Authorities say millions and millions of additional tourist dollars have poured into the region as a result of this "free publicity." But, along the way, there has been a casualty in this campaign to whip up excitement over south Louisiana's tourist attractions: The good name of the French-Acadian, or Cajun people, has been diminished. They have paid a heavy price for that part of the "free publicity" that tends to stereotype them as an unambitious, hedonistic, happy-go-lucky lot.

The simple truth is that the Cajun people and their culture are noticeably different than mainstream America in some ways. But these differences have been exaggerated to the point that some of the stories border on fiction. Rather than taking the time and making the effort to portray them accurately, too many writers have described the Cajuns in stereotyping words and gross generalities — and thus demeaned them, however unintentionally. For instance, consider these observations published in four otherwise respectable national magazines:

- "Cajuns are nothing if not jolly." (Esquire)
- "What lives in the swamps, plays an accordion, eats crawfish, speaks French and rocks your socks off?" (American Way)
- "Boudin is a hot Cajun sausage that has become the emblem of Cajun identity." (Gentleman's Quarterly)
- "The Cajuns who inhabit French-accented southwest Louisiana feast on crayfish and gumbo, hunt for alligators, dance exuberantly and revel in Mardi Gras." (Town & Country)

The false impressions conveyed by some media to the American public are an annoyance and embarrassment to the Cajun people. They also tend to hurt south Louisiana's prospects for industrial expansion and job creation, which are sorely needed here since the depression in the oil industry began in the early 1980s. Many of the stories depict the people of this area as much more interested in playing than working. Some out-of-state companies that might otherwise consider locating businesses here don't even consider this part of the country because they have been given the impression that the local people can't possibly be top-notch, productive workers. After all, how can someone who's been up partying and drinking half the night be bright-eyed and enthusiastic about his job the next morning?

The simple truth is that Cajuns in general are good workers. They are a people with a heritage of tenacity and self-sufficiency. They own a tradition of excellence in boat-building, in agricultural endeavors and in the culinary arts, among other things.

NEXT: What out-of-state newspapers and national magazines are saying about south Louisiana and its people.