Weeklong event offers lessons in being Cajun

By Angela Brown

ST. MARTINVILLE — The setting was straight out of a Cajun stereo, scene-covered oak trees, wood-plank sofas, straw-haden chairs, and everywhere the bayous, and everywhere the sounds of fiddle, accordion. Musicians fiddled the dense trees and left the farmers through two-steps. The thick smell of jambalaya filled the air against the rich scent of moonshine in a head-to-head battle.

For more than 200 years, Ca- juns quickly adopted a mix of food and traditions from other generations, but new music and new people were arriving in South Louisiana, and everyone was trying to spread the culture to the people there.

That’s what the first Dewey Balfa Cajun Heritage Week was all about. It was held in April, 1976, by a group of people who were determined to keep the Cajun culture alive. The event was a success, and it quickly grew into a weeklong celebration of Cajun culture, a festival that now attracts visitors from all over the world.

In the beginning, the focus was on fiddle music, but it quickly expanded to include Cajun dances, storytelling, and other traditional Cajun activities. The festival has continued to grow and expand over the years, and it now includes workshops, concerts, and other events that showcase the rich heritage of Cajun culture.

One of the highlights of the festival is the chance to meet and learn from some of the best Cajun musicians in the world. Many of the performers are local Cajuns who have spent their entire lives playing the music, and they are eager to share their knowledge with others.

In addition to the music and dance, the festival also includes a variety of other activities, such as Cajun cooking classes, Cajun art exhibits, and Cajun history tours. The festival is a great way to experience Cajun culture and learn more about this unique and fascinating way of life.

Despite a few challenges, including bad weather and a government shutdown, the festival continued to grow and attract more and more people. Today, the Dewey Balfa Cajun Heritage Week is one of the largest and most successful festivals in the South, and it is a testament to the enduring appeal of Cajun culture.

The festival is a great way to experience Cajun culture and learn more about this unique and fascinating way of life. Whether you’re a Cajun or just interested in learning more about this rich and diverse culture, the Dewey Balfa Cajun Heritage Week is an event you won’t want to miss.

For more information about the festival, please visit the website at deweybalfacajunheritageweek.com.
Day 2 of 3

Culture at a Crossroads

Cajuns strive to preserve their way of life

Ken Treharne, left, of Fort Worth, Texas, and Leslie Ducoile, right, of Lafayette keep an eye out for opportunities to photograph ancient cypress trees during a tour of Lake Martin south of Breaux Bridge led by Marcus de la Houssaye, standing in rear. Below, the giant crawfish that is part of the Acadiana Parish Tourism Commission's billboard seems to be aiming for a helicopter preparing to land at Industrial Helicopters Inc., an oil-field services firm across the parish line in Scott. Tourists are the actual intended catch of the day for the commission.

Acadiana calling

They come from Marseilles and Quebec, Montgomery and Kansas City, lured by bayou, boudin and Beausoleil. The mass marketing of Cajun culture has become big business — good news to a region bit bared by the oil bust.

Story by Bob Thibodaux

Photos by Ted Jackson

CROWLEY — It was just another day at work for David Guidry, attending his own business and trying to do his job while strangers peppered him with questions. Primarily a commercial photographer, Guidry started working about 100 acres of crawfish ponds as a sideline about 15 years ago. Since then, the number of tour buses driving across the Cajun prairie on Interstate 10 has increased steadily, and many of them find it compelled to stop and check him out.

Often, they've steered their way by the folks at the nearby tourist information bureau, whose mission it is to spread the word about what the area has to offer tourists and, hopefully, keep them interested enough to stick around for a meal, shopping, maybe even stay the night.

This time, it was a couple from Illinois, riding the countryside while spending a week at a campground in Lafayette. Guidry put-out his flat aluminum boat to the

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FAUX CAJUN

They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but some of these imitated Cajun products and the error-tiners who make fun of the culture are at least just plain embarrassing. Page 12

SPREADING THE WORD

 Hartford Weekly Oasis spent his life introducing Cajun culture not just to the world, but to younger generations at home. Today, those he influenced carry on the tradition. Page 14
Acadiana economy changing as Cajun's target tourism

Tourism, Page 11

edge of the pond and was met by a barrage of familiar questions posed in unfamiliar accents. What are those white things sticking up out of the water? How do you manage enough to eat those crawfish? How can that boat go in and out of those bars? How do you cook a crawfish? How do you eat one?" Goudy was glad to oblige, once again, even though there was work to be done. It came with the territory these days. "It's good that other people want to know about us — who we are, what we do, what our heritage is." Goudy resisted the urge to do a little bit with the words we've got. It's a shame that the rest of the world isn't aware of this part of the country, from Cape Canaveral, Florida, up to Quebec, and everyone in between, who make their living fishing. Over in Lafayette, a couple from France visiting the Acadian Cultural Center were so enthralled by photographs of the Atchafalaya Basin that they ditched their plans, got directions from a museum staff member, and left immedi-
ately for the St. Martin Parish swamp so they could see cypress trees for themselves. From Jennings, Robertboise, a New Orleans tourist, said that thousands of other visitors also were excited and intrigued by their Acadiana experience. "It's a natural environment, and it's still a recent undertaking for Louisiana's Cajun country. Here's a good economic potential that the world's oil and gas industry is on hand for. In the 1980s, it was the first to take an interest in environmental issues that people elsewhere were begin-ning to take in the region's feed and fuel. Since then, the mass-market appeal of Cajun culture has become a major business for Louisiana, helping boost the state's hospitality industry to record levels and cre-ating markets for Louisiana goods. The effort faces daunting challenges, though, in promotion four that negative stereotypes have given people outside Louisiana the wrong impression of Cajuns and that potbellied Cajun products have scared away many of the young women in town. "We're going to have them come to town and look around. After all, anyone who's tried and tired of the 'Rahin', "Acadiana's Best' Brandy" is as safe "the national network on the site. One of the most amusing stories was that Cajuns are struggling to survive on their own turf. Many of them are working not only to keep Cajun country on the map, but also to market it as a place worth visiting, whether it be for Cajun seafood or for a walk through its canal and rice fields.

Act naturally

It started modestly, with a few entrepreneurs turning native-themed "swamp tours" into tours of the bayous. Meanwhile, interest in Cajun culture has increased, with the rise of festivals like the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and the annual Bayou Country Superfest. The Acadiana Cultural Center in Lafayette, for example, has been transformed into a major cultural center, with a number of exhibits and events dedicated to Cajun culture. The center is home to the Acadiana Heritage Museum, which showcases the history and culture of the Acadiana region, and the Acadiana Heritage Center, which focuses on the arts and culture of the Acadiana region.

Third-grade Zach Pecora peers through the windows of the the Mill Pond at the Acadian Village in Lafayette as Jackie Begue, left, makes nuggets for children from Peck Elementary School in St. Landry Parish during a field trip to learn more about Cajun heritage.

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"We don't have mountains and beaches to sell — the clas-
sic vacation escape," said Lt. Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, head of the state's tourism office. "We are selling ourselves, our culture, our peo-
ple. So we depend on our people to sell us as well as we can. That's simply allowing them to market their own natural assets of hospitality."