As long as the swamp keeps calling, Dewey Patin will keep returning

Swamp's grip just grows stronger over time

By Angela Rozas

ST MARTINVILLE -- Dewey Patin deals among the myriad snakes and mass casualties of the Atchafalaya River Basin with the grace of someone who grew up as a boy spent a lifetime in the swamp.

In St. Martinville, his eyes fixed on fishing, his heavily soiled Ca-
jon French slightly muffled and his bearing muffled. Actually, it comes from the swamps. He still has a buzz from the fish from the water have dis-
figured both thumbs, his loamy hands, and his knees ache constantly.

But he still knows the swamp like the cracked skin on his palms, and he still can drive a boat.

Patin's son, Carol, 10, still bedevils him in the boat, but at least now he's got a boat.

Using a rusted 15-inch cutting tool, Carol slices into an oyster pull from the water minutes earlier, oblivious to the stumps and trees whipping past. He gazes up only occasionally, nodding his head in the direction he wants his father to steer.

"Come ahead, no 'it pen,'" he tells his father.

The boat slows to a crawl next to a fishing line stretched tightly between two stumps jut-
ting up at an angle of the water.

Carol pulls on the hook, turns with a look of sheer delight in his eyes.

"That's a big one," he says, busting a special toothed grip.

The fish is big, at least 20 pounds. A good catch.

This is their routine. Every morning, Dewey Patin takes his father from home in St. Martinville for a trip into the swamp, to fish or

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Patin says, occasionally, he hunts alligator. Sometimes they go for a few

hours. Sometimes they go all day. But not all, they could go.

"It's what he's been for He

when I was 12. I had had it in my
time," Patin said.

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Once a week, friends gather at Darren D'Aubert's for supper—good times and good food. The Chateaugay Supper Club gives the guys a chance to catch up on news and swap jokes and stories while the crawfish etouffée simmers.

In small towns along the bayou, supper clubs liven up social life

Home cooking helps serve up good times

By Ron Thibodeaux

CHATEAUGAY—There’s never been a bowling alley in this town of 365 people. There used to be a movie theater, with metal folding chairs. But it shut down a long time ago. And one by one, the four bars closed the doors.

So what’s a group of buddies to do on “hump night” in this corner of the rural Cajun parish, they have supper.

Every Thursday night, Fuzzy, Ironhead, Puck, T-Bob and the other members of the Chateaugay Supper Club gather in the old shed at Darren D’Aubert’s yard and kick back.

“There’s no more place for us to socialize. There’s no more little bar or nothing left around here, so once a week we get together and cook,” said Kevin “Ironhead” Richard, 39.

“What’s better than good food and good company, you know?” added Pat Duplessis, 54. “There’s 18 of us. You can eat 10 words for men and the 18th word you form a meal for the other 11 people.”

Gathering for a meal with friends as a social event is a very Acadian Parish thing to do, from Ville Platte to the smallest farming communities. The Acadiana tradition dates back to 1699, when Père Marquette and Louis Hennepin held Masses, although not as freshly picked from the garden.

A typical menu includes a main course such as frog, crab, crawfish or barbecue, plus salad and dessert. There are five secret recipes in the supper club, because most members are none too shy about what makes their recipe the best around.

And usually, it’s just called supper. The Chateaugay Supper Club tests out its formal name only on those weekends when it enters cooking contests at area festivals for fun and bragging rights.

Dinner talk

The guys start showing up after work, each carrying his own beverages in a small ice chest. While one does the cooking, the others sit around on the porch or in the车间 where their festal cooking trophies are displayed. They catch up on one another’s week-end fun, swap jokes and stories while knowing that the meal is ready. The only ground rules, no religion and no politics.

The one recent Thursday night, as D’Aubert kept a pot of crawfish etouffée simmering on the gas stove, the talk ranged from oysters and schnitzel to the Persian Gulf War and the traffic problems on U.S. 190 to Ex line High School football.

The conversation reflects working men’s attitudes and longtime friends’ camaraderie.

Ray Fontenot has been with the phone company for 29 years. Ron Thibodeaux is a welder. Duplessis is a heating and air-conditioning maintenance worker. Fuzzy Qualité is a farmer and crab-dugger, as well as an accomplished accordion player. Many of these men, in their late 40s or 50s, have lived all their lives and know one another since their school days.

Duplessis, a real estate agent, is one of the newcomers. A Barataria native, he entered a room when he married Qualité’s daughter.

Site of the feast

The group’s cafeteria is known to old-timers around Chateaugay (pronounced “koo-TAY-ghay”) as the former motion picture office from the 1940s and 50s. The men started hanging supper at Thibodeaux’s home in the mid-1960s — until he got married. They banded from place to place until the D’Aubert bought 18 acres in "the country" about five years ago.

The outbuilding on the property proved to be the perfect meeting place for the weekly supper.

"They called it the "You’d fall down" shed," Duplessis said. "It had three practically growing things together — wind, water and workers together to clean it. For somebody had brought his own store, somebody brought his own food. We had an air conditioner, someone brought his own furniture. We got all fixed up pretty good."

Then there was the matter of the bee hive in the valley. "We treated it. We tried smoking them out," Duplessis said. "I don't know what finally ran them off." Fontenot remembered. "It was the result of those burning osiers," he said.

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CULTURAL EVOLUTION

1864: The first French-speaking active in Acadian areas, present-day New Orleans, Canada.
1933: Beginning of great dragnet for great dragnet, as the first of the Cajun recording artists were immortalized.
1870: About 1,000 Acadians migrate to the United States, which sought Catholic settlers for its American Indian reservations.
1872: St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church, the first Catholic church in Chateaugay, is dedicated.
1944: Aviation industry workers assemble in plant for the first time at the Chateaugay plant in Chateaugay.
1945: Henry Ford and his wife open a public museum of "America's Western Front." The museum includes a model of the Chateaugay plant in Chateaugay.
1983: Louisiana's Compromise Education Act is passed requiring that students attend one public school.
1984: The last generation requires that education should be in English. In years to come, children who speak their native Cajun are prepared to enter schools and universities.
1998: Columbia Records releases "Joe Fair- cove's "Louisiana" (also known as "Acadian Father", "Joe Ford" and "Father" to his Mann's in the U.S.
2000: The 78-year-old Joe Faircove releases the first commercially released recording of Cajun music.

Cajuns have come a long way since their arrival in Canada 400 years ago and the later persecution they suffered.

* * *
WHO ARE THE CAJUNS?

The Cajun people were easier to define when they were isolated from the rest of the United States, when their forebears' simple lifestyle of farming and fishing still flourished across the 22 parishes that make up Acadiana. Centuries ago, Cajuns arrived as refugees, adapted to their new home and helped tame it. Today, Cajuns remain bound by language, cuisine, music and shared heritage.

Language
One of the stronger ties that set Cajuns apart is the language, whether they speak Cajun French as family or as grandparents or as a second tongue with the mixture of both Cajun and French. Although some students today learn English in school, they often return to their families and practices through immersion in their Cajun culture.

LEAVING LOUISIANA
An opportunity to leave many Cajuns to other states, especially Texas after oil and gas discoveries. Hundreds of miles from their home, they became a significant number to California as well. Today, about two thirds of the people who listed themselves as Cajun in the 1900 census live in Louisiana.

WHERE THEY LIVE

Cajuns in the United States by region:
- Midwest: 3%
- West: 5%
- Northeast: 1%

Children in Cajun South: 10%

Non-Numbers on display are all 95 percent plus or less.

How they got here
The history of Louisiana's Cajuns began in 1765 when le grand embrangement, the expansion of French speaking Cajuns from Acadia, the present-day Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, after they refused to swear allegiance to the Church of England, thousands either fled to neighboring regions or were relocated to what is now Louisiana. Thousands migrated to the Caribbean, Europe, South America and the Caribbean.

Ties to the land
The ties to the land meant that the Cajuns had to learn to adapt to new environments. The land was different, the crops were different, the weather was different, but the Cajun way of life continued.

Music
Rare music festival, Ballad, Big Band, Cajun music and other traditional musical styles combine to make the Cajun music scene vibrant. Cajun music is a dynamic blend of French, Spanish, African and Native American influences.

Cuisine
As a result of the diverse influences in Cajun cuisine, the dishes are often a combination of flavors and ingredients. The cuisine is a reflection of the region's history and culture, with influences from France, Spain, Africa and Native Americans.

Sources: Debra L. Darnell and Karen S. Darnell, Louisiana: History and Culture, University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

(Diagram and text provide a narrative of the Cajun people's history and culture, emphasizing their language, ties to land, music and cuisine.)