ACADIAN FISHERMEN stand waist-deep near the marshy shore of Lake Talouarad, hauling in a seine that teems with many kinds of fish.

BAYOU COUNTRY

Louisiana’s Acadians live in a land that is mostly water, in a world that is mostly French

by HAMILTON BASSO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRADLEY SMITH

The Acadians of Louisiana, a little-known and still relatively isolated people who lead an existence nearly as aquatic as that of the Venetians, might be said to be suffering from a prolonged attack of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Up to the time he made use of their story in his narrative poem Evangeline, a tale of mourning pines and hemlocks and two lovers that has now become an essential staple of average high-school diet, the Acadians were one of the minor footnotes of American history. Since then, thanks largely to the Sunday-supplement writers, who took up where Longfellow left off, they have become one of the country’s more legendary peoples. This is easy to understand. For years the Acadians were set apart from the main drift and current of American life, working out the pattern of a rather unique culture in a region that used to be fairly inaccessible, and it was only natural that they should be romanticized. It so happens, however, as in most such cases, that the facts of the case are considerably more interesting than the fancy.

The first Acadians to reach Louisiana came from a place called Acadia. No longer on the map, it was an early subdivision of the North American continent first mentioned in a land grant made by the King of France in 1603. Its boundaries took in the North American coast from Cape Breton Island to the shores below the Hudson. England also claimed part of the territory, including Nova Scotia, where most of the Acadians lived. Ultimately, after a hundred and fifty years of trouble and warfare, France ceded Nova Scotia to England. This was in 1713. By 1755 new colonial wars had broken

ACADIAN BOYS tread the soggy ground of a swamp near Port Barre, at the northern edge of bayou territory, cutting palmetto leaves which their womenfolk will weave into humble millinery and bedroom slippers.

BAYOU TERREWONNE, flowing placidly through Houma, serves as the town’s main thoroughfare.
TRAFFIC PROBLEMS become acute on Sunday, when devout Acadians swear to church.


WATERY COBWEB

The bayou system of lower Louisiana is best likened to a watery cobweb. Some of the bayous that make up the lines of the web are relatively large, well-mapped waterways—Bayou Teche, Bayou Lafourche and Bayou Terrebonne being the three most notable—while others are small uncharted streams known only to the few families that live along their banks. The swamps into which many of the bayous find their way have a special eerie beauty, and there is no place in America where one sees a greater variety of birds, but the chances are that this kind of beauty is an acquired taste. For along with the birds—the cranes and herons, the ducks and geese, the cardinals and hummingbirds—there is the finest collection of snakes this side of the tropics. Then, too, the somber stretches of swamp, in which even the best of trappers sometimes lose their way, are hung with a profound, almost palpable silence that seems to have gone unbroken since the start of time.

There is a considerable amount of dry land in the bayou country—including some of the most fertile acres in the state—but it all has a rather tentative air. In most places one hits water at a depth of from three to six feet, and quite often at from three to six inches. Because of this, the paved roads that now penetrate the Acadian country are among the most costly highways in the nation. When first laid down they served to bring the Acadians into immediate contact with the outside world, and various other links have since been forged, but despite these intrusions of modernity the inhabitants of the region still cling tenaciously to old habits, old forms and old ways. The automobile, for instance, has never supplanted the pirogue—a kind of canoe made entirely by hand from a single cypress log. One of the most graceful and maneuverable vessels ever to float on water, it is also one of the most difficult to manage. A good oarsman is enough to tip one over. But, as the bayou people say, the pirogue can "ride out a flood and travel on a dew," and it is capable of amazing speed. Each year a pirogue race is held over a five-mile course on Bayou Barataria, and the course has to be negotiated in around thirty minutes for a constant even to have a chance.

WHERE TIME STANDS STILL

Some people in the bayou country don't even get to the pirogue races. They live too far away—too water-locked in the deepest reaches of their water-locked land. Some of them, including grandmothers and grandfathers, have never seen a movie, an automobile or a train. Their cash income, which frequently does not amount to $100 a year, comes mainly from the fish they catch and sell. Yet they eat fish but rarely, subsisting on a basic diet of red beans, rice and molasses. For breakfast they like souffle-crunch, a humble dish of torn bread and clabber. Other Acadian dishes are snake glue (jellied veal). A stew made of rice boiled in milk and then sweetened and fried frog legs. But the high peak of the Acadian culinary art is reached in crawfish bisque, a savory, substantial soup containing crawfish heads stuffed with meat from the tail. The amount of coffee consumed in the Acadian country is beyond calculation. Children drink it from infancy and continue drinking it, in ever-increasing quantities, for the rest of their lives. The brew is always dripped, never percolated. The colander is always on the stove, and every visit to an Acadian house, after the first greetings are over, begins with a cup—the blacker and stronger the better.

The average Acadian shelter is a small wooden cottage, often unpainted, with the chimney built upon the outside. Because of the big families, space is at a premium. The doors swing outward rather than inward, and each house has a flight of stairs that leads to a space under the roof that serves as an extra bedroom. Traditionally the sleeping place of the boys of the family, it is called a garret.

In many of the gardens, medicinal herbs and plants are raised. Because of their long isolation and the lack of physicians the Acadians have learned to depend on home remedies. They have teas, or tans, for almost every ailment. The tea made from the leaves, barks and roots of the "maumoon plant" (the coral tree) is considered especially efficacious. So is a native known as margareta d'apri—"deterrent of the poor"—a mixture of yellow laundry soap, mustard tallow, brown sugar, wood ashes and turpentine. Just as they have kept to the pirogue, the Acadians have kept to their language, a corrupt form of French heard nowhere else in the world. The following: [Continued on Page 30]
THE HORSE AND BUGGY survives as a pleasant anachronism on the western edge of the hayon country, where gravel and dirt roads are too much for the ordinary automobile. Here the Le Blond of Duson, a two-buggy family, rein in before their home with a supply of natural cotton for weaving.

THE ACADIAN COUPLE step out of the weaving shed with armfuls of homemade bedding, the customary wedding present to their children.

AMBROISE LE BLANC, head of the family, prepares the warp for the loom, an operation calling for skill and elbow room.

MADAME LE BLANC spins her own thread for her rugs and blankets, following a distaff art handed down from mother to daughter since the Acadians settled in the bayous.
PALMETTO LEAVES from a nearby swamp go up on the roofto dry, their tips firmly anchored between shingles. The chore, generations old, is tackled today by youths in sneakers and bright sport shirts.

![Image of people working on rooftops]

DRIED STRIPS are braided outdoors on sunny days, amid fluent gossip in patois. Deft fingers interlace the leaves, and a wild swamp growth becomes a hat, a handbag or a pair of slippers.

![Image of dried strips being braided]

DEFT FINGERS interlace the leaves, and a wild swamp growth becomes a hat, a handbag or a pair of slippers.

Until the time of the first World War the Acadian patois was the only language heard in the region, other than a more conventional variety of French. Today most of the bayou people are trilingual, having added English to their list of accomplishments. The latter language, however, has also been bent to their own needs and necessities.

You see my cow down by the bayou?" one Acadian has been heard saying to another, "you push him home where he belong, yes."

And then there is the complaint voiced by a young wife: "It ain't so much fun being married twice as old as yourself, no."

And that of a small boy returning from confession: "That Father Etienne! The number of Our Fathers and Hail Marys he gave me to say! He is a hard man, yes, that Father Etienne. He ain't no soft-shell crab!"

GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

"The Father Etiennes of the bayous play an important part in the life of the region. Practically all the Acadians are Catholic. The Church, with its families, is the center about which the world revolves. Each year the sugar-cane crop is blessed, and also the vessels of the shrimp fleet. The first ceremony takes place at harvest time, which, because of the Louisiana climate and the nature of sugar cane, is also the time of replanting. The blessing of the shrimp fleet is rather more colorful. The gaily decorated vessels, bearing such names as St. Joseph, Mickey Mouse and Claudette Collette, tie up at one of several bayou towns, and everybody turns out. The holiday merriment is silenced for a few minutes as the bishop waves his aspergillum in the direction of the boats, giving each his benediction, but after the ceremony a fête takes place, and everybody gorges on boiled shrimp. Catholicism, in the bayou country as elsewhere, makes for large families. One aged lady is known to "have had eight hundred lineal descendants, all of them blood relatives. Fifteen, twenty, even twenty-five children in a single family, begot by a single pair of parents, are not uncommon. "It is more trouble to find a name for a child than to make him," a bayou man has said. This difficulty, however, is easily overcome by the Acadian imagination. Greek mythology has been a help too. There are any number of Acadians named Achilles, Ulysses or Hector. Some families, keeping to names beginning with the same letter, have come up with particularly interesting results. One set of parents, settling on "O," named their sixteen children Odile, Odilia, Odilea, Oliver, Olivia, Ophelia, Odellia, Octavia, Ovidia, Olydia, Olydia, Octavie, Ovidia, Olydia, Odellia, Octavia, Ovidia, Olydia, Odellia. (Continued on Page 60)
AFISHERMAN and his wife welcome a call by missionaries, almost their only visitors besides the trade boat which picks up his catch of fish.

The bayous bring a slow current of civilization to a people who live out their lives on water.

SERAPHINA SCADLOCK poses beside a portrait of her late husband, some musty pin-ups and a calendar she quit consulting long ago. After 93 years on the remote Bayou Boutee, she counts much of the local population among her progeny.

NINE-O'CLOCK SCHOLARS. Bayou country children go to school aboard a floating school bus painted bright yellow like its counterpart on land.

MAIN STREET. Sunset burnishes Bayou La Fourche, longest village road in the world. Houses, stores and tiny farms dot its banks for 120 miles.

HOLIDAY / OCT 61
A GREAT·GRANDCHILD of Seraphina Scadlock's smiles across the battered rail which limits his playground. To reach dry land for a good romp, he would have to negotiate a narrow catwalk over water.

SAM SCADLOCK, grandson of Seraphina, catches a hundred crawfish in a couple hours. The crustaceans, enjoying the bacon rind he dangles in the bayou, never notice the net until it scoops them up.

The Gifts of Nature

For the world of the 20th Century has finally battered its way into the region. Since the discovery of oil in the bayou country, along with huge quantities of natural gas, its complexion has been greatly altered. Robert J. Flaherty, in his excellent motion picture, Louisiana Story, has told this latest chapter of its development. Louisiana is now the third largest producer of crude oil in the United States, exceeded only by Texas and California. More than half of its total output (64 per cent, to be exact) comes from the South Louisiana parishes, and drilling in the section is at an all-time high.

Rich as the bayou country is in oil, it is even more uniquely rich in shrimp. The parishes of Southwest Louisiana lie near the most productive shrimping areas of the continent, and regularly account for three-fourths of the nation's annual catch. The home port for most of the offshore shrimp fleet is Morgan City, one of the most colorful and hustling little harbors in the country.

Of all the agricultural products grown in the bayou country, sugar cane is the most important. The sugar-producing area of Louisiana is almost completely contained in the bayou country, and most of the eighty-two sugar refineries in the state are located there. During the 1938-'39 season, over 5,000,000 tons of cane were grown in the region. This is about three and one-half times the crop in Florida, the only other sugar-cane state in the union.

A prodigious amount of sweet potatoes is also grown. One parish, St. Landry, raises more sweet potatoes than any other county in the United States, and one of its sister parishes, Lafayette, is in second place. Louisiana sweet potatoes (more properly called yams) are marketed all over the country. Last year's crop of 7,315,000 bushels was valued at $11,000,000.

But despite the noisy advent of progress—the oil wells, the sugar refineries and the canning factories—the Acadian country is one of the few places in the United States where an older pattern of life still prevails. It is only too easy to conclude, in its friendly, relaxed, hospitable atmosphere, that it is an extremely romantic place after all.
There are just as many recipes for bouillabaisse as there are varieties of fish that may go into it.

- Red Gurnet
- Weever
- Hogfish
- Bass
- Sea Perch
- Seaperch
- Whiting
- Conger Eel
- Lobster
- Crab
- Langouste
- Thyme
- Saffron
- Parsley
- Bay
- Seasoning
- Fennel