Bourré all-nighters endangered

BY HOPE RURIK
Special to The Advocate

LAFAYETTE — The people of southwestern Louisiana have a lifestyle unique to most of the nation, from the way they eat crawfish to the vigor with which they two-step that can turn a Yankee pale.

However, more than a few natives and visitors alike have turned pallid from a game that’ll make a man’s wallet empty faster than he can say, “I-ye-e-e-e!”

The game is bourré.

“He cheats when he deals!”

“He steals when he deals!”

Players ranging in age from 60 to 91 are already gathered and alert at 8 a.m. every Sunday in a back room of Nelson Menard’s home. There are two round tables set up with eight chairs standing around each.

Only one of the tables is in use by the five players who make a weekly ritual of banter and bourré.

But Louis “Teeboy” Gilbert, a “young” player of 60, confidently predicted the other seats would be filled by the afternoon and would stay warm well into the evening.

Most players have Styrofoam cups of coffee close at hand, and dollar bills are thrown into the center of the card table like a poorly raked pile of leaves.

On Thursday nights, the really “young” players (mid-40s up to 60ish) fill the makeshift game room for tournaments.

Menard, chattering with the speed of an auctioneer while dealing the cards and others made their plays.

The round was in his favor and he scooped up his spoils.

“He’s a talker,” said Gilbert of Menard, dealer pro tempore. “He’ll bluff to distract them.”

In this game, players’ tools are not only the hands they’re dealt, but also their means of distraction.

Theodore Sellers, left, and Harold Thibodeaux participate in a regular game of bourré at the home of Nelson Menard in Lafayette.

Bourré has been a card game passed on from generation to generation in Louisiana — its style varying by parish. The game’s relatives are euchre, then bridge, then rook. Sadly, interest in the game is dying off with each generation.

“I’d rather be lucky than good. I have a lot of skill because I watch and read people, but if luck isn’t with you, it doesn’t pay to be good.”

LOUIS “TEEBOY” GILBERT, bourré player

Barry Aucelet, Cajun folklorist and University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor, confessed he utilized this technique as a college student working an offshore summer job. Aucelet said he avoided playing bourré with the crew until he was asked to hold a spot at the table for another player.

“He told them to take it easy on me. He was gone 30 to 40 minutes and by the time he got back, I was $30 ahead,” Aucelet recalled.

“I had hair to (my shoulders). I was a hippie. They couldn’t comprehend how someone who looked the way I did would be able to play like that.”

Whatever tricks the players might conceal beneath their five-card hands, Gilbert disclosed that skill can carry someone only so far.

“I’d rather be lucky than good. I have a lot of skill because I watch and read people, but if luck isn’t with you, it doesn’t pay to be good,” he said.

The game has been Gilbert’s “job” ever since he retired from law enforcement in 1993.

He plays up to seven days a week in old bars and homes around the area.

“People ask me if I win money and I point to that new motor — ever so far.”
dation of bourné lends itself to variation by parish, town and card table and makes the origin of the venerable card game somewhat of a mystery.

In his 1964 book, "Rules and Techniques of Bourré," Henry J. Engler Jr. wrote that bourré is an "authentic Acadian card game," which developed in the bayou regions of Louisiana and spread intensively through the southern half.

The game's relatives, according to Ancelot, are euchre, then bridge, then rook.

"It's an imperfect, volatile version of bridge," he explained. As Acadiana's premier card game, bourré facilitated more than just nights in the doghouse for defeated spouses.

"It involves a gathering of people on a regular basis and community," said Ancelot. "Within these mini-communities, one often finds story-telling, social cooperation and solidarity."

The tradition, he said, bears a similar significance to the gatherings and practices of boucheries (hog slaughtering) and house dances.

"We didn't have much money," said Eunice native Pris Ashford, 68. "Other than suppers, that's what we did — played bourré. It was good inexpensive entertainment."

Gibert said he believes the game was born in France; however, its death certificate is being penned as playing cells shrink. With the changing culture of southwest Louisiana, the game's livelihood rests with the older generation.

"The players are dying," Gibert lamented. "Probably within the next 10 years it'll be really scarce. The younger generation is just not playing."

He added that what makes him most dangerous at the card table is what many young people lack for the game: Patience. Ancelot echoed Gibert's perspective.

"We're losing the game for the same reasons we're losing everything else: video games, Internet, television. Bourré requires repeated physical presence," he conceded. However, Ancelot admitted that even he couldn't make the weekly commitment the game demands.

"We're all hauled in more directions than (we were) back then," Ancelot said. "Then, there were remarkably fewer things to do outside of work."

Ashford, who has played with the same group for 30 years, said although they went with her to games, her progeny did not see its value.

"They never wanted to learn. It's slow and everything else is so fast," she explained.

Gibert never had children and so does not have the opportunity to pass on the tradition, but he remembers the part the game played when he was young.

"I usually meet at my uncle's, and they'd play 'til morning. Go drink coffee and eat breakfast then go home," he chuckled.

Playing cards from afternoon until the next morning?

"I've seen 'em play from Friday evening 'til Sunday morning," he insisted.

With the place bourré played in Acadian culture, Louisiana wouldn't just lose a card game when bourré finally folds, according to Gibert.

"It's a dying art form," he reflected.