Cajun Culture: Louisiana's own


Reviewed by MARIE WISE

Cajun Culture has a flavor all its own. Born in the rugged Nova Scotia Colony, isolated from France by an ocean, for 150 years the Acadians developed a close-knit society revolving around their families, their land and their church.

In the mid 1700's this special breed of French colonials were violently uprooted from what had become their homeland and dispersed by the new English owners to various parts of America and Europe.

The Acadians who came to Louisiana were looking for a permanent home, not as individuals, but as groups determined to re-establish their own culture which they preferred to any other.

In Louisiana, then under Spanish rule, Acadian leaders chose to settle their people on the Atakapas prairie, and for a second 150 years they remained more or less isolated.

Then, four things accelerated the Acadians out of an almost 17th century culture into the 20th; compulsory education (in English); the mass communication of radio, movies and TV; an oil boom; World War II and its compulsory military service. By 1945 the walls of Cajun cultural isolation had been breached.

The mystique of Louisiana's Cajuns has tantalized observers since Longfellow thrust fame upon Acadiana with his narrative poem of Evangeline's long search for her Gabriel.

Now the expertise of twelve specialists on the Acadian way of life - past, present and projected future - has been gathered into a book under the editorship of Glenn R. Conrad to produce The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture. Half the writers are native Louisianians; the rest from other states or countries; but all experts in their respective fields.

Dr. Conrad writes in his foreword that "They hope their efforts will not only shed light on the romantic aspects of the Cajuns' past but also realistically portray the Cajun role in shaping contemporary Louisiana."

Every phase of Acadian heritage is explored in this ever-interesting volume from "Myths and Realities" to "The Spoken French of Louisiana" (as many as a million and a half persons speak some of three kinds: Louisiana, Acadian and Creole).

Also presented are folk songs and folklore; history, traditions and politics; the impact of Louisiana's varied geography in developing four Acadian sub-cultures, each best suited to the levee lands, prairie, swamps or coastal marsh; a chapter on 20th Century Acadians ("The last 25 years have seen a new phenomenon, the urban Cajun"); and one chapter entirely in French.

"However Americanized, (they) will remain typically Acadian" says one of the writers in this excellent presentation of our state's Nova Scotia settlers who spread across twenty-two parishes south of Alexandria from the Mississippi to the Sabine and developed for Louisiana its unique Cajun Culture.