Cajun farms were organized differently from others in U.S.

The Cajuns of south Louisiana were mostly a rural people and they developed a farmstead that is unique and that varied little from one area to the next.

Geographer MALCOLM COMEAUX studied Cajun farms and found that, while some were exactly alike, there were certain traits basic to all of them. These included: "the characteristic farmer's residence and the barns and outbuildings that shelter animals, store feed, and protect equipment; particular kinds of fences, and the use of certain types of vegetation."

Coxeaux notes that in a study of American farmsteads done in 1866, it shows that the Cajun farmstead was quite different from all others.

The buildings on a Cajun farm were typically set back from the road, with a pasture for milk cows and horses between the road and the house. The house invariably faced the road and, except for a barn, was usually the biggest building on the farm.

The only building materials readily available in 19th-century southern Louisiana was cypress, and the wood was used in almost all construction. Coxeaux notes, "it was particularly important because it was very durable, less inflammable than other woods, easily worked, readily split into shingles and boards, and resistant to rot, a desirable feature in humid, southern Louisiana."

To acquire the wood, farmers entered swamps and circled cypress trees in the fall and then during the next flood, fell the trees and floated them to the swamp's edge. To produce boards, the logs were sawed into blocks about seven to nine feet long and six to nine inches wide. From these boards, known as bents, were made with a large mortise and tenon.

Except for the roughhouse the resulting pieces greatly resembled milled lumber. There was always a demand for these, and their production and sale had become a big business by the 1870s. By the 1880s, modern industrial techniques were being used in the cypress lumber industry and... Cajuns began purchasing milled cypress lumber from the sawmills that lined most local swamps."

Cajun farmsteads on the prairie were surrounded by open land and resembled an island in a sea of grass sod. Coxeaux notes, the houses or farmsteads were organized in a particular way. "All buildings were built either facing the same direction as the house or as close to it as possible. Doors to outside buildings were opened toward the house, but the buildings were outside the house, the rear and side of the house, the doors usually opened as to an imaginary courtyard."

Besides the house and barn, the farm usually included a chicken roost, called a dehouch, a privy called a compost, a potato house (potouri), milking shed (lattier), a smokehouse, tool shed, and sometimes a carriage house (trotula). A variety of trees was planted near the house, some for shade, but some — such as fig, pear, persimmon and citrus trees — for their fruit. Pecan trees provided both shade and nuts. In many prairie areas, chinaberry trees were planted for firewood. Catalpa trees were grown to fence posts because the wood is resistant to rot.

And then as now, farmers kept a small vegetable garden in the rear of the house, and Coxeaux notes, "all male titters were expected to visit and comment favorably upon it."

AROUND AND ABOUT:
We asked several farmers about old pharmacies and around Lafayette, Scott Pharmacy may be the oldest still operating in the parish, founded in 1910. Dr. John W. Younger started in 1880. Begnaud Pharmacy is everyone's choice for the oldest operating in the city, according to records kept by Byron Begnaud, his father moved from the Old Pharmacy and wrote the first prescription in his own store on June 19, 1914. It first on Buchanan St., then moved to St. John Street in 1923. That store was closed in 1951 and consolidated in the same building that had been opened in 1923. Feche Drug downtown opened in 1924. (Jim Bradford is a columnist for The Advocate. He can be reached at 110-6013 or by email at bradfordj@theadvocate.com.)