Cajun Weekend

When friends in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, suggested that I celebrate a Cajun weekend in the French-speaking town of Opelousas, near the southern tip of the state, I jumped at the chance.

The weekend, they said, would consist of a fun date ("crache to sleep" in my childhood vocabulary) on Saturday night and a horse race on Sunday.

Cautiously outweighing doubts, on Saturday afternoon I drove 80 miles west of New Orleans, stopping for sweet potato fritters at the town's only restaurant. French-Cajun mound builders 200 years ago. I met the three couples who were to show me a good time, and at 9 p.m. we were at a dance hall singing in a French bar near the house of a friend and an acquaintance playing Cajun music. Gradually I began to realize my Belgians, French with the Cajun accent, being spoken all around, but of course the men's songs—some 150, others humorous, as they rapped Atchafalaya's tragic history, Evangeline—remained beyond my grasp.

The dance was bawdy and gypsy, and the two-stripping was a treat I've never seen. Occasionally the musicians played out a current pop tune, and Cajuns from 16 to 85 rocked with much gusto. In this farming community most people had risen to live in the morning, worked hard in the fields all day, and would do the same tomorrow; but on Saturday night they danced with a vigor and jale de vivre that defined Cajuns. No less striking than I could see.

"Oh, no, the terms apply to the children," explained one of my hosts. "In the old days Grandpa made us to sleep in a corner of the dance floor, but today our kids are at home dancing with the TV and television nearby.

At 2 a.m. we left for the house of one of the couples for my first taste of a spicy gumbo made of okra and putrid, chicken or beef with hot EJ powder. In my honor, the gumbo was of course a delicious shrimp, like freshwater gefilte that is a rarity among the Cajuns in my country.

On Sunday, in the heat of the afternoon, I drove a few miles out of Opelousas with my new friends. A great deal of dust helped us locate the flat dirt track with its flimsy wooden starting gate.

The race itself had just ended as I followed the spectators into the stand of fire ants to drink Spanish moss to kill the track manager for his James. These races aren't like the big ones at tracks like Evangeline Downs over in Lafayette," he told me. "We mostly have match races. That's where one man sells his neighbor his horse to get his favorite horse entered, and the neighbor does not come out Sunday to attend.

Two small boys in jeans, sneakers and rain boots were up to their knees with a small boy was my age with his father's back but already won three races, worth $100, that day.

I followed the kids to the starting gate where a more less-boring man and a young buck who was Charles was easy, certainly not in need of any tips for the simple but straight-lined start. Once the sticky, nervous jockeys even up the starting, holding the horses, were supposed to look simultaneously at the cornets, who would raise the gate.

When one owner had his horse ready, the other, calling a pungent animal, released it to look up. The sound considerably startled my French vocabulary. During the 25 minutes it took to get ready, the spectators became frenzied, for this was a thing a time when each better term to the tune. The two men finally raised their heads, the gate flew open, and they were off to a small herd, encircling crossed of dust from which the jockeys' coats revealed the progress of the race.

We wandered back into the heat of the field and became very hot and then poked around for the jockeys to return and say we would. All the towers paid up without questions for who would doubt the word of a nine-year-old Cajun boy?"