The Ancient Acadians: An affinity between Cajuns and 'Celtic Fringe'!

By TRUMAN STACEY
Special Correspondent

In 1988 a professor at Texas Christian University, Dr. Grady McWhinney, published an interesting historical theory. Southernners, he wrote, were different from Northerners, and always had been because they are derived from different racial strains.

The South, according to him, has been people primarily by immigrants from the "Celtic Fringe" of the British Isles — the western uplands of England, the Highlands of Scotland, Wales, the Herreda and Ireland. The culture these people brought with them in the 17th Century, according to Dr. McWhinney, was largely preserved in their new homes.

What were these characteristics? He enumerated them as follows: the herding of livestock on the open range, rather than farming; leisurely lifestyle, marked with gaiety; a preference for the spoken rather than the written word, the enjoyment of such pleasures as drinking, smoking, fighting, gambling, hunting and fishing — and hunting.

Southerners, he wrote, like their Celtic forbears, he characterize them as follows: the herding of livestock on the open range, rather than farming; leisurely lifestyle, marked with gaiety; a preference for the spoken rather than the written word, the enjoyment of such pleasures as drinking, smoking, fighting, gambling, hunting and fishing — and hunting.

The reaction of the original Acadians who settled Louisiana's bayous and prairies? Had they significant ties with the "Celtic fringe"?

In "The Acadian Tradition and Change in South Louisiana," the Acadian lifestyle is portrayed as being predominately Roman Catholic, with the family as the dominant group of affiliation and action. The original Acadians were essentially rural, with a strong feels to live themselves, in a region with poor transportation.

Their early occupations included herding cattle on the prairies, hunting, fishing and trapping. They preserved an atmosphere of tolerance and permissiveness essential to the continuation of the fête de vivre (the joyful life). Their pastimes included all sorts of family gatherings in which music and dancing played a major role, a role that continues today in the fete de vivre broadcast on television. "We worked alone, he worked when and if he wanted, he was his own boss, and the only time he had to meet were those he set himself."

Saturday dances were family affairs, as were the traditional hop-killings, and various church functions.

Does the folk culture of the Acadians have any similarities with those of the Celtic lands? We may wish to consider the following points.

Acadians love to dance. A Scot once told visitors that "in the Highlands there are itinerant dancing masters who from time to time make the tours of the isles and mountains to give lessons to the inhabitants, even of the lowest order." Another observer noted of 17th century Ireland: "Dancing is very general among the poor people, almost universal in every castle." Another noted that "there are few Irish who will not, after a hard day's labor, gladly walk seven miles to have a dance." The "passion" for dancing was also noted in the 17th Century Wales.

The Acadians have hunted and fished since they arrived in Louisiana. Is this something forced upon them by the environment, or is it another folk way? We are told that the Scottish Celts, holding that bodily labor of all sorts was mean and disgraceful, devoted themselves mainly to the chase. The Irish, we are told, "kept all sorts of hunting dogs, and were even on the hunt."

In Acadia, the extended family has been the center of most daily life, and kinship was more important that in other areas of the nation. As we all know, Acadian politicians have many courteses.

In Scotland and Ireland, of course, family loyalty extends even beyond the extended family to the sept and the sept.

(Editors Note: Truman Stacey, a journalist for half a century, is the author of Louisiana's French Heritage, and a number of articles in newspapers and historical journals.)