New Brunswick visitors leave The Chapel at Village Historique Acadien, a 3,000-acre historical reproduction of Acadian living from the past. The Chapel is a reproduction of the Shrine of St. Anne du Bocage, built around 1831.

CELEBRATING A SHARED HERITAGE

THE REVELRY OF TINTAMARRE RIVALS THAT OF MARDI GRAS — AND SO DOES THE REDISCOVERED PRIDE OF ACADIANS, NORTH AND SOUTH.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DOMINICK CROSS

An ongoing swath of green, interwoven with irregular lines and patches of blue — that’s the eastern New Brunswick landmass viewed from the air.

New Brunswick, at ground level, is mostly wooded and green. The rolling, coastal countryside converges with Atlantic-seasoned gulfs and bays that dampen the cliffs and shores of the Maritimes.

Bodies of water, seemingly always nearby, intercede via rivers and streams and are usually shouldered by marshland.

It’s mid-August and the weather is wonderfully pleasant along the rural Acadian Coast. Patriotism runs high, as the Acadian National Holiday is Aug. 15. The Acadian flag, its gold star-stamped blue panel, followed in succession by panels of white and red, wave atop smooth, stripped trees or flagpoles that are always painted white.

Acadian colors are everywhere by the 15th. Not only can they be found on the displayed banners, streamers and flags, but also splashed across homes, autos and businesses — and, on that day, across Acadian patriots themselves.

Similar to Louisiana’s Mardi Gras in scope and anticipation only, the national holiday climaxes between 6 and 7 p.m., with the Tintamarre held in Acadian communities in the province, including Caraquet, the capital of Acadie.

This proud community celebrates freedom during the Tintamarre (literally meaning din or noise). Making as much racket as possible, costumed or not, celebrants bang on pots and pans; click-clack wooden spoons; blow long, blue plastic horns; and air out their lungs with hoots and hollers.

There are no krewes or chosen ones or jostling for thrown trinkets — this is the people’s parade.

The masses line Saint Pierre Boulevard, Caraquet’s main street, and move from being spectators to participants and back again.

In this clamor, Denis Ouellet and Natasha Landry and their 15-month-old daughter, Maya, revel in the excitement of the Tintamarre.

Ouellet and Landry reside in Austin, Texas. But Ouellet is from Quebec, and Landry, Caraquet. Both, however, formerly resided in Lafayette.

“The Acadians were deported everywhere and had to pledge allegiance to flags they didn’t want to,” says Ouellet.

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Landry. "And this is to celebrate our right to freedom now. Just scream or do what ever you want to because nobody can do anything about it."

"This is me. This is my family. This is my roots," she says. "This is what I've been doing ever since I was born."

It has been four years since Landry last enjoyed the Tintamarre.

Above, a pastoral scene near the community of Pokeshow in New Brunswick, near the cliffs of Bird's Island, Irene Maillet (right) portrays Dorine, a character in one of the books by Antonine Maillet, performed seasonally on le Pays de la Sagouine on Ile-aux-Puces (Flea Island) in Bouctouche.

in her hometown.

"I've got to be honest," says Landry. "Last year at this time, I was in Austin in my living room crying because I was missing this so much. My daughter was two months old, and I wanted to be here so bad."

"I said, 'I've got to go next year,'" she says. "This is me. Everybody's here. Everybody comes back here. All of my friends are here."

Ouellet concurs.

"It is definitely the history of my wife," Ouellet says. "And it was very important to my wife and I to keep the culture in the family. It's part of our family now, so we're going to come as much as we can."

"It's very important for Maya to be here," he adds. "Because she's American."

As a former resident of Lafayette, Landry says she sees the parallels between the Cajuns and Acadians.

Evangeline. They are joined by a fisherman, two other maidens and two children. Gabriel, oar in hand, stands in a rowboat with a lobster trap aboard and looks left at Evangeline and the other women. At Gabriel's right is the fisherman in occupational gear.

"Because today is the Acadian Day and this is the Acadian culture," J.P. Landry says, explaining the extravagant display of mamequins.

"It's an Acadian holiday. It's a day to show people the Acadian life."

Acadian life becomes more of a reality at the Village Historique Acadien, in Caraquet, an authentic historical site portraying the lives of New Brunswick's Acadians between 1770 and 1937.

Set on 3,000 acres, the village, with 35 buildings, takes up a third of that. The remaining two-thirds is a buffer between the past and present, as well as for eventual expansion.

Of the 200 staff members in the village, 80 are interpreters split into groups of 40 for two shifts. The staff drops to 15 to 20 in the winter, conducting marketing, research and the like.

"We try to make as authentic as possible in the meals, in the costumes, in the way they walk and the way they talk — I mean, they don't talk about computers in houses," says Sylvain Godin, chief historian of the 26-year-old site. "They try to keep it to what they're doing."

In keeping with details and historic accuracy, for instance, in a home brought to the site from Caraquet, fresh fish is what's for dinner "because they're close to the ocean," Godin says, adding that in a home brought from further inland, "They won't eat fresh fish because it was impossible for them to have fresh fish back then."

Likewise, the clothing, the farm implements and even the repairs to the homes or businesses are made with the authentic tools and available resources. There's no back to the future here.

"They didn't have mill-cut shingles," says Godin. "We replace our shingles with the ones we did by hand here."

"It's a big challenge, because every year we get older. Our 1770 house, a hundred years from now, that house is going to be very, very old," he says. "It will be a good thing to show people, our younger generation, 'Hey, that's how they lived when they came back.'"

It was the Treaty of Paris in 1763 that allowed the Acadians to return to their homeland, but not necessarily to their homes. And while no one is deported these days, a cultural tug-of-war can be felt between Acadie and English-speaking Canada.

"It's more intellectual-like. We want more, we want more," says Godin. "We want, in our social stud-
ies, to study the Acadians more than Quebec history, for instance. Because in school, we don’t teach them too much of Acadian history. It’s better for us. It’s better for our children.”

Godin, who carries both a history and French degree from the University of Moncton, has a theory about the similar paths Acadie and Acadia took to their own discoveries.

As Canada approached the centennial of the unification of the provinces (1967), the federal government had capital for cultural activities and historical projects.

“There was money there,” says Godin. “So, the Acadians said, ‘Let’s go get some money to make a museum, etc.’ and I think the word just spread out.

“In Louisiana, there were some Acadians there who were very close to some Acadians here in New Brunswick, and the idea just went everywhere,” he says. “The story of the Acadians has been studied for a while, but we never before the 1970s approached the Acadian culture this way.

“I think that’s where it started.”

Maybe so. After all, the first World Acadian Congress was held in New Brunswick in 1994. Then in August 1999, Congrès Mondial Acadian-Louisiane, the largest assembly of Acadians in history, was held in Acadia. Nova Scotia is set to host the World Acadian Congress in 2004.

“I worked a lot for the cause for quite a few years,” says Irene Maillet, who plays Dorine, a character in one of the books by Antoine Maillet, performed seasonally on the island site called le Pays de la Sagouine on Île-de-l’île aux Puces (Flea Island) in Bouctouche.

When pressed, the Bouctouche native easily moves from her theatrical role to one of an unavering cultural activist.

“I was brought up in the 1950s being told that if I spoke English, I was in the higher rank of this society,” says Maillet, whose ancestors were deported to Boston and eventually returned. “That’s the way I was brought up.

“This is why we had to change the young generation, telling them French is OK,” she says. “If you wanted to do anything in French, if you wanted to be a comedian, a singer, a writer, you had to go to Québec. You could not do it here.”

In 1976, while attending the University of Moncton, Maillet saw firsthand what can happen when people turn their backs on their culture. The recently formed band 1755, whose repertoire consisted of songs about Acadians, had one of their first gigs.

“They died a year and a half later,” says Maillet, of the band’s demise. “Why? We did not support them. We did not support them. I was there and I remember that very well. The people in the area did not support them and so they just separated and went their own ways.”

In wasn’t until almost 20 years later that the Acadians’ interest in their culture became evident, when, prior to the 1994 Congrès, 1755 was asked to reunite for the event in Shediac.

“The band obliged, and it was jammed packed,” Maillet says. “And everywhere they are on the 15th of August, in Acadie, we know that’s going to be one of largest gatherings of people.”

And it’s been like that for 1755 ever since, at home and even when the group performed at Congrès Mondial Acadian-Louisiane and Festival International de Louisiane. At first, Maillet says, little changed in Bouctouche in 1982 when New Brunswick became Canada’s only bilingual province.

“But in this area here, we did not use that right,” Maillet says. “We were not proud. And that’s the reason behind the Congrès Mondial Acadian in 1994.”

In fact, Maillet became involved in that first-ever CMA. She recalls that during the 15-day event, with its the opening party, closing party and family gatherings in-between, Louisiana was hardly represented, if at all.

“And all the families were waiting to have Cajuns come,” she says. “At the Maillet reunion, we had none.”

But she did not give up, nor did she wait for the next CMA to find a Cajun Maillet. In fact, at the end of her performances, Maillet says she breaks character and says: “I am a Maillet. Are there any Maillets here?” After two years, her question was, at long last, answered.

“On the closing day in 1997, a tall gentleman standing by the doorway said, ‘I am a Maillet.’ I said, ‘From where?’ He said, ‘From Louisiana.’ And I said, ‘Don’t move.’”

Maillet says the Baton Rouge resident was visiting New Brunswick in preparation for the 1999 CMA in Louisiana. “He knew there was one Maillet: Antonine,” (She is the award-winning author whose books are portrayed onsite.)

So Irene Maillet invited Dick Juno, whose mother was a Maillet from Marksville, and his wife to dinner that night, and later, to her family’s reunion the next year.

“This is the way we are down here, the Acadians,” Irene Maillet says.

Then when Maillet came to Lafayette in 1999 for the Congrès

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Mondial, she returned with an even deeper sense of pride.

“When I came back from Louisiana,” she beams, “I said, ‘I am an Acadian in my blood and in roots.’”

Now, on Aug. 15 of every year, Acadians gather at a Catholic church in town for the Tintamarre and march down the elevated wooden walkway to an island where Maillet and cast await their arrival.

“When I see a thousand people walking, I cry,” she says. “Because 20 years ago, hoo, we didn’t even say we were Acadians.”

That’s never been the case for 20-year-old fiddler, Louise Vautour, who performs with the group Vilajoie at a dinner theater show in the Village Historique Acadian in Caraquet.

“It’s amazing to know what they went through just so we can have the life that we have now,” Vautour says. “And to feel so proud of them.”

The pride coursing through Vautour’s veins, however, consists of the blood of the vanquished and the vanquisher.

“My mom is from Loyalist descendants and my dad is from Acadian descendants. So, really, their ancestors would’ve been enemies,” says Vautour. “So I’m sort of split in the middle, but I carry the Acadian name from my dad.

“I love my family in British Columbia, and it doesn’t really mean anything to me that my ancestors were Loyalists on that side,” she says. “I’m Acadian and I live here and this is my culture, really.

“And I’m proud to be able to speak English just as well as French,” she adds. “I was brought up like that.”

Vautour mulls over the idea of whether the English crown owes the Acadians an apology for the deportation.

“I don’t know. I just think what happened, happened,” she says. “And, I mean, we got through it and we’re all happy. Just the fact that we’re all here and we’re all wearing the Acadian flag on our bodies and we’re just so proud of it.”

Vautour says she’s not ignoring the act, or half of her personal history, but, she says there’s another lesson to be learned.

“It’s not forget the past, but you just move on and look forward to the future,” she says. “All the younger generations are learning about this and they shouldn’t be taught to hold a grudge or stuff like that.”

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