Crawfish—A Cajun symbol

The popularity of the Crawfish Festival and the development of a viable crawfish industry in Louisiana reinforced the association of crawfish and Cajuns. To celebrate crawfish you have to come to Louisiana, and while it may now be possible to buy some crawfish elsewhere, the product comes from Cajun Louisiana. Because of this, it has been possible for the crawfish to be used as a symbol to represent Cajuns: everybody recognizes it as one of the only things that Cajuns have and other people lack. The festival, the symbol, and the product are all dependent on each other for stimulation and promotion, and together they are responsible for a tremendous business in crawfish, crawfish related paraphernalia, the promotion of Cajun culture, and a general, all-around good time.

The crawfish has, in recent years, become the ultimate symbol used to represent the Cajun people. The image of a crawfish shows up everywhere, on bumper stickers, T-shirts, in children’s books. Crawfish souvenirs are sold across Louisiana to out of state visitors.

The use of crawfish as a symbol started at about the same time as the crawfish industry really got under way.

It may seem as though there should be little connection between the two, but in fact neither could exist without the other. Anthropologists agree that a popular symbol must be backed by a sufficient quantity of the product, and an industry requires sufficient demand to justify production. Until the crawfish was accepted as a symbol, there was not enough demand for crawfish to support an industry, but in order for it to be accepted there had to be enough crawfish. During the 1960s, the industry and the symbol developed together. Actually, the stories of the crawfish industry and the symbol are one story. The story begins in 1959, when the Louisiana legislature first allocated funds to develop crawfish farming.

Bob Angelle, then the speaker of the state House of Representatives, was from Breaux Bridge, which in 1959 was celebrating its 100th anniversary. He wanted to do something for his town, so he had the legislature declare Breaux Bridge the Crawfish Capitol of the World, a title the town had earned by serving crawfish commercially in restaurants during the 1920s and 30s.

As part of the promotion of Breaux Bridge and, by extension, crawfish, Angelle helped secure $10,000 from the state Wildlife and Fisheries Commission for the purpose of developing crawfish ponds.

But crawfish ponds and a regular supply of crawfish would be useless without a market for crawfish. Practically nobody outside Louisiana was interested in buying crawfish in 1959, and Louisianaans could only catch their own. What sparked the commercial potential of the industry was the Crawfish Festival. This festival grew out of the Breaux Bridge Centennial, and the first one was held in 1960. It was very well publicized, and within a few years the Crawfish Festival had been written up in the New York Times and other major newspapers around the country. People were getting interested in Louisiana, and the crawfish was something unique to Cajuns, something that only they were interested in eating. The Crawfish Festival brought people from all over to see Louisiana, to enjoy Cajun culture, and to eat that exotic food, the crawfish.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Cajuns drew more and more attention from the national press. Louisiana became famous as one of the only places in the U.S. where people were “different.” A large part of that “difference” is in eating habits, and nothing is so unique to Louisiana as eating crawfish. More aggressive marketing of crawfish and of tourism made more people interested in both, and the logical way to have both was to attend the Crawfish Festival.

Because of this, the Crawfish Festival is the second largest tourist event in Louisiana (second only to Mardi Gras in New Orleans). Outsiders come to the festival to celebrate Cajuns and their heritage. Cajuns attend the Crawfish Festival for the same reason — it celebrates them and what is more unique about them.

Outsiders recognize both the association of Cajuns and crawfish and the local pride in it, and they buy crawfish souvenirs to remind them of Cajuns and Cajun culture. But this wasn’t always the case. For generations, nobody was even remotely interested in crawfish. Old-timers recall when people were ashamed to eat crawfish and when fishermen couldn’t give their crawfish away. Crawfish were something that people caught for themselves, not for commercial purposes. The crawfish industry, and commercial exploitation of crawfish, is less than 25 years old, which means that before that time nobody cared enough about crawfish to cultivate them.