What is a Cajun?

Culture defines today’s Cajun

Lafayette, Louisiana

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The 700,000 Acadians who live in South Louisiana make up the largest French-speaking minority in the United States. They are descendants of some of the first white men to settle North America, coming from Brittany, Poitou, Normandy and across France to establish their first permanent colony in what is now Nova Scotia. That was in 1604, three years before Jamestown, four years before Quebec, and 15 years before the Mayflower.

They were forced from their Canadian homes a century and a half later, and eventually settled in South Louisiana. Some settled along the Mississippi River above New Orleans. Others migrated to wetlands along Bayou Lafourche. Another group crossed the Atchafalaya Basin to the country of the Attakapas and Opeiousas Indians, near today's cities of St. Martinville and Lafayette.

Each of these groups lived in relative isolation from the Anglos, and to some extent, from each other, and developed in different ways. (There is, for example, no single “Cajun French” language, but distinguishable - to the trained ear - regional dialects, all based upon the original Acadian French, alike in sound and rhythm, but often with distinctive phrases and modes of expression. And you can start a battle royal among different Cajuns over just which instruments are proper to “authentic” Cajun music.)

The Cajuns were for several generations largely an unschooled and unlettered people, living simple lives, keeping to themselves, their families and their lands. Because of this, the Cajun was often, and mistakenly, portrayed as a likeable buffoon; an ignorant, French-speaking, backwards swampbilly, scraping a bare existence from his surroundings; a pleasant, easy-going peasant who has nothing and wants less, as long as he can go to the fais-do-do (dance) on Saturday and to Mass on Sunday.

Listen to Richard Ketchum, writing as late as 1974 in the American Heritage Book of Great Historic Places:

“(Cajuns) speak an ancient French dialect which few outsiders can follow ... Mixing little with the modern world, they earn a living by fishing, boating, trapping, and by selling handwoven baskets and cloth. In a region of few roads, they live on simple wooden houseboats, dependent upon the waterways and the pirogue ...”

In many places they were called “coonasses.” Some of them call themselves that still. The bumper sticker (“Coonass and Proud” still bedecks many a pickup truck.)

But times have changed, and so have the Cajuns. The shantyboat is no longer first choice for economical housing, and some of them live in real houses, on dry land, with paved sidewalks leading right down to paved roadways. More Cajuns have pickup trucks than pirogues. Few Cajuns sell handwoven cloth or homemade baskets anymore (or know how to make either of them), but lots of them are still fishermen. Some trap still, gathering more pelts in the wild each year than all the rest of the United States and Canada combined. Some Cajuns are boatmen - Louisiana operates the largest fleet of working craft in
the nation. (Duffy St. Pierre, a Cajun captain, gained instant fame — or notoriety — in the summer of 1987 by towing unwanted barge loads of New York garbage around the Gulf of Mexico for a month.)

And lots of Cajuns are doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants, even college professors. You'll find Cajuns selling shoes at Sears, running gasoline stations, driving taxis, flying airplanes, working at chemical plants, operating computers, stringing telephone lines, raising crops and cattle, delivering the mail, running restaurants...doing the same thing that people do everywhere. Lots of them wear suits and ties. Some of them, the proud ones, still speak French from time to time — sometimes more often and more fluently than English. They feel sorry for folks who can speak only one language.

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More simply, the Cajuns thought it better to hold onto traditional values, to maintain their own identity. It was a passive resistance, more often a shrug of the shoulders and a perplexed chauvinism than a concerted effort. As early as 1827, a visitor wrote that the Cajuns held themselves apart from the rest of America, and "they prefer to be French than American."

It may not be as obvious now, but the Cajun has always held a healthy distrust of his English-speaking neighbors. Why not? These were the people who exiled him from his homeland, and who, later, used wealth and numbers to push him into the hinterlands. But he usually went peacefully enough. He just wanted to be left alone. He sought the isolation to maintain his culture. In isolation, the culture sustained and reinforced itself, developing its own patterns.

But understand that the Cajuns aren't the only Frenchmen in Acadiana. There are a handful of French cultures here. The Creoles of New Orleans descend from settlers who came to Louisiana in the early 1700s. St. Martinville was called Petit Paris by aristocrats who fled there during the French Revolution. Refugees from Napoleon's army settled in Ville Platte and elsewhere. French-speaking blacks from Haiti and other Caribbean islands were here early on. It causes some confusion when we start talking about who is a Cajun and who is not.

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