Culture, not blood, defines today's Cajun

By Jim Bradshaw
Business Editor

The 700,000 Acadians who make up the largest French-speaking minority in the United States 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 Atakapas and Opelousas 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, each developed in different ways. "There is, for example, only one single 'Cajun French' language, but there are several Cajun dialects, each based on local ear - regional dialects, all based on the "Cajun French" idea, in sound and structure - and a number of other "Cajun French" speakers in Louisiana, and in support of our offshore oil industry. (Durty St. Pierre, a Cajun captain, gained instant fame or notoriety in the summer of 1977 by passing into popular song.)" And let's call them Cajuns.

Some Cajuns are fishermen. Louisiana operates the largest fleet of working craft in the nation, transporting goods along the world's waterways. And some Cajuns are on the waterways and the rivers - in the bayous and the canals. In many places they are called "coonsaels." Some of them they call themselves that still. The bumper sticker "Coonsaels for President" still sticks even a pickup truck.

But times have changed. And so have the Cajuns. The shantyboat is no longer the 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平原期。Few Cajuns sell handmade 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 than they can use. Some of them, the proud ones, still speak French on a trip to France - sometimes more often and more fluently than English. They feel sorry for the few folks who can speak only one language.

Some of them are beginning to object to being called coonsaels. They say it's an ugly word that came into use after World War II by the government, for political reasons, that made it into a word coming from the Caribbean. These folks believe that, by calling the people "coonsaels," they are treating the people with less respect, more often and more of the Indian nods and the "chucan a son gout" ("there's no accounting for taste"). But they resist. They believe that the people who live in harmony, with good reason, with respect for the land.

And the standard Cajun carriage is...as all of them are, it is a little stroked to begin with. It is correct even in the old days, when the people had to use the crops and the cattle, driving the mail and running restaurants...doing the same things that people do everywhere. Lots of them wear suits and ties. They feel sorry for the few folks who can speak only one language.

There are those who would argue that a Chinese reared in Acadia is more likely Cajun than an Acadian reared in China, that "Acadian" has no special connotation, but that the culture makes the "Cajun."