Elaine Dundy never imagined she would one day spend so much time in the South or write so much about it.

A friend of hers was the more likely candidate for that and Dundy would have been the one to write extensively about British royalty. They joke that it has actually become just the opposite.

Dundy has been drawn to the South since researching and writing about Elvis Presley and his roots in Tupelo, Miss.

Following a National Public Radio interview about the book, she received a call from Mickey Gilley's manager.

"You should know about Ferriday, Louisiana," the man told her.

They met and he told Dundy about the colorful Ferriday trio: Gilley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Jimmy Swaggart, three cousins from Ferriday.

"Well, I thought, three musically talented cousins. What a talented family," Dund'y recalls.

(Of the three, only Swaggart flocked the bandstand for greener pastures)

Gilley's manager mentioned other famous people from Ferriday, such as the television anchorwoman Howard K. Smith and Gen. Claire Lee Chennault of the famed Flying Tigers squadron during Chiang Kai-shek's regime in China.

Dundy's curiosity had been piqued.

Soon, she would spend months in the small north Louisiana town, researching for a new book. The waitress at the Ramada Inn where she lodged asked daily if she had finished her book yet.

It was published in 1991: Ferriday, Louisiana.

Now, Dundy is drawn again to Louisiana, this time by her interest in Gov. Edwin Edwards' on-again-off-again popularity, how Edwards' run-off with David Duke came to exist politically, and in contemporary Louisiana.

Among her first stops: Lafayette.

This book, she says, will be on the shelves one day: Cajuns, Rednecks and Populists.

When?

Dundy keeps no schedule. Instead, she interviews and interviews and interviews, gathering information until she feels confident that a book is ready for writing.

"Like being on the spot," Dundy says of her research. She plans to spend a week in Crowley, time in New Orleans and then wherever else her interviews may lead.

With each new person she meets, she learns of more people she wants to meet, she says.

"One person leads me to another" and "conversation here doesn't have to be made. It just flows," she says of Acadiana.

Dundy, a native of New York, calls no particular place home, spending most of her time away from her actual Hollywood home.

She quotes a poet when saying pleasure never is at home.

What has she already found odd about southern Louisiana?

• "That men cook and they take a real interest in cooking," she says, for starters, describing the roux-making and entire meal she witnessed one male host prepare in a cooking shed behind the man's home.

• That people here make "rainbows," meaning a crowd of important people easily includes black people, white people and other people.

• That people here make "rainbows," meaning a crowd of important people easily includes black people, white people and other people.

An example, she says, is Gov. Edwin Edwards' inauguration day activities. Dundy covered the events for the Los Angeles Times. State leaders who hovered about the governor were black and white.

"I was very impressed by that," Dundy says. "Everyone is very separate in Los Angeles."

What does she want to know from Acadiana residents?

"Why is this state different from others in the South? From Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina?" she asks.

So far, she has received numerous answers, the best of them still just guessed: the original aristocratic French and Acadian French, Spanish, Italian, Creole, African, and English influences; frequent changes in government in colonial times; the Roman Catholic church; and, even, the Mississippi black silt and soil, versus the red stuff found elsewhere.

And, she adds, "people don't seem to be so self-righteous here. They seem to be more open."

From that candidness, she has ascertained so far that David Duke and Edwin Edwards have something in common.

Only two words describe either when anyone is asked: "Outrage or admiration; there is no middle ground," Dundy says.

Ferriday, Louisiana

1991

...about the small town and the famous who have called it home.

Coming Soon:

Cajuns, Rednecks and Populists (non-fiction)...

...about Gov. Edwin Edwards, David Duke and contemporary Louisiana.

By Elaine Dundy:

Fiction:

The Dud Avocado (novel)

...was Dundy's first work and has been in print ever since first published in the 1950's. It will be added to Virago's classics list in the World Classics Series in 1993.

The Old Man and Me (novel)

The Injured Party (novel)

My Place (play).

Non-Fiction:

Elvis and Gladys 1985...

...about actor Peter Finch.

Finch, Bloody, Finch...

...about the king and his mother.

Ferriday, Louisiana 1991...

...about the small town and the famous who have called it home.