Embraced by a community
Syndicated columnist makes home in Henderson

Rheta Grimsley Johnson is not Cajun.
She doesn’t pretend to be.

As a syndicated newspaper columnist appearing in about 50 newspapers across the country, Grimsley has legions of fans in some communities. However, in Acadiana, where she’s wintered for 10 years, she’s largely unknown.

When she and her husband first decided to relocate to Acadiana, they spent their time on a small houseboat. But when she got the hankering to garden they moved to a Cajun-style cottage on a dead-end road in Henderson about a mile from the levee.

"We just love Henderson. We think it’s the real thing,” she says. “Everybody in the town still makes their living from the swamp.”

Grimsley says the book is primarily about the people in Henderson she’s come to call friends.

"Mostly it’s our story. I don’t want to come across as an expert on Cajun, because I’m not,” she says. “This is just the story about how we ended up loving this funky little town and how we ended up spending a part of our year there for a decade now.”

Grimsley says she waiting a while to learn the area and its people before attempting a book about her life in Henderson.

"It took me two or three years before I felt comfortable. It seemed so exotic and so different. I would even find myself enunciating differently,” she says with a laugh.

Along the way and by chance, Grimsley started a neighborhood reading club in her backyard. She says the experience marked a pivotal point with her connection to the area.

"It started with the little girl across the street. Then she started bringing her friends. Before I knew it, we would have eight to 10 kids running around the back,” Grimsley says.

They called it the Toolshed Reading Club.

Cypress trees at sunset on Henderson Lake North of I-10.