Even the Egret Still Lives
Though in a Language Fully Expressive

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The geese range high in the sky over the bayou, honking their strident tidings of colder weather in the off- ing, and the ducks swing their V-formations with a precision that any air corps pilot might well envy. And canyon old hunters argue the efficacy of the particular calls that will bring the winter visitors within range of the well aimed guns.

It's time for "la chasse." The birds are othes, in the oysters in many a Lafourche gumbo pot, and the freshly rendered lard in the clay pot will fry many a tender morsel. A space game has passed into a gustatory memory, and its name will remain in the language of the bayou folks, an oral tool to paint a meaningful analogy.

For the birds that will fly over the Lafourche lowlands to seek out some feeding grounds in the marshes not only leave their down feathers behind to fill many a bayou pillow: Their qualities are preserved in many a bayou saying, like the pillows, a lasting part of everyday life.

The goose, of course, has left its name here, as elsewhere, to tell of monumental silliness. As in the days when Grandmere Zulma derided some of Grandpere Marcillette's cronies as "conteniers," in today's bayou grammar as "comme un petit oiseau" that more pleasant phases of the subject are expressed, "pauvre barancro!"

And this is unusual, for even the turkey, that national institution, does not escape. In the bayou phraseology that noble bird pays a slightly less than heroic role, being relegated to the class of the goose. "Grand dindon!" is the phrase in which it has left its mark, and the person to whom it is applied gets the idea right away. When they "talk turkey" along the bayou, folks aren't getting down to brass tacks. They are expressing the opinion that somebody is a big dope.

Egret Still Lives

In the bayou phraseology, surprisingly many of the birds are used to describe unflattering aspects of life. It is only in such expressions as "contenter un petit oiseau" that less pleasant phases of the subject are expressed. Anyone who is as "happy as a little bird" is understood to have a very pleasurable existence indeed.

But now take Louisiana's nearly vanished bird, the egret. It has been a long time since the great numbers of the white birds used to descend upon Bayou Lafourche. But the name of the bird is still a part of a bayou person's vocabulary.

When Tante Therese had her more flighty moments as a young girl, rigging up a nest at all and generally comporting herself as an undisciplined colt, Grandmère had at her tongue tip a scathing indictment for such unseemly behavior. "Tu t'embaume unas egret folle!" Grandmère would deprecate.

You look like a crazy egret," her hands emphasized. And Tante Therese, properly squeled, would hasten to adopt a more young ladylike behavior.

Neglect Duck

The egret is gone from the bayou, but the phrase is still extant as a memorial to its ways. Somehow it seems impossible for the Lafourche folks to speak of are merely expressing the descriptive crazy before it. There are mothers who reproach active daughters with "T'it egret folle!"

The rail has obvious possibilities as a part of speech. Sometimes it is used, but most bayou folks are too kindly to take advantage of the simplicity it offers. After all, Mamzelle Louisa may be doing all she can to add a few curves, and to compare her figure to that of the rail is flagrantly mean.

The duck itself, now coming in great numbers to add its enticing richness to many a bayou meal, appears to be one of the few game birds around which the Lafourche folk have failed to embroider some descriptive phrase. Perhaps it has left too gracious a memory of canard roti, jambalaya au canard, and gumbo melee to be treated with any such irreverence.

And so it goes, all through the days when Grandmere Zulma often used, and left, to be heard. It was usually her own fault, for preparing a too-tasty meal and developing gourmand habits among the members of the family. No one was gobbling his food with more enthusiasm than tidiness. Memere had her admonition. "T'a pas honte! Sellewing your meal like a beggar!"

The gull is always useful, in Lafourche language, to point a warning at anyone young and one (even grandpere, for that matter) who suffers a lapse in table manners.

Considering the numbers to be seen in the southern parishes, the crow must be a healthy old bird, but grammatically speaking, it is always in pretty bad shape. For its name figures in a most lugubrious fashion in the bayou bird talk.

Pigeon Rates High

"Comment ca va, Pierre?"
"Pres m'sal, Paul, tres mal! Tel que le pauvre careneco!"

Figuratively speaking the "poor crow" is never in good shape. And this is opposite true of the pigeon, except that it is never a live pigeon. Whenever someone has a particularly good fortune, no phrase could be more descriptive than "II vie sur le pigeon roti!" Anyone, it would seem, from the Lafourche grammar, who can live on a roast pigeon must be very fortunate indeed.

The state bird comes into its share of Lafourche wordage. But it is an ignoble role that it plays, for like the gull, it serves as a warning at the too greedy. For anyone acting like the dog gobbling more than his share of food at mealtime, the pelican can serve as an admonitory club to be swung at the proper moment.

"Don't bolt your dinner, Ti Noo. Mo foif! One would think you had not seen food before. "Tit Pelli-can!"

And so it goes, all through the list of birds that fly South in winter to furnish food for thought and food for the cooking pot, and those birds that are always with us, pleasantly decorative but mere nuisances. But not only the birds that fly have left their mark on the Lafourche language.

Barnyard Birds

The birds in the back yard also have figured in many a bayou phrase.

There was Tante Therese, nearing 50, and just beginning to realize the infinite possibilities that face a girl reaching the age when boys begin to have a major significance. When there is all the glamour of self love to be generated through. And Memere Zulma, half affectionately, half in exasperation, regarded these manifestations of unfolding youth and applied a name to them.

"Regardez ma p'tit poule! And see the hen passed into its niche in the bayou speech.

Nor was the rooster neglected. Nowadays they talk of boys who are wolves with the ladies. But when Jean Louis parted his hair in the middle and slicked it down with a greasy bar of "cosmetique," all with an eye of putting the head of young Josephine in a whirl, it was not as a young wolf that his amused family pictured him. The roosters got another role besides waking Grandmere Marcillette in the morning and predicting company coming by crowing on the doorstep. He got a phrase of his own to describe the young Jean Louis of the bayou: "Quel jeune coquel!"