They came as exiles to Louisiana's bayous two centuries ago. Now the descendants are gaining in prosperity—and rediscovering an ancient heritage—in the midst of big economic shifts.

GRAND MAMOU, La.

Before he died, the old Cajun wanted to know one thing. "Do they," he asked a friend who had seen the world, "still speak French in France?"

A worthy question. His generation had gone to school speaking no English. For the offense of saying "Bonjour" to a teacher, they were whipped, made to kneel on bricks or kernels of corn, ordered to stand with their noses pressed in little circles chalked on the blackboard or forced to copy long pages from the dictionary.

So they had sent their own children and grandchildren off to school, not knowing how to speak French. It seemed reasonable that nowhere on earth was their native tongue spoken without shame.

A budding renaissance? Now, to the surprise and delight of the old-timers, hope blooms anew that the man who once died and to the political death lost his land, most of his children and his language and his idiom, had kept his pride. The old-timers, hope blooms anew that the man who once died and to the political death lost his land, most of his children and his language and his idiom, had kept his pride.

In Cajun Land, A Return to French Roots

Stretching along the Gulf of Mexico from the Mississippi River nearly to the Texas border and reaching inland from the tidal marshes and through the swamps into prairie lands, Cajun country is a region of broad diversity. What binds the people together are a history of exile and a sense of being different.

Cajun is a contraction of Acadian, the name that peasants from northern France gave themselves after settling in what is now Nova Scotia in the 1600s. After wresting that part of Canada from France, Britain forced virtually all of the Acadians to leave in 1755 because they refused to promise to bear arms against their kinsmen in Quebec. Ten years later the refugees arrived in New Orleans, only to find that the aristocratic French Creoles there despised them. The Spanish governor, already troubled by a nationalist French majority in the city, sent them on to the wilderness to the west.

Once they had settled—cut off from civilization by the Atchafalaya basin, a cypress swamp so thick that it took a week to paddle 20 miles—time stood still. Well into the 20th century, customs that dated back to medieval Normandy went unchanged.

Hungry for social contact, they made festivals of the most ordinary occasions. They had danses called séde-dos, literally meaning go to sleep, because children would be bedded down in a back room while older family members had fun. In early winter, hog and cattle slaughtering, or boucheries, drew communities together for work followed by music and feasting. Whenever someone needed help with a crop or a new well, neighbors gathered for a coup de main, which means to give a hand and which inevitably turned into a party. With variations brought about by modern conveniences these traditions endure to this day.

This heartfelt approach to life gives root to an unofficial Cajun name—Cajun ganzo, dawg—a mishmash
reference to their staple food, sex and sleep. It also is a reason for longstanding friction between the Cajuns of south Louisiana and their Anglo-Saxon, fundamentalist Baptist neighbors in the northern part of the state who hold to a sterner view.

"We strongly believe in God," explains a Cajun businessman with a grin, "and we believe strongly that God winks at a lot of little things." Acadiana is staunchly Roman Catholic, although, as one folklorist puts it, "Now and then you find a Cajun who turned Baptist if he was not satisfied with his wife."

The ties of religion and the closeness of their society are what preserved the Cajuns' identity as a people. Only about 2,000 Acadians came to Louisiana from Canada, and even their practice of having huge families cannot account for their numbers today. They enculturated those who followed them to the area, and there are Johnsons and Abbevilles and Shexnayders who consider themselves just as Cajun as the LeLeuxs and the Doucess. Of the 1 million people in the 22 Acadiana parishes, nearly half speak French—although few can read or write the language.

From Survival to Progress

Cajuns, illiterate in their own tongue, keep their history by storytelling. For 12 generations, Claude Martin's offspring have passed on a legend of how their ancestor last saw his brother Pierre on a day the Acadians were deported from Canada, fleeing into the north woods with wife and child while British soldiers fired at them. The tale has a happy ending. Three years ago, a direct descendant of Claude's, Lenoir Guitard, was working as curator of the Acadian museum in St. Martinville when a car with Quebec license tags stopped and the driver asked her how to find any remaining members of the family. Mrs. Guitard describes the incident with a teary smile: "It was the first we knew that Pierre had survived."

Such memories, however, have faded in the last half century under the pressures of what is called progress. The advent of radio and television, and the building of roads, exposed Cajuns to the cultural influences surrounding them and brought prosperity that lured them from customs they themselves began to consider quaint. They rushed to assimilate, even prohibiting French on school grounds, believing that their language, and not their literacy, caused their poverty.

Today, the riches of their land are magnets pulling them further toward the American mainstream. Rice fields cover half a million acres; sugar cane, though now in decline, has been adding up to 100 million dollars annually to the region's economy; salt mining brings another 90 million dollars, and Louisiana has led all other states in the volume of catch of fish, shrimp and other shellfish.

But the greatest causes of wealth—and change—are oil and natural-gas production. In 1976, for example, the area produced 511,349,533 barrels of oil and 5,843,699,807 cubic feet (thousand-cubic-foot units) of natural gas. Firms servicing this industry are turning Lafayette into a little Houston and making New Iberia the workshop capital of the world.

"A happy geographical accident." Since the discovery of Louisiana's offshore petroleum in 1947, Cajun boatmen and drillers have pioneered seabed exploration. Their expertise has scattered them among oil fields from the North Sea to the Persian Gulf.

"We coastal Louisianians were recipients of a happy geographical accident," says Robert Alario, who started with his brother-in-law in business on a borrowed $5,000 and now is a consultant on marine services with clients worldwide.

"We were blessed by the fact that this new industry needed skills that we knew best and took in us that were bred into Cajuns to survive," he explains. "Cajuns were not afraid of risk because they lived with that daily; death by drowning was an expected end of life. They were used to failure—hurricanes periodically wiped away all they had. What they lacked in training they compensated for in instinct. I've seen steel crew boats, as seaworthy as the best, designed on the back of a napkin."

Politics—With Pepper

With the oil, though, came strangers who derided Cajun customs, roustaaboats from Texas and Oklahoma who laughed at their clumsy command of English. A lawyer in Grand Mamou describes the encounter this way: "When I grew up, we didn't think of ourselves as Americans. To us, Americans were the English-speaking people from the Sabine badlands, roughnecks who came among us looking for jobs. At that time, there was no feeling of brotherhood."

The outsiders infuriated the Acadians by calling them "coonsasses." The sting of this is fading today, but leaders of the French-renaissance movement are appalled that many of their youths are wearing T-shirts that display the term as a badge of pride. It is a hard trend to stop, as fast as six were.

self-effacing humor is an ingrained trait. To questions about their ways that they consider a putdown, they often reply with a put-down, such as: "Toonair, mon, I go to school in a purrrrr, an' alligator, him, he carry my book and I eat Spanish moss with every meal."

Actually, the cuisine of Acadiana is justly famed for its select flavors. Most are richly seasoned, especially with cayenne. There is "boudin", the intestine of hog stuffed with ground meat, herbs and rice; gumbo, a thick soup made with seafood; and crawfish served "etouffe", smothered in butter sauce, in a gravy called bisket or simply boiled and highly spiced and served in the shell.

Where debates heat up. As peppy as the foods are the politics of the Cajuns. There are hot arguments, for instance, over the direction of their language renaissance. Some feel that their children are being taught classical French, not the Cajun variety that includes words heard in France in 200 years. Others gripe that the academic community has openly opposed each new step because the movement was begun and largely controlled by laymen such as Lafayette lawyer James Domeneaux.

Hailed even by his critics as the father of the language program, Domeneaux delights in trodding the toes of all who stand in his way. He outrage the academic community by claiming: "The mentality of educators is not to accept innovation because it interferes with their pet projects—band and soccer and that kind of thing."

At the same time, Domeneaux works to insure that his cause does not become divisive. "I would not contribute one effort," he says, "to reducing the use of the English language."

Privately, some say that the volunteers sent to oil in the program by the separatist government of Quebec are asked that the Cajuns show no interest in building an ethnic political movement. But the one-man, one-vote ruling of the Supreme Court, the Cajuns now have a fair share of seats in the Louisiana Legislature. Political and economic parity have largely ended the old hatreds between the state's French south and Anglo north.

Cajun leaders are quick to distance any notions of separatism from the United States, observing that they are too few and occupy too small an area to support an independent. But explains Paul Tate, Sr., of the Louisiana Folklore Association, "As Americans, we can preserve our own culture because we are free."

The foregoing article was reported and written by Associate Editor John S. Land.