IOWANS IN
CAJUN COUNTRY
An Overview & A Request
by Rocky Sexton

The Cajuns of Louisiana, contrary
to popular belief, are not simply the
swamp-dwelling descendants of Acadians
exiled from Canada in the late
eighteenth century. Cajuns are instead the
result of a centuries-long acculturation process
among Europeans, Africans, Americans, and
Native Americans. Settlers of Iowa were one
group involved in this melting pot, and the
setting for this acculturation was the prairie
region of southwest Louisiana, an area very
similar to the Midwest.

During the early nineteenth century, south-
west Louisiana was only sparsely populated, by
Acadians and other groups such as African-
Americans and Native Americans. In the
1870s, settlement of the area was encouraged in
publications extolling the climate, soil, and
other favorable conditions. There was, how-
ever, no immediate response to such induc-
ments.

The situation began to change in the early
1880s upon completion of the Louisiana West-
ern Railroad. At this time, the Watkins Syndi-
cate, an investment group headed by Jabez
Watkins, purchased one and a half million
acres of land encompassing much of southwest
Louisiana. To organize agricultural endeavors
and promote settlement in the region, the
Watkins Syndicate recruited Seaman A. Knapp, an Iowa farming expert, writer, and
professor of practical and experimental agri-
culture. Through the efforts of Knapp and oth-
ers, a propaganda blitz was directed toward
northern states. The American, a weekly news-
paper promoting the region, was published in
Lake Charles, Louisiana, and widely dis-
tributed. Circulars and advertisements were
placed in farm journals throughout the North.
The support of journalists and farm leaders was
cultivated through carefully arranged inspec-
tion tours of southwest Louisiana. Knapp was
especially helpful in directing these recruiting
efforts towards Iowans, given his position as

An immediate contribution by midwesterners
was the application of northern agricultural
technology for raising grain to Louisiana's un-
developed rice industry. Prior to this time, rice
was generally grown in small, non-irrigated
plots, and harvested and processed by hand.
Midwesterners introduced seeders, binders,
and threshing machines to the area. They also
developed irrigation systems to ensure a steady
supply of water to the rice fields. Within a few
years, rice became the major product of the
region and many towns developed as shipping
points.

The Louisiana towns of Vinton and Iowa
(still pronounced "Ioway" by natives there) are
documented as having been settled by Iowans.
Other settlements such as Morse and Milton

This church sign, from Acadia Parish in Louisiana, exhibits the varying influences that have formed the human
landscape of contemporary southwest Louisiana. Migrating Iowans were among those influences. On the sign, the
Baptist denomination and surname Miller are not usually associated with Cajuns. The term "French" and the barely
visible statement "Jesus est Seigneur" (Jesus is Lord), however, demonstrate a Gallic background.

1984 and his
earlier successes in breeding stock and editing
the Western Stock Journal and Farmer. (In
1885 Knapp himself took a leave of absence to
establish a rice plantation in Louisiana.)

Beginning in the 1880s, hundreds of mid-
western families, attracted by the promise of
cheap land and a warmer climate, began mov-
ing into southwest Louisiana. Benton County,
Iowa, provided many of the founding citizens
of Vinton, Louisiana. At the same time, Ben-
ton County experienced a substantial loss in
population — nearly a thousand people be-
tween 1880 and 1885. By the 1890s, the
number of migrants to Louisiana had reached
the thousands, and settlement continued well
into the twentieth century.

An anthropologist searches for the
Louisiana-Iowa connection in old
letters and diaries. Can you help him?
May also indicate Iowa place names and family names used for new Louisiana towns. (The fact that Vinton, Morse, and Milton are in eastern Iowa suggests that eastern Iowa provided a large number of Louisiana-bound settlers.)

In the following years, the newcomers mingled with the existing population, and today many Cajuns bear non-Acadian names such as Smith, Gatte, Matte, Hoffpauer, and Miller (see additional names at the end of this article). Likewise, many Cajuns of southwest Louisiana are Protestant rather than Catholic. The presence of Methodist, Baptist, and other denominations throughout southwest Louisiana suggests an influence attributable to settlers from the Midwest and other areas.

Midwesterners also contributed to the architecture of southwest Louisiana. Unlike other areas where Acadian and Creole architecture dominated, the Louisiana prairies still feature many buildings representing styles familiar to the Iowa landscape. Particularly common are frame houses that are one room deep, two rooms wide, and two stories high. Cultural geographer Fred Kniffen has named these structures "I Houses" because of their builders' origins in Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana. In many ways, Iowans and other midwesterners apparently made a lasting impact on the economy, culture, and landscape of southwest Louisiana.

My dissertation topic is settlement and acculturation in Acadia Parish, which lies near the center of prairie Louisiana. In the current phase of research, my particular interest is to study in detail the settlement and interaction of various groups in the area. I am requesting of Palimpsest readers any information about families who left Iowa or other states to settle in Louisiana. Of particular significance are letters, journals, and diaries containing references to Louisiana. Such information can provide personal perspectives into the cultural history of both Louisiana and the Midwest. If you wish to correspond about this topic, please contact me at the following address: Rocky Sexton, Department of Anthropology, MacBride Hall, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242. Thank you.

Abandoned farmstead, rural Acadia Parish, Louisiana, with outbuildings identical to midwestern structures. The typical prairie landscape shows large, open areas bordered by tree-lined canals and bayous (creeks).

NOTE ON SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL READINGS


Additional Louisiana towns with possible links to Iowa:

Edgerton
Egan
Estherwood
Hathaway
Hays
Jota
Jennings
LaVon Point
Midland
Millerville
Silverwood
Welsh

Additional Louisiana towns with possible links to Iowa:

Edgerton
Egan
Estherwood
Hathaway
Hays
Jota
Jennings
LaVon Point
Midland
Millerville
Silverwood
Welsh

Non-Acadian surnames common to southwest Louisiana:

Ashmore
East (Irre)
Gatte (Gott)
Hoffpauer
Leckett
Matte (Mott)
Miller
Shekswynder
Smith
Wilson

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