Ancient Acadians: Is there a Celtic prologue in Acadians' past?

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In considering the occupation of the people, do we find any further similarities between the Acadians and Celts? The first Acadians in southwest Louisiana, we are told, obtained cattle from the Spaniards, and divided themselves to cattle raising, taking advantage of the open range. Cattle racing, we learn, flourished on the prairies. In 1838, the Rev. Pierre F. Durandy, a missionary from the Mississippi valley, visited southwest Louisiana and commented: "...the Acadians divided their cattle into three classes: the best, the middle, and the lowest. The best class formed the half-bred cattle on the "pastoral prairies."" Dr. Charles Miltz, of Mississippi State University, pointed out that because of the natural advantage of the open range, abundant water and the absence of predatory animals, cattle raising became the dominant economic activity of the male settlers. The Acadian vauders, or leaders, was an important aspect of the early cattle industry.

Wells the Cattle enthusiasm! We are told that in the 17th Century the Irish were a royal people, subsisting on the produce of their cattle only ... a herdsman in Ireland said he never saw a blacksmith. Horse racing has been an Irish pursuit. In the Journal of Acadians, writes "Especially popular in Ireland was horse racing; and races took place in the fields. The Irishmen were noted for their love of horses. They were fond of horse racing. In the late 1500s, horse racing was popular as a sport in the Irish, and was often regulated. There were many races held in the fields, where money was often wagered on the outcome. As with horse racing, a chief attraction of such racing was the wagering that accompanied it. Before the days of horse racing, many people had no place for gambling. In the late 1800s, horse racing was introduced into Louisiana from Ireland in 1856. In Ireland, we are told, many of the women were horse riders, and a woman felt it demeaning to walk on foot. As Carl Bruneau pointed out, one of the prominent virtues of the Acadians was that Acadian women rode astride like men.

There are some of the "first half" Celtic ways that continued the Irish and the Yankees, and the same Celtic ways that united the Acadians. All of these similarities are suggestive, of course, but they are not conclusive. Many historians have associated these folk ways with the rough life of the frontier, especially in the United States, since the first half of the 19th Century, the effects of the economic, social, and cultural changes brought about by the development of civilization and industry. As the railroads were built in the early 1800s, the frontier was pushed back, and if the frontier shaped the Acadian folkways, or was it something else?

Editor's Note: Truman Stacey, a journalist for the New York Times, is the author of "The American People, A History." His articles have appeared in newspapers and historical journals. This is the second of a six-part series.