ing for taste), than an active fight. But they resisted, nonetheless, and with good reason. It may not be as obvious now, but the Cajun has always held a healthy distrust of his English-speaking neighbors. Why not? These were the people who exiled him from his homeland, and who, later, used wealth and numbers to push him into the hinterlands. But he usually went peacefully enough. He just wanted to be left alone. He sought the isolation to maintain his culture. In isolation, the culture sustained and reinforced itself, developed its own patterns.

But understand that the Cajuns aren’t the only Frenchmen in Acadiana. There are a handful of French cultures here. The Creoles of New Orleans descend from settlers who came to Louisiana in the early 1700s. St. Martinville was called Petit Paris by aristocrats who fled there during the French Revolution. Refugees from Napoleon’s army settled in Ville Platte and elsewhere. French-speaking blacks from Haiti and other Caribbean islands were here early on. It causes some confusion when we start talking about who is a Cajun and who is not.

By strict definition, we could limit the term Cajun to descendents of the Acadians exiled from Nova Scotia in 1755. In fact, however, the earlier French and other settlers mixed and married with Cajuns, and more often than not, adopted their ways. So that today some argue, you can find Cajuns who aren’t Acadian at all. (There’s an old folk saying that you can become a Cajun in three ways: by the blood, by the ring, or by the back door.)

You have a good argument that it is the culture, not the blood, that defines today’s “Cajun.” It’s culture that counts various aspects. Not every Cajun speaks French, but his grandparents probably did. You’ll find Protestant Broussards and Ascornes and Leger today, but they likely spring from Catholic stock. Even townfolk used to hold some rural values, and ways. The cuisine and the music hark back to old traditions. Latin blood shows through. Cajuns can be quick to anger, quick to laughter, and quick to change from one to the other. They play as hard as they work, but they work hard. The Cajun can still “make do” from the abundant resources around him. And he still wonders sometimes why anyone would want more.

And there are subtler aspects. The Cajuns are a tolerant people—perhaps to a fault. They sometimes tolerate a little too much drinking, a little too much dancing, some chicanery in their politics. Some outsiders clutch their tongues and wonder why. The Cajun suggests that some things just aren’t worth the trouble to change.

There are those who would argue that a Chinese reared in Acadiana is more likely Cajun than an Acadian reared in China; that “Acadian” has to do with geography, but that the culture makes the “Cajun.” Regional historian Revon Reed claims to count 15 different kinds of Louisiana Cajuns, including Anglos, Spaniards, even Yugoslavians and Filipinos.

He can start a good fight by arguing that in some of the wrong places. The back door to becoming a Cajun opens only so wide. But he’s right about this: There’s more to being a Cajun than just the blood.

For more information, contact the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission 1-800-366-7128 in the U.S. 1-800-583-3340 in Canada.
Culture, not blood defines today's Cajun

By Jim Bradshaw
Lafayette Daily Advertiser

The 700,000 Acadians who live in south Louisiana make up the largest French-speaking minority in the United States. They are descendants of some of the first white men to settle North America, coming from Brittany, Poitou, Normandy and across France to establish their first permanent colony in what is now Nova Scotia. That was in 1604, three years before Jamestown, four years before Quebec, and 15 years before the Mayflower.

They were forced from their Canadian homes a century and a half later, and eventually settled in south Louisiana. Some settled along the Mississippi River above New Orleans. Others migrated to wetlands along Bayou Lafourche. Another group crossed the Atchafalaya Basin to the country of the Atakapas and Opelousas Indians, near today's cities of St. Martinville and Lafayette.

Each of these groups lived in relative isolation from the Anglos, and to some extent, from each other, and developed in different ways. (There is, for example, no single "Cajun French" language, but distinguishable - to the trained ear - regional dialects, all based upon the original Acadian French, alike in sound and rhythm, but often with distinctive phrases and modes of expression. And you can start a battle royal among different Cajuns over which instruments are proper to "authentic" Cajun music.)

The Cajuns were for several generations largely an unschooled and unlettered people, living simple lives, keeping to themselves, their families and their lands. Because of this, the Cajun was often, and mistakenly, portrayed as a likeable buffoon, an ignorant, French-speaking, backwards swambilly, scraping a bare existence from his surroundings; a pleasant, easy-going peasant who has nothing and wants less, as long as he can go to the fais-do-do (dance) on Saturday and to Mass on Sunday.

Listen to Richard Ketchum, writing as late as 1974 in the American Heritage Book of Great Historic Places:

"(Cajuns) speak an ancient French dialect which few outsiders can follow...Mixing little with the modern world, they earn a living by fishing, boating, trapping, and by selling hand-woven baskets and cloth. In a region of few roads, they live on simple wooden houseboats, dependent upon the waterways and the pirogue...."

In many places they were called "coonasses." Some of them call themselves that still. The bumper sticker "Coonass and Proud" still decks many a pickup truck.

But times have changed, and so have the Cajuns. The shantyboat is no longer first choice for economical housing, and some of them live in real houses, on dry land, with paved sidewalks leading right down to paved roads. More Cajuns have pickup trucks than pirogues. Few Cajuns sell handwoven cloth or homemade baskets anymore (or how to make either of them), but lots of them are still fishermen. Some trap still, gathering more pelts in the wild each year than all of the rest of the United States and Canada combined. Some Cajuns are boatmen. Louisiana operates the largest fleet of working craft in the nation. (Duffy St. Pierre, a Cajun captain, gained instant fame - or notoriety - in the summer of 1987 by towing unwanted bargeloads of New York garbage around the Gulf of Mexico for a month.)

And lots of Cajuns are doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants, even college professors. You'll find Cajuns selling shoes at Sears, running gasoline stations, driving taxis, flying airplanes, working at chemical plants, operating computers, stringing telephone lines, raising crops and cattle, delivering the mail, running restaurants...doing the same things that people do everywhere. Lots of them wear suits and ties. Some of them, the proud ones, still speak French from time-to-time - sometimes more often and more fluently than English. They feel sorry for folks who can speak only one language.

Some of them are beginning to object to being called coonasses. They say it's an ugly word that came into use after World War II by the comings and goings with the French noun conasse, which means a stupid person or prostitute. Others say it is more innocuous, deriving from caouaz, a word coming from the Caribbean Indians, most likely via the Spanish, and meaning a fellow who lives simply, on and with the land.

And the standard Cajun caricature, as all of them see it, is too broadly sketched to begin with. It was incorrect even in the old days. Acadians have played a healthy and wide-ranging role in Louisiana (and American) history. They fought the British during the American Revolution, and fought alongside Andy Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. An Acadian presided over the convention that voted Louisiana into the Union. Other Cajuns helped the state back in. There were two Acadian governors and another served as lieutenant governor between 1840 and 1860. In fact, an Acadian, Alexandre Mouton, was Louisiana's first popularly-elected governor. (Before him, governors were chosen by the legislature.)

Acadians built their vacheries (cattle ranches), roped the prairies, held fine river plantations, founded towns that became cities. They sat in Congress and the legislature and on the bench. (U.S. Sen. John Breaux is a Cajun.)

But it's true, too, that Cajuns often did - and do - things their own way. The scholars tell us:

"Certainly no one will deny that...numerous...Acadians...resisted acculturation until well after World War II, when improved transportation and communication brought mainstream America into the darkest reaches of the swamp...."

More simply: The Cajuns thought it better to hold onto traditional values, to maintain their own identity. It was a passive resistance, more often a shrug of the shoulders and a perplexed chacun a son gout (there's no accounting...