Louisiana’s Cajun Country

By BESSY WADE

In the part of Louisiana that the state’s map demarks as Acadiana, a triangle whose bases reach east to New Orleans and west to Texas, prosperity leaps from the earth and the water: Oil pumps nod along the wayside; turned-up fields lie in ridges that will later be tall with sugar cane; salt mines gush wealthily into the earth. Shrimp fleets and crawfish farms share the mudflats with billboards advertising for all sorts of workers “offshore” — the oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico.

Such prosperity has a funny feel after threadbare New York. The driver going west from New Orleans into Acadiana quickly gets proof that the hassle of life is sharply reduced: Road maps are free—help yourself from tall stacks at filling stations. The thurs day restaurant patron, edgy and geared up to ask, finds that the waiter appears with glasses of water before anything else, ice clinking. Downtown sidewalks are hosed off in the morning. In a cafeteria, coffee comes in a real cup and baking powder biscuits are created by humans, not encaged from a frozen tube. The price is 45 cents for all, and the cashier brings the biscuits over when they’re out of the oven. A New Yorker is likely to forget that such quandaries exist.

A Family Link

The trip began as an idle fantasy. In New Iberia, La., 140 miles west of New Orleans, a town known as the home of McIlhenny’s Tabasco, is an 1844 mansion belonging to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a private organization that owns and operates eight historic houses in the United States. The New Iberia site is named Shadows-on-the-Teche (“teche”), and as an addicted collector of names, I fastened onto this one in a hurry. To find the house, drive along a road where the coffee comes in a real cup and baking powder biscuits are created by humans, not encaged from a frozen tube.

A trip to New Iberia—it derives its name from the Spanish Ishimbay (Ishimbay), which means “terrible one” or “frightful one” in 德语. It was also the name of the area’s first resident, a man named Iberia. The town is located about 30 miles east of Lafayette, Louisiana. It is known for its rich history, including the role it played in the early days of Louisiana’s development.

The house was built in 1844 by Dr. John McIlhenny, who was a prominent Louisiana politician and planter. The house was originally a single-story structure, but it was later expanded to include a second story. It is built in the Greek Revival style, with a portico supported by four columns.

The house was the site of many important events, including the marriage of Dr. McIlhenny’s daughter, Mary McIlhenny, to Charles B. Bassett, a wealthy plantation owner. The house was also the site of Dr. McIlhenny’s death in 1858.

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mirlitons, or vegetable pears, a regional delicacy, are kept in a pantry. Although the Shadows has been restored to the period 1834-64, the summer house built in the 1920's has been retained; Tish points out that it's impossible to reproduce the garden exactly as it was since the oaks Mrs. Weeks planted now tower above the house.

By the time I had made the full circuit (about 45 minutes) and had gone to the room used for the sale of books and souvenirs and records of Cajun music, Tish was gearing up for a visit by a group of pupils in the morning.

Another Sort of Feast

I would have been happy to have kept on eating shrimp and crawfish forever, but for dinner my hosts wanted me to sample Cajun food. From a grocery store we bought hot boudin (boo-dahn), an inexpensive spicy sausage of rice and pork livers that is steamed before eating. We also had stuffed mirlitons, which I had asked about. These had a distinctive green taste and the combination was excellent with wine, although my hosts said beer would have been just as good.

In the morning I went to see Tish marshal her guides for the pupils, whose yellow and black school bus from Lafayette had pulled up out front. I watched as she bent to question and respond to the children. They had studied the Shadows in school and were on their toes. Looking at their faces, black and white, as they heard about the blacks and whites who had put their lives into building such a place, gave me a lump in the throat. Tish's problem was less sentimental—she was really expending the last shreds of her voice; I waved farewell and started for New Orleans.

Returning, I took a southerly route, following the Teche to Franklin and then over to Morgan City, a boomtown of shipyards on the Lower Atchafalaya River where today it's oil rigs, not ships. It was here, surrounded by engineers and construction crew members, their hard hats set on chairs in a roadside restaurant called Chez Marcheaux, that I finally got enough shrimp. The waitress and I discussed my supposedly exhausted appetite and she advised the shrimp platter for $5. Everything that has been said about the revelations of traveling among strangers is true: I demurred about the size of the portion—it was a nine-inch oval platter heaped with tender boiled shrimp—but I peeled (with fresh shrimp it's easily done with the fingers) and ate every bite as well as all the fresh French bread in a plastic basket. It went down easily with a 50-cent can of Dixie beer, and many evenings since I have wished that $15 would fetch as much good food as $5 did that day.