James Dorman

This is the forest primeval, but where are the hearts that breathe it

Louisa's 'Cajuns':
French Acadians of The South

The question was posed by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Where were the Acadians? He then answered the question in his epic Tale of Acadie. The story he told was based in history, although poetic licence enabled Longfellow to shape his tale to the demands of dramatic narrative, the tale is in its primary contours essentially true. Evangeline (or her real-life prototype) was an Acadian, of course, but the story of her people continues long beyond the conclusion of her ill-defined search for her lost lover. It is the story of a group of people, French-speaking Catholics, farmers, fishermen, hunters, essentially a peasant folk whose forebears had arrived originally from the west-central French provinces to colonize 'Acadia' - now Nova Scotia - as early as 1606. By 1650 the initial groups of settlers, augmented by the arrival of new colonists and by natural increase, had dispersed broadly throughout the waterways of the Minas Basin. An independent and self-sufficient people, they sought their subsistence and developed their patterns of life relatively unhampered by French colonial officialdom based at Port Royal (Annapolis Royal) and at Louisbourg on Cape Breton. Military and political realities did, however, occasionally impinge on Acadian isolation. As a result of European contention for New World empire, Acadia was chronically beset by struggle between and among the French, the English (and the Anglo-Americans of New England), and the local Acadian-Indian population, who resented interference with the generally good trade relations they maintained with the Acadians. The result was nearly inevitable: a continuing shift in European overtures as one or the other colonial power assumed political control. Such was the case, at least, until 1713 when, by the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht, the British won control of 'neutrality' over the North American continent in particular, were among the dominant themes of the century. As such, it was certain the Acadians would find their ill-defined 'neutrality' ever more difficult to maintain. The fact was then, we were French-speaking Catholics as a British colony of great strategic significance, located as it was between British Newfoundland and French Quebec. Suspicion in the part of British officials was chronic, especially the suspicion that the real location of the Acadians was to the Roman Church, their own kinship groups, and the French Crown (in that order), despite the oath of allegiance extracted by the British Crown.

By the outbreak of the Seven Years War (in America, the 'French and Indian War') in 1754, the suspicions grew apace. When it was determined that some Acadians had还算ually violated the neutrality agreement by bearing arms against the British at Louisbourg, it seemed that action would have to be taken to put into effect a policy that had been determined by bearing arms against the British. As Nova Scotia, relocating them in other

In 1755, the ranking British official in Nova Scotia, General William Lawrence, acting Royal Governor of the province, it was this officer who shunted in January to exile all the Acadians. The exile was in fact carried out with an efficiency bordering on the ruthless. People were herded onto the waiting ships with little or no prior notice. Families were occasionally separated, along with the affiliated. Indeed, the last great majority of the French Acadian population, perhaps 10,000 in all, were shipped away and dispersed broadly throughout the American colonies (and ultimately to France and the French West Indies as well) in what came in Acadie lore to be called the Grand Dénouement. From Massachusetts to Georgia, groups of Acadians began to arrive by ship in the colonial capitals. Normally they met with hostility and contempt, a measure of the fear and loathing that Anglo-Americans felt for French-speaking Catholics. For, it should be noted, they began arriving in the early stages of a devastating war between England and France, a war fought in part in the wilderness of Acadia. The Acadians simply bear the brunt of the Francophones rampant at the time and in the place of their arrival. As a result, they were normally shunted off into a miserable poverty.

In the period after the Grand Dénouement, a phenomenon called the Acadian Exile occurred, or, in some cases, banished altogether or consigned to the status of prisoners of war - 'French Neutrals' indeed and shipped off first to France and ultimately to Canada, where they were with a persuasive neglect. It was thus the fate of the Acadians here to be dispersed widely throughout the British Dominions. It is of course understandable that they would have to group together in their exile. They shared a common past and a collective historical ordeal. They also shared kinship ties, a language, religion, customs, a folk heritage; in brief,
Early Academic settlements in Louisiana. (Right) Elders Acadia woman from Nina Snow.

then, groups of Acadians came to be bound together as kinship groups in isolated areas along the Mississippi River and the 'bayous', the sluggish inland streams that abound in south-central Louisiana. Seeking to join their kinsfolk, the newcomers quickly produced a pattern of Academic settlement: small communities of farmers and fishermen somewhat similar to those of old Acadia began to emerge. It was in one of these communities, now the town of St. Martinville, Louisiana, that the prototype of Longfellow's Evangeline sought her still-wandering Gabriel. Also, she missed him there, but a shrine still marks the point of her landing on the banks of the Bayou Teche.

As the process of Academic settlement continued, however, simultaneous circumstances played a powerful part in the emergence of the Academic immigrants as a distinctive American ethnic group. Most notable among these factors was the arrival of numbers of Anglo-Americans, attracted to Spanish Louisiana by the promise of land and by the myraid waterways that provided access to world markets for their trade goods. As 'Les Acadiens' appeared on the scene, they often sought land in the region occupied by Academic settlers; land that could be purchased for consolidation into large plantation units for the production of staple crops, especially indigo, later by the early nineteenth century, sugar. The Acadia inhabitants of the region were normally located on navigable water-ways, often chose to sell out and move further into the west and the interior of the south Louisiana region. They still preferred isolation, both from the Creole population in the new towns they considered haughty and arrogant) and now the Acadia themselves, they believed to be greedy and aggressive - and also of English origin, a fact that rendered them even more odd to Creole tastes. The result was a major shift in the Academic immigrant population from their first land purchases. The old relative isolation of the interior streams and on the prairie land further to the west. There they would engage another cluster of Academic settlement communities.

Not all of the Academic groups, of course, made this retreat from foreign encroachment. A majority held on to their old lands, perhaps even augmenting them by further land acquisition and thus joining into large-scale production. Not all of the Academic groups were determined to maintain their own individualistic, self-contained, traditional ways and their own sense of group identity. It was this group that became Cajuns.

The term derives from the French Acadie, in local parlance usually pronounced Ca-jun. The American pronunciation has been generally pronounced French, patoisized the pronunciation of the Acadian, rendering it C-a-jun. The word was thus American in origin, as were the ethnic qualities that Americans generally associated with the Cajuns: they were, ascriptive, poor and unambitious, illiterate and unlearned, superstitious, crude; a folk dominated by primitive customs, beliefs, practices. And though the Cajuns themselves did not accept this essentially negative view of their ways, they did accept that they were different and distinctive, concluding that their ways were, in fact, better ways. They were thus separated from their nearest neighbours by mutually antagonistic cultural attitudes as well as by different life-styles.

The very word 'Cajun' came to mark the separation of the groups: to function as an ethnic boundary marker between the increasingly dominant Anglo-Americans (and those who shared their values) and the minority Cajuns' in the interior reaches of their south Louisiana domain. An element of class division, then, powerfully influenced the advent of the ethnic Cajuns. The ultimate measure of this division came with the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861. The Cajun population generally wanted no part of that conflict. They chose to avoid it altogether or, if conscripted, to desert or to join bands of 'jayhawkers' raiding the supply lines of Union and Confederate armies alike, to the horror of their 'Central Acadian' kinsfolk, who supported the Confederacy militarily and financially.

Following the Civil War, the Cajun people confronted the problems of the new post-war social order. Once again they had to adjust to circumstances not of their own making. With the abolition of slavery in America, the black freedmen emerged as a large, landless proletariat, competing for subsistence with poor whites, normally as small farmers in some form of tenant farming arrangement, or as trappers or fishermen. The Cajuns - now some 35,000 in number - were often among the first to exploit the resources of the region who found their lives more difficult than before. Their response was by this time predictable; they found solace and strength in the group, maintaining their isolation and their kinship ties; maintaining too their own ways - their language, religion, customs.

By the 1880s, however, the relative isolation of their settlements had begun to be eroded. The railway connection between New Orleans and New Iberia (the major urban centres of the Gulf Coast region), was complete by 1889, and the new southern route of the New Orleans, Tyler and Alexandria, the heart of Cajun country. The railway attracted numbers of new farmers and became a transcontinental route in particular, who now sought their fortunes in central Louisiana. As the tracks sprang up along the tracks, the Cajuns were thus drawn into new relationships with an American population, even in the very centre of the 'French Triangle'.

At the turn of the century oil was discovered in the region, and with it yet another wave of invasion that was also tended to displace the Cajuns as crude, illiterate, as Cajun ethnicity was thus reinforced both by new social movement, and by their own essentially primitive customs, beliefs, practices (whom the Cajuns terms 'Cajun'), 'Red Necks'- or more idiomatically, 'Bayou' (referring to the part of the anatomy). When, in an effort to 'Americanize' French Louisiana, the Cajun culture was abolished French language instruction, and schools and local school authorities followed the example of the speaking of French at school, Cajun Cajun culture was further threatened. Not only their language, but their very culture - their music,
their folk beliefs and practices—came to be viewed by outsiders (and sometimes by the Cajuns themselves, especially the younger generation) as inferior, primitive, rustic, quaint but essentially backward and unenlightened.

Over time, the fact of modernisation further eroded the base of Cajun ethnicity. The development and dissemination of new information and communication media—radio, telephones, improved postal services—meant that even in relative isolation the family was beginning to know more and more of the outside world, and to fall to the influences of its ways. Moreover, the two world wars of the twentieth century saw young Cajun soldiers leave home to become part of a larger and very different social order. By the beginning of the 1950s, the truly isolated, Cajun family was a rarity. The majority of the population had some degree acculturated to the norms of the modern world.

As a case in point, Cajun French-speaking families began to use English within the family, even refusing to teach their children French at all. They knew that speaking the old language could only result in the formation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (COODOF), which provided an institutional framework for the movement.

Yet the revitalisation phenomenon continues in the land of Evangeline, and apparently has even grown stronger in some respects. The establishment of an active Center for Acadian Folklore at the University of Western Louisiana (the 'Université des Acadiens,' as the school letterhead asserts) has provided impetus to the folk aspects of the revival movement. The annual 'Festivals Acadiens,' featuring Cajun music, cuisine, and crafts, attract thousands of visitors each autumn and tourists flock to the region to join in the celebration. There is, moreover, an observably different attitude towards things Cajun prevailing among the remaining ethnic population—especially the younger, more modern-minded Cajuns—than that which was characteristic of the Cajuns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Cajuns, a self-consciously unadulterated, even earthy and egalitarian. The ethnic revival, then, manifests an element of aestheticism which renders a united programme difficult to sustain.

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