North meets south
Louisiana combines cultures

BY CAROL RUST
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Louisiana is like two different countries.
Anyone who hails from anywhere north of Alexandria is regarded as a “Yankee” by anyone south of there.
The rolling red dirt hills and towering pines of North Louisiana contrast greatly with the flatlands of South Louisiana, thick with low undergrowth and dissected by meandering fingers of water.
And the cultures are just as different.
In the north, predominantly Scotch-Irish and English stock attend mostly Protestant churches that sometimes seem to dot every corner in small, conservative towns. In many North Louisiana cities, the sale of alcohol is forbidden.
In South Louisiana, many adults grew up being told it was a mortal sin to ever enter anything but a Catholic church. Many are descendent from the French who settled on the Louisiana coast once the British exiled them from Nova Scotia in the 1600s. Spanish, Irish and black descendants are also ethnic brush strokes of the South Louisiana picture.
You can buy beer at just about any corner store in the south. There’s even a chain of drive-through daiquiri stands in South Louisiana, where a general partying spirit contracts with North Louisiana’s early-to-bed, early-to-rise prudish stereotype.
North Louisianans speak with a sort of East Texas twang. Heavy Cajun accents flavor the English in South Louisiana, where it is just as ordinary to hear them speaking Cajun French.
Lacherer pas la potat — literally “don’t drop the potato” — is Cajun for a North Louisiana version of “Keep on trucking.”
The two cultures have co-existed — mostly peacefully — but with many exaggerated perceptions or outright misconceptions.
In 1988, Carola Ann Andrepton of Opelousas, in the southern part of the state, got the idea for a cultural exchange program between the two parts of the state, mainly from her family’s participation in an international student exchange program.
They had been a host family for foreign students for the past five years.
“It started out as a joke,” she said.
“We were talking about the state like two different countries, and then we started thinking it might not be such a bad idea for the two cultures to get to know each other.”
In November of 1988, the first exchange occurred between Ruston to the north and Opelousas.
Twenty high school students from each town “changed places” for a week. They applied through their schools, and they were graded on their “visit” by their daily journals, the pictures they took and how well they presented it to their classmates when they returned.
The project was a success, and the Louisiana Office of Tourism took over the project on a larger scale. The first large exchange started three weeks ago and will continue through the spring semester. It involves about 30 towns, matched according to similar city populations.
Some of the matches include Alexandria and Kenner, outside of New Orleans, Monroe and Lake Charles, and Winnsboro to the north and Gonzales to the south.
Andrepton said the first batch of students all commented on the food. Ruston’s fare was too bland for the students from southern Louisiana.
“They have gumbo, but you can see right through it,” one student said.
And South Louisiana’s cuisine caused some students to sputter from the spiciness.
Andrepton recalls the southern students first visit to a Baptist church.
“You could see them looking around for the kneelers,” Andrepton said and chuckled. “And when we got out, one student said, ‘Can you believe that priest was wearing a suit?’”