'Cajun Night' artist is family man who does his illustrations at night

The man who hitched alligators to Santa's sleigh has given Christmas a hillbilly twist.

By MABEL C. SIMMONS
Book editor

Artists James Rice was studying his profession before he could read or write.
He says he has his mother's word for it that he knew which end of a pencil was which while he was little more than a babe in arms, and that he was drawing pictures with the proper end even then.

Rice turned up in New Orleans the other day with his picture-book, "Hillbilly Night Afore Christmas" under his arm.

He had come to talk things over with his publisher at Pelican Press in Gretna, to visit his son in Slidell, and to let everyone see what a suitable children's Christmas gift his recent book can be.

"Hillbilly Night Afore Christmas" under his arm.

Rice has 400,000 books in print now, he says, and the one most read by children all over North America and in Europe too is "Cajun Night."

Rice has written the texts as well as drawn the illustrations for numerous other books. A keen observer of landscapes and architecture, he has a knack for playing up those things that most characterize the scenes of the stories they illustrate.

Rice first was recognized as a portrait of the bayou-side Cajun scene. He later worked the oil-field and off-shore backgrounds into his books, both from the Louisiana and the Texas points of view.
He formerly lived in Louisiana but moved to Texas a few years ago where he now is at home in Hico.

The Gaston stories, which he both wrote and illustrated, began with "Gaston the Green-Nosed Alligator" (1976) and have developed into a series of whimsical nature adventure tales.

Rice says works on his books at night: "I get my best ideas after 10 p.m."

By day, he says, he is a musician: "If you pluck it or beat it, I don't play it. Otherwise I play everything," he says. He has often played with groups, both amateur and professional, and now he plays with an ensemble every Tuesday night (before he starts writing) at a home for the elderly.

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The first book he wrote — and that was before his daughter Patti, now 14, and his son Jason, now almost 12, were born — was "Lyn and the Fuzzy," a fanciful tale about a little boy who planted a dandelion seed that came up a living — and fuzzy — monster.

His publisher accepted it but wanted to publish another book that Rice was working on first — with a Cajun theme. So Rice put the completed "Lyn and Fuzzy" aside. By the time the publisher was ready to print it several years later, both Patti and Jason had arrived, so papa Rice merely revised the book, adding two more pages and "working" Patti and Jason into the pictures.

The book Rice is working on now, to be published in May or June, 1985, will be called "Gaston Goes to Nashville and Becomes a Country Singer."

"So," Rice says with a grin, "we will be eating at least until September."