The Cajuns: Still

With a style as spicy as boudin, a popular sausage, the Cajuns are
HE WAS A BEARDED, stocky, hearty Cajun papa, treating three generations of his family to a pizza after the Krewe of Hyacinthians parade on Sunday afternoon in Houma, Louisiana. They were planning a party for Mardi Gras, just two days away. And while I couldn't catch every French-accented word, one admonition came through firm and clear.

"I don' wanna run out of beer," he said, "an' I don' wanna run out of crawfish."

With a chuckle I realized that after six weeks in south Louisiana, I'd found him at last. Here was the Cajun as the world imagines him to be: the easygoing, hard-drinking, seafood-loving denizen of the bayous, brimming with joie de vivre and always ready for a good time. And what was he eating? Pepperoni.

Along the course of those six weeks I'd had a lot of my expectations about Cajun country turned upside down. I'd met Cajun lawyers, bankers, professors, and captains of industry; I'd been welcomed into the homes of crawfish farmers and cattlemen, rice planters and musicians. Except for an occasional French-language sign, the legendary Evangeline country looked pretty much like the rest of the Gulf coast south. There were no fiddlers in the streets, no pirogues on the bayous. It took me a while to be persuaded that it was more than just a tourist come-on, that a proud Cajun subculture does indeed still thrive in the eddies of the American mainstream.

Pepperoni yesterday, crawfish tomorrow: The genial Cajuns may be the country's prime
The world where earth and sea mingle has sustained generations of Cajuns with waterfowl, seafood, and pelts. Now this customary hunting and fishing ground is fast eroding. Navigation canals big enough for a barge and access canals to oil rigs,
such as these that slice the marshes of Timbalier Bay, bring saltwater ever farther inland along Louisiana’s Gulf coast. Levees built to control the Mississippi River and its tributaries prevent the flooding that once renewed wetlands with silt.
"When I started painting 22 years ago, there was no such thing as Cajun art," says George Rodrigue. Collected on both sides of the Atlantic, his work recaptures the vitality of now faded folkways. In "Aioli Dinner" his grandfather meets friends for a meal that features the French garlic mayonnaise of the title.

example of an ethnic group that celebrates its own distinctiveness while remaining comfortably a part of 20th-century America.

Cajuns are the descendants of 17th-century French colonists who settled along the shores of Canada’s Bay of Fundy in a region they called Acadie. Expelled by the British in a series of deportations beginning in 1755, more than 2,500 Acadians eventually found refuge in Louisiana. As the years passed, their neighbors softened the edges of the French "Acadien" into "Cadien" and finally "Cajun." Many neighbors, including those of German and Spanish descent, were gradually absorbed by intermarriage into the Cajun milieu.

Today’s Cajun country is a roughly triangular section of south Louisiana reaching from the outskirts of New Orleans to the Sabine River. It laps over the Texas line for a few miles past Port Arthur — "Cajun Lapland," as Louisianans sometimes say to needle their Lone Star relatives. Despite popular belief, New Orleans is not Cajun country. Nor is Baton Rouge. Nor is a great deal else that seems French in Louisiana, since a goodly number of French Creoles—a term that was originally used to describe people born of European parents in the New World—settled in the territory both before and after Cajuns arrived.

In 1971 the Louisiana Legislature designated 22 of the state’s 64 civil parishes as Acadiana, remarking on the "strong French Acadian cultural aspects of said region." Mostly rural, and with a population that is by no means entirely Cajun, Acadiana centers around two unofficial capitals, Lafayette in the west and Houma in the east. Despite the dogged misconception that most Cajuns live in swamps, Acadiana actually divides into four geographic areas: the bayou country, consisting of fertile levee lands slowly built up by natural processes along the Mississippi River and lesser waterways; the coastal marshes, rich with oil and gas deposits but eroding now at an alarming rate; the inland swamps like the great soggy wilderness of the Atchafalaya Basin, virtually uninhabited; and the prairies of southwest Louisiana, an agricultural breadbasket of rice, cattle, and soybeans.

In one of those unexpected twists that keep life interesting, something about the Cajuns captured people’s imagination a decade or more ago. Paul Prudhomme, a celebrated chef from Opelousas, was in part responsible. In 1980 he created an instant classic called blackened redfish and spread the gospel of Louisiana cooking from New York to San Francisco. Cajun cuisine, with its exotic ingredients and its reputation for high-octane seasoning, spawned legions of imitators.

The energetic fiddle-and-accordion songs like "Jolie Blonde" and "The Lake Arthur Stomp" set toes a-tapping far beyond the prairies of Acadiana. Cajun musicians found enthusiastic new audiences. Songwriter D. L. Menard, in real life a chairmaker in the tiny town of Erath, traveled to 42 states and 21 countries, from Thailand to Egypt, playing his

Griffin Smith, Jr., a writer and lawyer in Little Rock, Arkansas, last wrote "Small-Town America" in the February 1989 National Geographic. Photographer William Albert Allard is a frequent contributor to the magazine.

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The Cajuns: Still Loving Life

EARLY in the 17th century the Cajuns' pioneer ancestors founded a French colony called Acadia in what is now the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. While the Acadians prospered on the fertile farmland, France and Britain vied for control of the region. Britain won sovereignty in 1713; four decades later, at the start of the French and Indian War, security-conscious officials deported many Acadians.

Scattered along Atlantic and Caribbean shores (above), some refugees found a new home in south Louisiana. As their settlements spread across bayous and prairies (left), neighbors shortened the French “Acadian” to “Cajen” then “Cajun.” Today 22 parishes, or counties, with a Cajun flavor make up a triangular region known as Acadia.
guitar and singing his modern-day Cajun hit "The Back Door." For the 1988 Reagan-Gorbachev summit conference in Moscow, chef John Folse was invited to bring Cajun cooking to Mother Russia. He set up a temporary restaurant that required 16 tons of imported food, and artist George Rodrigue's hauntingly evocative paintings of turn-of-the-century Cajun life went on display there.

By the end of the decade you could walk down Main Street in Canada's Moncton, New Brunswick, and have a choice of Cajun jambalaya or spicy shrimp at not one but two restaurants. You could hear a French Cajun band play the old Louisiana standards in Paris and kick up your heels at the monthly Cajun dance in London's Cecil Sharp House. Or you could just stay home and wash down your Amazin' Cajun potato chips (from Dallas) with Original Cajun Flavored Beer (from Milwaukee).

ALL THIS COMMOTION has been fun. But Cajun purists like Barry Jean Ancelet fret that it may have gotten out of hand, giving the world an exaggerated caricature of the people he holds in affectionate regard. "There's good news and bad news" were the first words I heard from this
lanky, droopy-mustached folklorist at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, who probably knows more about today's Cajuns than anyone else. "The good news," he dead-panned, "is that Cajun is hot. The bad news is that Cajun is hot."

Like most Cajuns, Ancelet winces at implications that Acadiana is full of fire-eating swamp dwellers who communicate in archaic French and have not yet joined the modern world. "It's ludicrous," he says. "In the movies Cajuns have replaced hillbillies as a people among whom heroes can get into exotic trouble." Businessmen trying to restore the area's oil-depressed economy worry that the tales of Cajun carousing will prompt prospective industries to dismiss south Louisiana.

For the rest of us, the only bad news may be that Cajun chic has left the best part of an amazing tale untold. That tale is the story not only of who the Cajuns are but also of who they were—and how they got here. Today's zesty south Louisianans are just one chapter in a nearly four-century saga of heartbreak, struggle, and perseverance against all odds. Many Cajuns know the story, as do their modern-day kin in Canada, New England, and France, because each of them has in some way lived it.

*The Cajuns: Still Loving Life*
Doing his part to get the crop to consumers’ kitchens, eight-year-old Hank Menard levels freshly harvested rice in a truck ready to take it to the mill. If seasoning is the soul of Cajun cooking, then rice is its body, adding substance as it soaks up the
pungent sauces. In September the Menards flood some of the fields and through the winter trap the crawfish that feed on the rice stubble. Cajuns say that these crustaceans, which are sometimes called mudbugs, taste far better than shrimp.
"It's a place where people just let go and have a good time," says a dance hall customer. Every town worth a two-step has one. There's Snook's in Ville Platte, Lakeview Club in Eunice, Fontenot's (now Richard's) in Basile. Fred's in Mamou.

Set aside for a moment what you remember of Evangeline, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's sentimental account of an Acadian maiden's separation from her fiancé, Gabriel, during the exile of 1755, because Longfellow's characters and many of his important details are now known to be mere fiction.

Early in the 17th century, settlers from western France came to what is now Nova Scotia's Annapolis Basin, a fertile land of orchards sheltered from winter winds by mountains to the north. They spread into rich land in the Minas Basin and along the Isthmus of Chignecto. Fishermen and farmers, they always hewed close to shore, constructing elaborate dikes to claim new cropland from the Bay of Fundy's 50-foot tides.

Their new homeland of Acadie lay squarely athwart the rivalry between France and England for mastery of North America. The Acadians declared neutrality, but the English, who had won control over their lands in 1713, demanded loyalty. When, in June 1755, the English overran France's Fort Beauséjour and captured some 300 Acadian conscripts inside, the fate of Acadie was sealed.

The English claimed treachery. Within months Acadians of the Minas Basin were being boarded onto British ships bound for the American colonies, their lands and homes in flames. Others either capitulated or fled into the forests. For years the roundup continued. Of an estimated 15,000 Acadians, 10,000 were captured, deported, or detained before the war between France and England ended in 1763.

Those who came to the American colonies faced wartime hostility and grew quickly destitute. Virginia's allotment of 1,500 Acadians was actually refused entry and shipped to England as war prisoners. At least seven hundred Acadians drowned when their overloaded ships sank in a storm on the way to Europe. The odyssey went on for years. In one chronicler's words, "the wretched exiles cropped up like driftwood along the littoral of the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea." They made their way to France, Quebec, the French West Indies, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, French Guiana, and the Falkland Islands. By 1765 a few hundred had settled in Louisiana.

More than 2,500 impoverished Acadians congregated in French maritime ports, living

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is famous for its Saturday morning crowds (above). By 9:15 a.m., when Don Thibodeaux and his Playboys strike up the music and the live radio broadcast begins, the drinkers and dancers are shoulder to shoulder.

on a dole from the French crown. For most, Louisiana was what destiny had in store. A plan was devised to reunite them with their kinsmen. Spain had gained control of Louisiana in 1762, and the king needed good Catholic settlers to bolster his dominion against English-speaking neighbors. He supported the plan, and from May to October of 1785, seven ships set sail from France, bringing their cargo of about 1,600 Acadians to Louisiana.

It has been called the largest single transatlantic migration up to that time, the end of a 30-year exile. Today, in hundreds of Cajun homes whose families are descended from those long-buffed souls, someone can unfold a dusty, fan-shaped family tree and tell you not only the names of their ancestors but also the name of the very ship they took so long ago.

INSTINCTIVELY TRYING TO REBUILD their former life, the Acadians retreated into isolation along the bayous and in the open prairies west of the Atchafalaya Basin. In the passionless language of social scientists, many of them "resisted acculturation" well into the 20th century. "Before the Civil War," historian Michael Forêt told me, "Cajuns were not as poor as people think. But the war caused a depression in the South that lasted until the 1940s." And on the social ladder Cajuns were near the bottom rung. Many led a subsistence existence, and many still remember it: Paul Prudhomme, sitting in the test kitchen of his renowned New Orleans restaurant, described how his own family "had bartered butter and eggs for other things."

When Louisiana began to require school attendance in 1916, most Cajuns were illiterate. Their indifference to education lingered: "If you went to college," said Weldon Granger, a successful attorney who now lives in Houston, "people thought you were lazy." As late as the 1930s observers commented on Cajuns' "rude shacks" and their "chronic aversion to wearing shoes."

By 1950 three major things had changed all that: the oil and gas demand, which brought jobs; new roads, which ended rural isolation; and World War II, which thrust thousands of Cajun youths into the outside world.

When Weldon Granger invited me to attend his family's Christmas reunion in Erath, I was
Work hard, play hard, is the rule in Cajun country. At Mardi Gras in Mamou costumed revelers step lively to coax donations of gumbo ingredients from the farmers they entertain. The evening’s public dance winds up at midnight, the start of Lent.

In New Iberia cars assemble for the Louisiana Sugar Cane Festival parade, the last chance for fun before the harvest.
prepared for a good time. I found it, certainly, but I also found a microcosm of many Cajuns' long upward climb from lower class to success.

When Weldon's father, Willis, joined the Navy in 1943, he spoke not a word of English; 20 years later he had 11 children, nine of whom went to college, several to graduate school.

For years Willis Granger and his boys were sharecroppers on nearby lands of the Thibodeauxs and Broussards, farming with a mule. His wife, Edith, born an Hebert, cooked and washed without running water. In the off-season Willis eked out a living trapping nutria and muskrat. "When Dad got a job in the salt mines on Jefferson Island," Weldon recalled, "it was a real step up. We could live in town."

Today, basking in his children's achievements (all have done well, and three sons are internationally known physiologists), the 68-year-old Willis runs a horse farm squarely across the road from where he used to sharecrop. With a white fence and a modern home, it looks like a bit of Bluegrass Kentucky. Weldon bought the tiny four-room house in Erath and moved it to the farm, a memento of the family's past. Willis has a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud now, a whim of his lawyer son ("He uses it to go buy groceries," Weldon grins). But he still prefers his pickup.

At Christmas a hundred or so Grangers and Heberts came together at Erath's American Legion Hall from as far away as Venezuela to eat boudin (sausage) and dance to a Cajun band. Grandmothers en banc watched the doings; the men discussed the merits of the latest deer hunt; the children all behaved; and (surprise!) a well-stuffed Cajun Santa arrived to lead the two-step at the head of a conga line.

At his plush law office, Weldon Granger tells me why a painting of a man and boy picking cotton hangs in the place of honor behind his desk. "That's my dad and me," he says. "I had an artist take an old black-and-white photo and make it into a portrait. When I get a little cocky, I look back at that. I'm very appreciative of all that's happened."

That blend of simplicity and success typifies many Cajuns today. I never met a Cajun who put on airs. Composer-saxophonist Richard Landry, whose radiant "Mass for Pentecost Sunday" was commissioned for the opening of the Menil Collection, a sophisticated museum in Houston, wrote the work in his family's high-ceilinged old house in Cecilia, not far from where he once picked cotton for a dollar a day and played the saxophone in Otis Redding's band. Baseball pitcher Ron Guidry, one of the best the game has seen, was hanging a cypress cabinet in the kitchen of his new party barn on a 75-acre rural tract near Lafayette when I caught up with him. "It's a place for dances," he said—and for his bass boat. "This whole area is close, tight knit," the ex-Yankee told me, explaining why in retirement he came home to Cajun country. "I can walk ten square miles around here and know everybody."

With all the attention given to the Cajuns'
"There must have been 300 boats tied up for two miles on each side of the bayou," remembers Herman Broussard, one of the shrimpers who took shelter in Delcambre as a storm approached last October.

The state’s most valuable seafood, shrimp powers the economy of many coastal towns. "When you have a good season, you know about
it because things move along real good. When the season's bad, everybody feels it," says seafood handler Ron Collins. At his Leeville dock, workers hustle shrimp off boats and into refrigerated trucks (left).

In master chef Paul Prudhomme's New Orleans restaurant, cooks transform fresh shrimp and other staples of Cajun home cooking into haute cuisine (right).
Their food, with its cayenne pepper, roux, and mingled aromatic flavors of onion, celery, and bell pepper, owes more to the Indians, the Spanish, and the slave cooks of the ante-bellum South than to the salted, oily foods of old Acadie. Rice is a Cajun staple, and well-loved ingredients like crawfish and alligator play a part in Louisiana as nowhere else. Only in the one-pot cooking style do the Cajuns share a culinary inheritance with the Acadians—but a gumbo or a jambalaya is a far different experience than the Acadian chicken-and-dumpling stew called fricot. Today's favorite Acadian dishes are poutine (a doughball containing salt pork) and rappie pie (a casserole of grated potatoes with the starch pressed out). Both are bland enough to put a Cajun palate fast asleep.

Classic Cajun music owes its heart and soul to the fiddle and to the diatonic accordion, something old Acadie never saw. Introduced to Acadia by the Germans about 1850, it reshaped the old Cajun fiddle dance tunes, eliminating those that could not fit its limited range. For the most part, only waltzes and two-steps survived. Today's distinctive Cajun sound has few real counterparts in Canada.

The status of the French language is a fighting matter in New Brunswick, which in 1969 became officially bilingual. In Louisiana a smattering of French lingers, but the generation now in its 40s is the last to have grown up speaking it at home. With some exceptions—such as the French-language news program read by a Cajun accordionist every night on Lafayette's community TV channel—French is no more than a grace note in Cajun life, although efforts have begun to preserve it.

The Cajuns, one Louisianan told me, "have a sense of wrong without an attitude of militancy." In New Brunswick the bold, single-starred Acadian flag flies proudly in front of homes and buildings, at times higher than the Canadian flag; in Louisiana an attractive flag of Acadiana was designed some years ago, but it has not become the same sort of political symbol. In a perfect illustration of Cajun moderation, a Lafayette lawyer named Warren Perrin recently petitioned the Queen of England to bring an official end to the Acadian exile by admitting that it was a violation of English and international law. "I wanted to do this," he told me, "so when my children ask why their ancestors came here, I don't have to say they were 'criminals.' It's never too late to correct a wrong."

The deepest difference between today's Cajuns and Acadians may be one of temperament. When the Cajuns celebrate who they are, they mean who they have become; when the Acadians celebrate who they are, they mean who they have been. One honors change, the other endurance. When I asked Acadians what qualities distinguished them from their English-speaking neighbors, they always mentioned the closeness of their family life, just as Cajuns did, but unlike Cajuns they never mentioned joie de vivre.

Joie de vivre: It may be the richest nugget wisdom at the core of Cajun being—keeping in mind Cajun author Trent Angers's observation that joie de vivre is "not a state of euphoria that can be induced by the consumption of alcohol," but rather a "way of looking at things...a condition of the mind and of the heart."

A millionaire before 40, industrialist Dailey J. Berard credits his success to Cajun ingenuity. "I grew up in a big old swamp and spoke only French," he recalls. World-traveled as a contractor for the oil industry, he has returned to New Iberia roots. "Once this place gets in your blood, you can never get it out."

The Cajuns: Still Loving Life
Rolled up for storage, skins from Wayne Sagrera's alligator farm in Abbeville (left) may fetch as much as $35 a foot. Meat to be sold for human consumption in this country and abroad shares the cooler with the bodies of two nuisance alligators removed from the wild. Cajun hunters who brought home gator for the stewpot were ahead of their time. "It's very healthy meat, high protein, low fat," says Sagrera.
tradition, Broussard and his neighbors work together on the fall roundup. “One thing about down here, you can always call one of your neighbors,” says another rancher. “He’ll drop whatever he’s doing and come give you a hand.”
A brash label and a bayou gator tattooed on the upper arm of crawfisherman Chad Boudreaux proclaim him one hundred percent proud of his heritage. From good-old-boy boatmen in the Atchafalaya Basin (left) to business executives in the city, Cajuns everywhere celebrate their culture with high spirits.

"We have a saying: 'Lâche pas la patate—Don't let go of the potato,' " he says. "It means 'Hang in there.' What Cajuns have is our mystique, our outlook on life. Cajuns don't let things destroy them. Not even our odyssey could destroy us."

A few days later the great Cajun accordionist Marc Savoy echoed those words as we sat on his back porch. "What's Cajun?" he mused. "It's the spirit, the attitude of whatever happens, it's for the best. It's the outlook about everything. How do you see the things around you...how do you work...how do you play...how do you sin? It's not about speaking French. It's what you got right here under your chest. That's what's Cajun."

But will it endure in mainstream America, where the Cajuns so clearly have decided to be? Michael Foret, the historian, thought so.

"I think there'll always be something about the Cajuns that will be at least marginally different from people in Ohio or Utah or Michigan. And it works both ways: Maybe the 'Americans' are catching some of our joie de vivre. I think we've had some permanent influence on American ways of thinking."

From what I had seen, each of them was right. Life has loved the Cajuns back, not least because they willed it so. And perhaps decades from now, when the French language is barely a memory in south Louisiana, when the lilting Cajun music is kept in a cupboard for the delight of connoisseurs, when the gumbo and the crawfish and the jambalaya have given way to fast foods we cannot now even imagine, then there will still remain, like a lingering smile of grace from the bayous and the prairies, that disposition of the mind and heart.