The name game

Nicknames abound in local culture

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There was a time when it seemed that every child in Acadiana had a Nononc and a Ti-Tante, an aunt and uncle whose given names remained a mystery.

Even if the child knew them by another name, it was more than likely a nickname.

Although the custom has faded somewhat, in past generations, it was common practice in the Cajun and Creole cultures to bestow nicknames on children. As adults, oftentimes, people were better known by their nicknames than by their real names.

Sometimes, people's given names were revealed only in obituaries.

"When somebody died, we'd say, 'Look — his real name!' " said Cynthia Duhon, executive secretary and administrator of the Acadiana Legislative Delegation Office. "We knew them as Ti-Boy, Ti-Girl. You just took that in stride."

"Pi-Boy was a common nickname in Acadiana. Ti, sometimes written as T, short for petit, or little, could also be placed before the person's given name," said Carl Brasseaux, director of UL Lafayette's Center for Cultural and Eco Tourism.

"If you look at the muster rolls for French garrisons in the 18th century," he said, "virtually every enlisted man had a nickname that either represented a person's geographical point of origin or some physical trait or personal trait or quirk."

The practice was made necessary by French naming customs, Brasseaux said.

"It was common to repeat a given name throughout a family. If there were three daughters, one might have been Marie Jeanne, another Marie Louise and the other Marie Isabelle. And in many cases, all three might have gone by 'Marie' at some point. You can see why nicknames would have played an important role in naming people."

That particular naming practice survives today in some instances.

Brenda Burley on the Airport Commission — my younger sister — she was Boo."

A French custom

The local practice of conferring nicknames dates back to 17th and 18th century France, according to Carl Brasseaux, director of UL Lafayette's Center for Cultural and Eco Tourism.

That particular naming practice survives today in some instances. Opelousas folklorist Rebecca Henry, known in her family as Ti-Ti — was given the name Rebecca Jane; her sisters are named Mary Jane and Emma Jane.

Nicknames abound in Henry's family. Her father's name was Robert, but he was known as Pete. Her granddaughter, Nia, is known as Toofie and her grandson, Adrien, is better known in the family as Noonie Bug.

Sometimes, in the days before Social Security numbers, a nickname was the only thing that differentiated one person from another. "I was doing work on the Acadian immigrant population," Brasseaux said, "and in St. James Parish alone, there were 18 individuals by the name of Pierre Landry. In that sort of situation, they had to have some means of distinguishing."

The practice of using nicknames has remained so prevalent in the area, even into the 20th century, Brasseaux said, that in the 1960s, the Breaux Bridge telephone directory listed the nicknames of local subscribers.

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A contradiction in terms

Some nicknames are unique to the culture of the area. The nickname, 'Neg,' taken from 'negre,' the French word for Negro, has been conferred on a white men and African-American men for decades. Although the term in other contexts carries derogatory connotations, it has been used traditionally as a term of affection.

"Anyone not from this area would certainly call it (derogatory)," said Mamie Joyce Broussard McCloud, a Lafayette native and retired professor of French, "but it is a name of endearment."

"Young boys were also called that way in both races." It was often used by wives as a pet name for their husbands, as well, McCloud said. "I don't think people gave it as a negative," Henry said, "they used it as a term of love and affection."

An inside joke

Some nicknames are a variation on the given name, as in the case of Neetsie Livaudais David, who was born Anita. Some, like her husband, Zeen, have nicknames that are harder to peg. "His name is Dewitt and they would call him 'Dee' in school," she said.

"But it didn't end there. His group of friends had made up a secret language in which certain endings were affixed to words. One of them was 'aazeeen.' He ended up being 'Deezeeen,'" David recalled. "Then, they dropped the 'Dee' and called him 'Zeenie,' then Zeen."

Her father and all his siblings had nicknames. David said, "There was Honey Boy, Tot, Doodle Bug, Mookie, Sun and Tiny."

Sometimes, a person might be known by what seems to be a given name, but it turns out to be a nickname that is totally unrelated to the person's official name. "Aunt Alice, we called her Aunt Sue," David said. "My brother's name is Kenneth Francis, but Daddy always called him Joey."

"They're all inside jokes," Carl Brasseaux said. "If you're not a member of that circle, the meaning is lost on you."