

The Cajuns in South Louisiana : Their Environments and Economic, Social and Cultural Lives

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In south Louisiana, there are an ethnic group named Cajun, the descendants of Acadians, French peasantry, in origin. Due to their refusal to pledge the loyalty oath to new sovereign, English king, in 1755, the Acadians were compelled to leave their homeland, Acadia, that is Nova Scotia now, though they had settled there for 100 years. After much suffering in New England, France and French Antilles, by 1785 many of them resettled in south Louisiana. They turned to Cajuns in a few generations with their adaptation to new environment, absorbed some elements from the Indians, neighboring Germans who had settled there before, and the blacks brought in as slaves. As many Americans flowed in around them, since 1920s, their lives were Americanized in general, and the process is going on still further. In this paper, the writer aims to make their old ways of living cajunized clear, and show some of their social and cultural traits unchanged.

South Louisiana is the deltaic plain of Mississippi on the whole, but its alluvial area is confined to the lower part, between the Red River confluence and Bayou Teche. There are many basins with swamps or marshes (more coastal), divided by natural levees developed along rivers and bayous. Acadians occupied the natural levees, protectable only for floods, for their homesteads, first at Acadian Coast —the left bank of Mississippi 40-50 kilometers upstream of New Orleans, then banks of up- and midcourse of Bayou Teche and Bayou Laforche, built houses with garden and barn at the top of them, opened farms on their backward slopes wide and gentle. As natural levees are made of flood deposits, the coarser materials remain on the top, so that the soils of slopes, from the top to the bottom, vary from

gravel, silt, and mud in turn. Accordingly crops of the farms changed by soils, corn and sweet potato in sand, sugar cane in fine sand, and rice in silt for example. They raised cows and horses in meadows, pigs and poultry in the garden. Swamps offered cypress for pillar, mast, plank, and board, many fish, wild games, and birds for fishing, hunting, and trapping. All of the crops mentioned above, except corn, with okura, pepper and tomato etc. were strange items for them, and they learned the ways cultivating them from the neighbors. Houses were built on the stilts about 1 meter high, instead of on the ground as in Acadia, and have galleries, devices borrowed from French Creoles living in New Orleans, at the front and back of them. They poled *pirogues*, dugout canoes learned from the Indian, and rowed flat-bottomed *bateauxes*, created by themselves, in shallow swamps. These were examples of their adaptation to deltaic conditions of wet and hot, proving their cajunization. By 1900, they began to overflow to the prairie, uplifted old delta to the west, forms low upland now. They showed another example of their adaptation to different environment, living by depending more on cattle raising. In those days their cajunization may be completed.

Over a long time, they were so isolated in the vast plain that they had to depend on themselves only. Friends and relatives lived in next door and they worked together in farming, fishing and hunting, or to build one's house or boat by *coup de main*, exchange their labors each other without pay. There were no formal institutions such as public office, police and school in their society, and they regulated themselves with traditional customs of the extended family. Social gatherings such as *boucherie* and *bals de maison* stood on family group nearby.

Many traditional deeds, social and cultural, peculiar to them have been lost in modern times, but solid ties of family and relatives, once based on the land, Catholic faith, and French, old fashioned and corrupted, are their cultural traits that have remained unchanged today.