

PEOPLE OF SOUTH LOUISIANA

Cajun Louisiana is named for a people, but more accurately today, the name denotes a lifestyle. The cruel expulsion of the Acadians, French who settled present day Nova Scotia and formerly known as Acadia, took place in 1755. Over the subsequent 20 years they made their way to Louisiana.

The English boats, on which the Acadians were loaded, went to many parts of the globe. The Acadians were unloaded in the American colonies, England, France and as far as New Zealand. With Acadian families separated, penniless and landless, they found very little success or acceptance in the communities to which they were deported.

The longing to recreate their former success in the New World led to the migration to the Louisiana colony which was French and Catholic. During the next 20 years, the Louisiana colony was given to Spain which did not dampen the movement to the colony. The Spanish King also commissioned seven ships which brought Acadian settlers to Louisiana to bolster the population and settlement against the threat of English westward colonization of North America.

The original French settlers had settled most of the best land near New Orleans. The same Acadians settled on the higher land above New Orleans with the previous German settlers who were brought to Louisiana when France owned the colony. Many others settled in southwest Louisiana and along the many bayous of South Louisiana.

Many resumed farming as they had in Acadia (Nova Scotia) while others learned to live off the tremendous bounty of wildlife, fish and fur. The descendants of these original Acadian settlers became known as Cajuns.

The Native-American population taught the Cajuns the utility of building with mud, moss and palmettos. But both the Cajuns and the Native Americans had isolated communities and did not form the close bonds that the Acadians and Mic Macs had in Canada.

The pre-Cajun German settlers were assimilated into the Cajun culture and added the accordion, along with some food traditions. Both additions are basic ingredients of the Cajun culture.

African-Americans were slaves to the French and Spanish plantations. Most Cajun farms did not have a slave component. African-American population increased along the bayous in the first half of the 1800's when American farmers from Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi territories bought the high land along the bayous and brought slaves for a plantation operation. The Cajuns moved to more isolated areas closer to the productive marshes and wetlands.

Croatians settled in Louisiana and helped to develop the oyster industry. Chinese brought the technique of drying shrimp. This was the only way to preserve shrimp until commercial ice production allowed the transport of shrimp from the wetland communities to New Orleans. Philippines also settled the area and worked primarily in the Shrimping industry. Major migration of the Italians into New Orleans with a portion of the population migration into the wetlands added to the cultural mix of coastal Louisiana.

Another group who settled Louisiana were the Islanos, migrates from the Canary Islands. Their communities paralleled and some mixed with the Cajun communities.

Alligators, oysters, shrimp, finfish and furs allowed the Cajuns to live and profit from the natural production of Louisiana wetlands. From swamps to the marshes to the barrier islands, communities developed to exploit the natural resources of this extremely productive coastal zone.

Communities moved southward as people were drawn to the coast. Although drawn to the coast, hurricanes periodically hit, but periodic hurricane impacts changed development of communities. The hurricane of 1893 killed 2,000 people in coastal Louisiana, completely destroying some fishing hamlets and causing the relocation of some of the larger communities such as Chenier Caminada.

The mixture of the cultures and the tremendous biologic productivity has led to what we call today's Cajun Culture. Its music, its cuisine, its joie de vie is a reflection of the productivity of coastal Louisiana. The communities, despite the onslaught of legal, social, and economic pressure to conform to the Anglo Saxon Protestant American model, continued to maintain their French language and European based customs. In some communities the French language was the primary language until the 1960's – 70's.

World War II along with mass media accomplished what laws and social pressure could not accomplish in replacing French with English.

Another great change in Cajun Louisiana was the discovery of oil in Louisiana. A large influx of English speaking people from Texas, Oklahoma, North Louisiana and Mississippi came to meet the demands of the oil industry. These people brought their culture and an industry which provided a steady paycheck.

Many locals worked for the oil companies. More importantly when oil went offshore it was Cajun fishermen who had the boats to allow offshore drilling.

As oil went further offshore, Cajun fishermen started supply boat companies. The shipyards grew from building wooden hull boats to constructing and maintaining large steel oil support vessels. This work has led to government military contracts to build Coast Guard patrol vessels to ice breaker ships. Grandsons of fishermen own supply boat companies which support work in places like the Persian Gulf, the North Sea and Nigeria.

Although the generation of French language speaker is now over 50, the end of seven generations of passing on the language in the United States, there are still distinctive traits still alive in the Cajun culture. As long as there are productive wetlands and people living off those resources, segments of the Cajun Culture will continue to be recognizable.

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