

HOPKINSVILLE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY

*Cajun or Creole: the Fascinating People and
Culture of French Louisiana.*

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I apologize. My paper is two days late. We are now in the season of lent, but two days ago, the State of Louisiana was engulfed with Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras Day, the climax of the carnival season. If you were present for the occasion, you may have seen everything from carnival parades, plenty of drinking, and maybe even some debauchery. Unfortunately, I suspect that many of you were like me on Tuesday—your celebration of Mardi Gras consisted of nothing at all or a “Shrove Tuesday” pancake supper. Tonight’s inquiry is broader than a single day feast: who are these people that make up this unique and perhaps mysterious culture of French Louisiana? Tonight’s paper is entitled: *Cajun or Creole: the Fascinating People and Culture of French Louisiana*. So, *Laissez les bons temps rouler* (lay-say lay bon ton roo-lay) and let’s dig in.

Some wily history professor once told me that no study of any culture is complete without a history lesson. I must apologize because the history of our subject is incomplete as French Louisiana is a melting pot of many different ethnic groups. For the sake of brevity, I’m going to focus on a summary of two— the Acadians and the Creole.

The Spanish began exploring the Louisiana territory as early as 1528, but the settlement of modern Louisiana began with the arrival of the French colonists in the mid seventeenth Century. Most notably, Robert Cavelier de La Salle, a French explorer, named the region “Louisiana” in honor of King Louis the XIV. It is said that on the bank near the mouth of the Mississippi River, de La Salle claimed all the lands drained by the great river as the territory of France. La Salle believed he was claiming a vast area, but it is doubtful he understood this included over half the continental United States. In the years that followed, several trading posts and settlements began to appear along the Mississippi tributaries and distributaries. Notably, Natchitoches was formed in 1714 as Louisiana’s oldest European permanent settlement to

establish a trading post with the Spanish and to prevent further Spanish expansion. Eight years later in 1722, France declared New Orleans as the capital of civil and military authority. From this point until the United States negotiated the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the Louisiana territory was under various periods of both French and Spanish control.

Defining what is Creole is not exactly clear. The term has not—and still continues to be—inconsistently applied. The descendants of the first settlers in Louisiana—those that were born in the colony—were called Creoles as a distinction from the French immigrants. Perhaps most accurately, a Creole is “any person of non-American ancestry, whether African or European, who was born in the Americas.” Creoles spoke mostly French and were overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Aside from people, Creole simply referred to something that was “local, home-grown, not imported.” In time, the term was used with a positive connotation. A Creole horse was hardier and adapted to the Louisiana heat and humidity. Likewise, Creole tomatoes were more likely fresh and vine-ripened. This process of “creolization” reflected the improvisation and adaptation as the territory was being settled.

Today, the most common use of the term Creole is in reference to the Louisiana Creoles of color. This population includes the multiracial descendants of the French colonists, Africans and others. As a comparison, a French Creole usually refers to a “white” decedent of the French colonists, but more on that in a minute. In the early settlement of Louisiana, a three-tiered society evolved that was similar to what was found in many Caribbean islands. The classes included the white Creoles, the Creoles of color and the African slaves. In the middle social class, the Creoles of color were able to achieve elite status in Louisiana in the early 19th century. Some of the Creoles of color were also slaveholders. Under the law they held the same rights and privileges as the so-called “white” Creoles. Given their unique position, the Louisiana

Creoles of color could have easily been absorbed. This made them a self-conscious group, who historically has been endogamous. During the reconstruction period, the Creoles of color increasingly were caught in the middle of the South's binary system of racial classification. Some of the confusion was caused by the "white" Creoles, who became increasingly hostile in believing that "Creole" exclusively applied to them. But, this kind of sentiment once led Louisiana governor Huey P. Long to remark that you could feed all the "pure white people in New Orleans with a cup of beans and a half a cup of rice, and still have food left over!"

Unlike Louisiana's Creole population, the Cajun population is much easier to define. The "Acadians," later shortened to "Cadians" and finally "Cajuns," are the descendants of working class French immigrants. In 1632, most of this class had departed from an area within a 20 mile radius of the town of Loundun, France primarily to escape religious warfare and famine. The Acadians did not originally settle in Louisiana, but rather the Maritime provinces including Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the northern tip of Maine. The Acadians were industrious, frugal, and bounded by an intricate extended family. They also shared a deep and resounding attachment to the land they farmed. By adapting their farming knowledge to the tidal marshlands along the Bay of Fundy, the Acadians grew from a few hundred to several thousand by the time the Brits took control of Acadia when it became a colony in 1713. The Acadians would continue to live in Nova Scotia under the rule of the British Crown for another 40 years.

The Acadians' destiny with the bayou country was cemented by their stubbornness, which is not entirely surprising. There is an old saying that: "You can tell a Cajun a mile away, but you can't tell him a damn thing up close." Following a treaty with France in 1745, the British demanded the Acadians take an oath of allegiance or be expelled in three months. The British didn't follow through when they realized the Acadians were equally resistant to French

pressure so the Acadians were not initially deported. However, several years later 300 Acadians were discovered inside a French fort after it was seized by the British. With that discovery, these 12,500 French-speaking Catholics who would not pledge their allegiance to Britain were perceived as too big a threat. So, between 1755-1764 the majority of the Acadian population was deported. One third of the population died from diseases and starvation. Some made it to other colonies in the United States. But for our study, between 1764-1800 waves of Acadian deportees arrived in southern Louisiana through San Dominique, now in present-day Haiti.

The Acadians first established river settlements known as “strip villages.” These were located along the Mississippi River (the Acadian Coast), Bayou Laforche, and Bayoe Teche. If you have seen the movie *Southern Comfort*, the Cajun village featured at the end of the movie is a “strip village” near Bayou Laforche. The land divisions were long-lots that were narrow on the river but extended far back into the swamp. Even looking at present day aerial photos, the long-lots are easily depicted. Each family was given a narrow plot on the river that varied between three to six “arpents of face” (a French measurement system). The home was constructed near the road that followed the natural levee along the bayou. In the early days, these Acadians had a means to travel the waterways in their pirogues or larger boats. In contrast, in the prairies of western Arcadia, the long-lot was not as prevalent due to the open range. As a result of the lack of waterways and horrible roads, the prairie settlements were much more isolated. Prior to the 1930s these prairie Cajun families would only travel a few times per year.

Regardless of the location, Cajun communities lacked formal social institutions. Rather the informal communal efforts formed the social fabric. Examples include events like *boucheries* (boo-che-ree) (hog killings), *coups de main* (coo-de-mon) (communal efforts to preform hard tasks like crop harvest), *bals de maison* (bel-de-mee-som) (an all-night house

dance), or *veillées* (vey-yeé) (after dinner coffee and conversation). Indeed it was these *villées* where many of the old Cajun stories and jokes were told. Speaking of Cajun stories, here is one I came across that reveals how a Cajun feels about his hunting spots:

An old Cajun trapper was running his traps one day when he spotted the sheriff hunting ducks on his “property.” “Property” in this context is a term of art. Under Cajun folk law, a fisherman or hunter obtains exclusive hunting rights by his continued use of public land; others can pass through, provided they do not exploit the resources. Anyway, the trapper quickly advised the sheriff that he was “trespassing.” When the sheriff made no effort to leave, the old man punched him in the face. Of course, the case was taken to court, but the charges were dropped, and the sheriff was never seen around the old trapper’s “property” again.

As Cajun social life evolved, the house dance (*bel de masion*) was replaced by local dance halls, called a *Fais do-do* (fay do-do). This is the French expression for “go to sleep,” which is used in the context of what you might say to a young child—like “beddy- bye.” Now if you wonder how such child-talk was used to describe a late night dance party, here is one person’s account: “A young mother would go to the cry room give her baby a nipple and say, ‘Fais do-do.’ She’d want the baby to go to sleep fast, ‘cause she’s worried about her husband dancing with somebody else out there.”

Especially in a time without any authority, it became common place for there to be several fights at a Cajun dance party. One Cajun musician explains: the men fought “because they liked it. There was no television, no radio in those days. That was their only fun. Those were the days when men were men and women loved them for it.”

Enough about fisticuffs, and I say to you *bon appétit*. In case you are wondering, Louisiana Creole and Cajun cuisine is my inspiration for this paper. I became acquainted with

this food at a Cajun/Creole joint that opened in Lexington while I was a UK student. The restaurant is named “Bourbon and Toulouse”— for the intersection of streets of the same name in the French Quarter. When I moved home to Hopkinsville, the lack of local options led me to try to recreate some of my favorites: jambalaya, shrimp creole, crawfish étouffee, red beans and rice, and of course the staple: Louisiana gumbo.

The general public tends to consider Cajun and Creole cuisine the same. It is true that many of the basic dishes are similar, but they are distinct. Perhaps the best way to distinguish the two is that Cajun is “country-cooking” whereas Creole cuisine is considered upper brow or “city-cooking.” This is a reflection of the differences between the two societies. Cajuns lived in rural areas and made the most of the wild game and other foods available. The Creole had access to exotic ingredients coming into one of the world’s busiest river ports. In addition, in upper-class Creole homes, most meals were prepared by slave help who had time to prepare elaborate meals. Another simple way to distinguish is that pure Cajun cuisine will not include tomatoes. For example, a Cajun jambalaya is usually based with tasso— a Cajun’s version of country ham— along with whatever else is available. The browned meats are scraped from the bottom of the pot to color the rice dark brown. In contrast, a Creole jambalaya features diced tomatoes—sometimes called red jambalaya. If you need a local example, Harper House has a jambalaya on the menu that is definitively a Creole-based version.

If you ask a Louisiana cook the first step in a recipe, the answer will almost always be “first you make your roux.” Roux is a mixture of flour and fat, generally in equal parts by weight. The flour is slowly cooked to the desired color depending on the dish. As with dishes from northern France, melted butter can be used as the foundational fat, but for most Cajun and Creole dishes, cooking roux with oil or lard is preferred. Colors range from blond, peanut butter,

rust red, dark chocolate to black. The darker the roux the more flavor, but the less it serves as a thickening agent. The roux must be constantly stirred especially during the final stages to avoid burning. Roux cannot be burned or the batch must be thrown away. I have learned that in making a roux, the best thing to do is intentionally burn a batch to get over the fear. Making a good roux over medium heat takes between 20 minutes to an hour. Chef Paul Prudhomme, well known for his gumbo made with a “black roux,” refers to roux as Cajun napalm. This is easily understood by anyone who has had the misfortune of having some of the hot roux contact your skin.

If you ask a Louisiana Chef the second step in a recipe, the answer will most likely be “add your vegetables to the roux.” Any Louisiana chef will understand that “vegetables” specifically means the “Holy Trinity” of diced onion, celery, and green bell pepper. The process of adding the trinity to the roux helps stop the roux from continuing to cook, while the hot roux caramelizes the vegetables to create a sweeter flavor. At that point, you have the base of what forms many dishes. For example, by adding diced tomatoes and simmering the end result is shrimp creole or chicken sauce piquant; reducing a lighter roux with stock yields étouffée; and chicken or seafood stock is added to dark red or black roux to make gumbo.

Speaking of gumbo— it is without a doubt Louisiana’s most famous dish. Gumbo is often used as a metaphor for French Louisiana. Like the people, gumbo is a literal melting pot. Gumbo has clear African origins as it was initially prepared as a stew made with okra, which is native to western Africa. French influence is found in the roux base and with the use of aromatic vegetables. The spicy cayenne seasoning is attributed to Spanish and Afro-Caribbean people. Many gumbos are finished with filé powder, a spicy herb of ground sassafras leaves attributed to the Choctaw Indians. Filé also serves as a thickening agent. German immigrants, who settled

the “German coast” along the Mississippi River some forty miles upstream from New Orleans, are represented in the gumbo pot by their knowledge of the art of making sausage. Naming the different varieties bears resemblance to Bubba recounting the ways to cook shrimp in Forest Gump: gumbo thickened with roux, gumbo made without a roux but with okra, seafood gumbo, oyster gumbo, gumbo z’herbes, chicken and Andouille gumbo, and the list goes on. Traditionally, Gumbo is often served to guests at the end of a dance party or to cap off the end of Mardi Gras.

It would be careless of me to not include some discussion of Mardi Gras. Translated, Mardi Gras is French for Fat Tuesday, but Mardi Gras in the broadest sense includes all of the Carnival season celebrations between Epiphany and the start of Lent. Mardi Gras is celebrated worldwide, but of course in the United States is almost synonymous with French Louisiana.

Most of you are probably familiar with some of the New Orleans traditions. Mardi Gras was celebrated publicly in New Orleans as early as the 1730s. Within a decade the Governor of Louisiana established eloquent society balls, which became the model for modern festivities. In 1856, a group of young men from Mobile formed the Miskick Krewe of Comus, which was the first secret society to host a formal Mardi Gras parade. Later many other krewes formed in the pattern of Comus. Each of the krewes vigorously conceals the identity of their membership. After the public parade, the krewes host a ball for its members and their guests. Carnival legend has it that admittance to the Mistick Krewe's ball was so highly sought that a group of uninvited ladies once formed a flying wedge and attempted to force their way into the Comus ball. In other years, uninvited persons have tried to beg, buy, or steal invitations to the Comus ball. Even afterward, the Comus ball invitations are prized by collectors, as they are both exceptionally beautiful and rare.

The most recognized parade and krewe is the Rex parade. Rex was founded in 1872 by a group of New Orleans businessmen in order to put on a spectacle for a visiting Grand Duke from Russia. The identity of “Rex”— Latin for King— is revealed on the Lundi Gras. Rex reigns over Mardi Gras as the “King of Carnival.” To be named as Rex is an extremely prestigious honor usually bestowed upon someone involved in philanthropy. (In case you are wondering, Jack Laborde was named as this year’s Rex. He has been chairman of the Rex parade for over a decade). Along with Rex, a Queen of Carnival is chosen from the debutants of the current Carnival season. After the parade, the Rex ball is held, typically in the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium. On the other half of the Auditorium, Mistick Krewe of Comus holds its ball. It is a tradition that Comus extends an invitation to Rex and his queen to join him and his consort at the Comus ball. This is called the “Meeting of the Courts.” When the monarchs have all made their exits, the Captain of Comus literally closes the curtain on the Carnival season, just in time for the arrival of Lent.

Unlike the sophistication of the New Orleans Mardi Gras tradition, the rural custom is to celebrate with a Courir (ku-hear) de Mardi Gras. This is basically a Cajun poker run on horses. On Mardi Gras morning, the riders dressed in traditional costumes and masks, mount their horses and start down country roads to the designated meeting point. Once assembled, the *capitaine*, who is appointed for life by his predecessor, has absolute reign over the proceeding. His reign is a necessity as the *capitaine* prevents the ritual madness from turning into lawlessness. In addition, some of the rules of the celebration are preventative measures such as: no rider shall advance beyond the *capitaine*; no rider shall enter private property without permission of the *capitaine*; and no rider shall consume liquor except as distributed by the *capitaine*. Once the procession is in order, the riders depart singing the Mardi Gras song, and approach the first

house. The *capatine* then halts the group and rides alone with a raised white flag to seek the owner's permission to enter. If granted, the *capitaine* drops the flag, and the riders charge the homestead as if taking it by assault. The riders then tease the household with antics of song and dance, sometimes snatching up the lady of the house and her daughters to dance in the crowd. Eventually, the man of the house brings out an offering for Mardi Gras, which is a contribution to the communal gumbo to be shared later in the day. A number of gifts are appropriate, but the most sought is a live chicken. The chicken is thrown into the air and a barn yard chase ensues to the amusement of the participants and spectators. After the chicken is caught, the *capitaine* blows the horn and it's off to the next house.

This goes on throughout the day, maybe 20-30 times. Of course there are plenty of breaks for libations, so the party can work themselves into a state of ritual inebriation. By afternoon, the survivors straighten up for the parade back into town waving to the crowd of spectators along the way. Following the parade, the ceremonial gumbo is served. It is tradition that the riders always eat first. After all of the day's events, the riders go home to rest before returning for a masked ball. As with the New Orleans krewes, the ball always ends abruptly at midnight.

Like all good Mardi Gras balls, it's time to close the curtain on this one. In researching this paper, I felt that I only began to scratch the surface of the distinct and fascinating cultures of French Louisiana. Any singular section could have easily warranted an entire paper. I'd like to share two thoughts I have taken away from this paper. First, the Cajuns and Creoles—like most of us—are just a product of their heritage and trying to make the best of their situation. Second, our American society would be well served to try to start seeing people and things like Louisiana

gumbo, a little bit of this and a little of that; too often, we still see life in terms of just black and white. Thank you all for your time, and very literally, please forgive my French.