

**“We’re Coonasses Here” The Relationship of Class and
Persecution in Reclaiming Cajun Identity from 1960-1990**

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Spring 2011

General Honors

White ethnic revivals in the United States hold a complicated sociopolitical place, and the Cajuns of Louisiana are no exception to this. Cajuns are connoisseurs of ethnic identification. Any Cajun will be happy to tell you who they are, who their ancestors were, and who a Cajun is. Making those stories match across a broad community of Cajuns, however, is somewhat complicated. By 1960, Cajuns were re-discovering themselves, and noticing their differences, rather than their similarities. Many diverse groups knew themselves to be “Cajun”, and the inconsistencies in this self-identification led to a fracturing of the Cajun re-identification. Their sense of self-identity, and their ethnic history makes them an interesting case in the larger discussion of white ethnic identity in America. Cajuns were a part of the broader white ethnic movement that occurred after the civil rights movement, but their position among white groups was a unique one. Cajuns were never Cajun-Americans, but reclaimed their heritage as simply “Cajuns”. What, however, constituted a Cajun? This was a question that many, in the search to reclaim Cajun identity in Louisiana, struggled with, because Cajuns often had more in common with people in their same class than with others who called themselves “Cajuns”. Because the debate around what constituted “Cajun” identity and heritage was so varied, in order to create a solid Cajun identity, leaders had to rely on a narrative of persecution in order to create a touchstone for Cajuns to rest their identity on. This narrative of persecution was essential because it allowed Cajuns to keep their multiplicity of identities, yet also assert their Cajun-ness. By saying that Cajuns were persecuted against, a laundry list of definitions for Cajun ethnicity was not necessary. The construction of Cajun identity was based on a few common experiences, such a persecution, and thus allowed a broad range of people to identify as Cajuns. However, the

construction of this identity happened during the 1960-1990 period, through a class struggle that first divided Cajuns, then allowed for a narrative of persecution to be constructed that changed the way they identified and brought them together. The issue of class must be raised in this, because the reason Cajuns could not agree on a conclusive identity was that two separate Cajun cultures and identities rose from two separate classes. This paper will explore the rise of those classes, the loss of other traditional Cajun lifestyles, and the construction of a narrative of persecution in order to bind all of them together.

Historiography

The history of the Cajuns was relatively limited until 1970, and represented Cajuns in stereotypical ways. Portrayed in a traveler's sketch as "...hallowed by the magic of Longfellow..."¹ or by national interest magazines as "simple" these anecdotes of Cajun life were far from deep, and instead reflected the bias against any French presence in Southern Louisiana. The Cajuns depicted in these texts were interchangeable with Acadians, but some distinction was made as to terminology. A traveler notes not to call them "Cajuns" because it is an insult, and remarks on the multi-ethnic Native American and white heritage of some of the people.² However, instead of being portrayed as a positive ethnic diversity, this imagery contributes to the image of Cajuns as dirty, swarthy peoples.

Alcee Fortier's "*The Acadians of Louisiana and Their Dialect*" is one of the first examples of positive Cajun historiography, sparking the tide of Cajun research that would

¹ Julian Ralph. *Dixie, or Southern Sketches* (Harper and Bros; 1895). 118

² *Ibid.* 118

be concerned with the language of Cajuns. Research during Fortier's time remained slim, as the study of ethnic movements in America was limited.

During the 1900s, few historical studies of the Cajuns were done. Most centered on evocative arguments centering on the romantic images of Cajuns as pastoral farmers or quaint, pure peoples. William Faulkner Rushton's *The Cajuns*, published in 1970, provides an excellent example of this genre. Rushton's imagery of the Cajuns starts in their occupations as trappers or farmers.³ Cajun home life is described in detail, as well as social mores.⁴ Interestingly, although Rushton gives the broad historical trajectory of the descent of Cajuns from Acadians, he does not associate all Cajuns with those pure Acadian families, but rather includes marginal communities of mixed racial heritage as part of the Cajun background.⁵ Ethnographic sketches, such as *Henderson, Louisiana* demonstrate an interest in Cajuns not as historical figures, but as they are, demonstrating with excellent detail the cultures surrounding Cajuns of 1960.

When a boom in the historiography of Cajuns would result in a mass of scholarly information about Cajuns in the 1980s, the historiography worked to solidify the narrative of persecution and create a Cajun common history. *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* by Shane K. Bernard depicts the story of Cajuns as a struggle against the overwhelming difficulties of existing in America, and the many aspects in which American culture whittled away at the Cajuns' own cultural insularity.⁶ Although Bernard's book demonstrates an excellent factual historiography of the Cajuns,

³ William Faulkner Rushton. *The Cajuns: From Acadiana to Louisiana* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Gireaux, 1977) 55

⁴ Ibid. 55

⁵ Ibid. 19

⁶ Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns : Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003)

his emphasis on the cohesive identity detracts from his argument, because he is unable to demonstrate Cajuns as a cohesive unit. Bernard addresses, for example, that Cajuns hardly experienced language persecution as a group, but does not address the variety of experiences, but focuses on the most detailed examples of Cajuns being discriminated against for speaking French.⁷ Bernard highlights the narrative of “Cajuns” by acknowledging the diversity of Cajun-ness, but only weaving his version of Cajun ethnic identity into the discussion of what Cajun identity is based on.

Even the most scholarly academic sources on Cajun identity are biased in their portrayal of Cajuns as a group. Carl Brasseaux, the premier historian of Cajuns based out of the University of Southwest Louisiana, wrote the seminal works on a Cajun historical narrative. *Acadian to Cajun: The Transformation of a People* and *The Founding of New Acadia* both detail the social, economic, and political history of the Acadian migration to Louisiana, and the Acadian experience up until around 1900. Brasseaux’s work, published after 1980, creates an archival look at Cajuns through colonial records, and represents the definitive work on the subject. By publishing this, though, Brasseaux does not allow for the broad definition of Cajun ethnic identity that is represented in the source material from 1960. Where Rushton and others define Cajuns as multi-ethnic, incorporating numerous white and black ethnic groups, Brasseaux specifically discusses the “confusion” of Cajun identity. He says that, because all people of low class speaking French were considered “Cajun”, they have come to be known as such, even though true Cajuns were the ones that could trace Acadian ancestry.⁸ By creating this distinction,

⁷ Ibid. 37-39

⁸ Carl A. Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia : The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765-1803* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 90

Brasseaux creates an unbroken historical heritage linking Acadian ancestry to contemporary Cajuns, but denies the people who know themselves to be Cajun the historical identity.

Most of the modern historiography follows Bernard and Brasseaux, creating a historical narrative for the Cajuns that accentuates their common experience. The discrepancies, however, lie in the lack of common experience, and the changing nature of that experience. *Blue Collar Bayou*, a 2005 snapshot of the statistics that identify Cajun country, shows that Cajuns were no longer the agrarian pastoral communities portrayed in literature, but were blue-collar oil workers concentrated in small communities. *Blue Collar Bayou* was the first to bring the idea of class into Cajun identity up in the literature. By demonstrating that Cajuns were not the pastoral farmers of Rushton's imagery, the authors of *Blue Collar Bayou* indicate that Cajuns, and the Cajun construction of identity, rely more on class than on a common culture. *Blue Collar Bayou: Louisiana Cajuns in the New Economy of Ethnicity* places the dialogue on Cajun ethnic identity in the larger context of ethnic identification. They also argue that the socioeconomic position of the Cajuns at the time the book was written plays an enormous part in the construction of Cajun identity in 2005, and the continued construction of that identity.⁹ This idea of socioeconomic construction of identity is one that will be demonstrated as essential to the Cajun Renaissance of 1960-1990, because the socioeconomic status of people who self-identified as Cajuns resulted in a fractured movement that was solidified only after much debate.

⁹ Jacques M. Henry and Carl L. Bankston, *Blue Collar Bayou : Louisiana Cajuns in the New Economy of Ethnicity* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002). 15

The goal of this paper, and the research presented in it, is to incorporate and appreciate the academic work that has gone into creating the history of the Cajuns, while at the same time using literature contemporary to the period from 1960-1990 that illustrates a critique of the secondary literature. Building on Henry and Bankston's idea of a socioeconomic class heritage, and how that dynamic affects the construction of ethnic identity, the historiography of the Cajuns and their movement during the 1960s becomes a story of class identity. As a result, some sources (mostly books written during the 1980s) double as both secondary and primary sources. Their presentation of facts about Cajun historiography is accepted, but their presentation of Cajun identity is different than what Cajuns knew themselves to be.

Terminology

Several important distinctions in terminology must be made in order to ascertain the true weight of what a narrative of persecution meant. "Cajun" is used to describe anyone who self-identifies as a Cajun. This paper argues that the actual definition of a Cajun identity is not solid; therefore, in order to discuss them in this paper, an inclusive identity of anyone who says they are a Cajun will be used. This will demonstrate the broad range of who calls themselves a Cajun, and shows that to impose a definition on Cajuns is part of the problem, and the reason Cajuns needed a narrative of persecution to collect around. A narrative of persecution is what developed over the course of the resurgence in ethnicity from 1960-1990. By being able to say "we were persecuted against" as a central tenet of Cajun ethnic ideology, all Cajuns, regardless of where modernity had placed them in relation to their ethnic heritage, were able to claim Cajunness. This narrative brought them into a new era of identification, as was necessary

because Cajuns had lost their traditional modes of identifying as Cajun. CODOFIL, an organization that I will discuss very often in this paper, stands for the Council of Development of French in Louisiana. Founded in 1968, this organization was responsible for implementing programs in Louisiana schools that would represent a significant player in creating the new culture of Cajunism. Finally, a cast of characters includes Jimmy Domengeaux, legislator and head of CODOFIL, Raymond “Lala” Lalonde, state legislator. Domengeaux was born in 1907 to a wealthy Louisiana family, descended from Acadian refugees who came to Louisiana in the early 1800s.¹⁰ Domengeaux’s ideas of Cajun ethnic purity, and the clean heritage he promoted as part of Cajun identity, would clash with the actuality of Cajun life. Raymond Lalonde was also of wealthy Acadian stock, and would introduce into the Louisiana state legislature a controversial bill about Cajun identity and rights. These people and organizations came to define the movement of Cajuns and their reconstruction of ethnic identity.

Expulsion from Acadia

The predecessors of Louisiana’s Cajuns, in a sense, were Acadian settlers in the French colonies of Canada. Although later not all people who identified as “Cajuns” would be of purely Acadian descent, it is true that there would be no Cajuns without the Acadians. The Acadians colonized Nova Scotia (which they knew as Acadia) around 1604, using the fertile sea region to settle into an agrarian lifestyle.¹¹ International politics disrupted this process, however, as by the mid 1700s Acadia was given from

¹⁰ Bernard. *The Cajuns*, 91

¹¹ Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia*. 5

France to England, a deal that ultimately resulted in British troops forcibly evicting Acadians from their homes.¹² British raids on Acadian settlements between 1755 and 1757 demonstrated that Acadians were no longer welcome in the home they had known for over 100 years.¹³ By 1764, there were almost no Acadians left in Canada. Successive waves of Acadian settlers attempted to make homes elsewhere in the world; the vast majority gained passage back to France, while others settled in Maryland and Pennsylvania, where they endured continuing persecution during an age of Francophobia and anti-Catholic discrimination.¹⁴ However, some Acadians eventually secured passage to Louisiana. Acadian settlers thrived in Southern Louisiana, as the amount of wildlife and proximity to the Gulf, as well as the copious amounts of arable land, gave them a solid basis to conduct the agrarian lifestyle they had come to cherish. These were the roots of Cajun life in America, which are pointed to (as will be demonstrated later) as the Cajun historic narrative. However, the coming century would change the development of the Cajun community, to include a much wider variety of people than just the Acadian migrants.

The Evolution of Cajun Life

From 1790-1860, Acadians developed a community in Louisiana that in many ways continued the community they had left, but this community was not unchanged, especially in economic terms. These transformations come to be crystallized after the Civil War. Although the vast majority of Acadians remained engaged in agriculture, a distinction began to develop between wealthy and non-wealthy Acadians. Acadians that

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. 25

¹⁴ Ibid. 36

emerged from the Civil War were no longer “Acadians” as a monolithic community but had been transformed into wealthy upper class members, or the lower class Cajuns. The process of becoming “Cajun” from “Acadian” is one that reflected a class division, which would carry on through the blue-collar Cajuns that existed in the 1960s.

The division between Acadians and Cajuns had its roots in the development of the economy of Louisiana through the 19th century. Over the course of time, some Acadian farmers became enormously successful businessmen and plantation owners, with plantations harvesting large amounts of sugar and rice.¹⁵ As was characteristic of plantations, these Acadians made huge profits, boosting both their economic and social place in the antebellum community. Both of these economic situations led to significantly higher incomes than other Acadians, who were still engaged in trapping, hunting, fishing, or subsistence agriculture in order to make a living.¹⁶ It was only a very small number of Acadians who were able to escape the lifestyle of subsistence agriculture, and most of the community remained invested in eking out a living on the margins of Louisiana’s harsh marshlands, but Acadians with means began to identify as a separate class from their less wealthy counterparts. In the antebellum years, wealthy Acadians strove to drop the label “Acadian” and replace it with the grander “Creole.”¹⁷ Creoles, meaning peoples of European descent born in the colony, represented a higher social class, with greater economic power and closer connection to Europe and colonial authority. This definition of Creole is different than the Creole of later years, meaning a person of mixed racial African and European heritage. Upwardly mobile Acadians aspired to be known as

¹⁵ Ibid. 36

¹⁶ Carl Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun : Transformation of a People, 1803-1877* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992). 150

¹⁷ Ibid. 105

“Creole” above a certain economic level. This often meant that slaveholding Acadians became “Creoles” or “Acadians”, whereas by the Civil War “Cajun” was being used as a negative way to describe French-speaking peoples of Southern Louisiana, regardless of their historical descent.¹⁸ Cajuns were depicted in American press as dirty, uneducated, rural, and lazy. In general, Cajuns were tied to subsistence agriculture, or traded fur and fish for a living. Thus, to be “Cajun” was to be poor, while to be “Acadian” or “Creole” was to be wealthy. This distinction would continue into the 1960s, when it would result in the rupture of the Cajun pride movement.

While living in Louisiana, rural Cajuns retained the language of their ancestors, the almost medieval French patois that had been spoken for generations. Cajun French is a language that linguists cherish for its diversity, complexity, and interesting mongrelization of French, Spanish, and English words. Well studied and documented, the Cajuns’ experience with their language is one that has assisted in shaping an idea that, because of the common bond endured by Cajuns and the persecution of their language, they have become stronger as a group. Multilingualism and the use of French have an important place in Louisiana history. As a port city, New Orleans accepted many immigrants from many different countries. As a result, New Orleans and the surrounding areas had a very different identity than other places, in which multilingual interaction was part of the fabric of daily life. As will be discussed later, this community of French speaking immigrants became essential to the people who would self-identify as Cajuns in the 1960s, because these immigrants represented their direct lineage, even if they knew themselves in 1960 to be Cajuns. French also represented an important part of daily life

¹⁸ Ibid. 105

in New Orleans, because French and Creoles had such a high status. The elite of New Orleans spoke French, creating a French society that was an important aspect of the city's identity. Rural peoples, relocated from France and Spain, also adhered to this language construction. Cajun French was part of this historical use of languages other than English.

As Acadians separated from Cajuns, it becomes clear in the historiography that Cajun life was based on several things. The first was a common economic bracket, where Cajuns were engaged in subsistence agriculture or small-scale fishing, farming, and trapping for occupations. This was a result of the economic divisions that had defined what a "Cajun" was through the Civil War. The second was geographic boundaries. The geography of Southern Louisiana is unlike anywhere else in the country, except for maybe the Florida Everglades, in that it is swampy, remote, and inaccessible by most conventional forms of transportation. This marshy delta area is where most Cajuns settled, and remained for the majority of their lives. The bayou country, the most central to Cajun settlement, remained extremely isolated until the 1950s, and most Cajuns did not have the means to purchase a mode of transportation other than a horse cart until that time as well. Close family units and sedentary communities defined Cajun life from settlement until the 20th century. Finally, the Cajun language was a major form of group cohesiveness. Without a formal schooling system, most Cajuns remained illiterate and speaking the French patois characteristic of their communities. But, the 20th century would bring inevitable change to the region, and these traditional markers of Cajun identity would be slowly changed, so that Cajuns were forced to create a new narrative of ethnic identity.

The Changes and Continuity in Cajun Identity

The Civil War devastated the agricultural South, and rural agrarian Cajuns were no exception to this rule.¹⁹ By the early 1920s, most low-income Cajuns were gravitating toward cities, and away from their ancestral homes. WWI, as well as discovery of oil in the early 1900s, concentrated well-paying jobs away from the homestead. As time progressed, the concentration of jobs in urban environments meant that more Cajuns worked outside of the family farming units, as a source of supplementary or primary income. WWII brought Cajuns into factories, a trend consistent with the broader American South, but had many cultural implications as well. Cajuns were interacting with their Anglo neighbors in a competitive way, and the natural response on both sides was some prejudice based on ignorance and fear, which resulted in the stereotyping of Cajuns that will be discussed later.

The biggest change to the Cajun landscape came with the discovery of oil in the Gulf of Mexico. Oil was discovered in 1901 and immediately affected the jobs of male Cajuns.²⁰ Drawn to the money and the convenience of the jobs, Cajun males spent months at a time on oil rigs, disrupting the gender roles and family lifestyle they had cherished for generations.²¹ Cajun workers became synonymous with oil rigs early, and eventually represented a larger proportion of workers than the well-established wealthy oilmen from Texas.²² In addition, blue collar Cajun young men saw more appeal in working on an oil rig than finishing high school, and often invested their time in oil fields instead of in schoolbooks, which continued the culture of illiteracy that was used in

¹⁹ Ibid. 68

²⁰ Jacques M. Henry and Carl L. Bankston, *Blue Collar Bayou*. 88

²¹ Ibid. 99

²² Bernard, *The Cajuns : Americanization of a People* . 37

stereotyping Cajuns.²³ Some Cajuns resented this change of lifestyle, which they felt was inescapable because of their economic situation.²⁴ In addition, oil work destroyed the bayous, and greatly reduced the amount of agrarian harvesting that Cajuns could draw from the land that they lived on. In the delicate bog of the marshland, the loss of natural floodways and water paths represented an ecological degradation that continues today, and affects the amount of wildlife that the Cajuns can gather, an occupation that they had traditionally depended on for survival, and represented an enormous part of their idea of cultural heritage.²⁵ Some Cajuns maintained aspects of both their traditional and modern lifestyles, but the environmental impact of the oil work soon cut down on the ability of Cajuns to harvest Louisiana's bayous for goods to sell.

These changes represented a fundamental difference in a traditional aspect in Cajun historical cultural identity. From the time of their settlement in Louisiana, Cajuns were not a highly mobile people, and the assertion is made best by Carl Brasseaux that "Most Cajuns live within 90 miles of their homes" which is an accurate description of the way many Cajuns until 1960 lived.²⁶ Although oil work had been present in the bayou for a long time, advancements in the later half of the 20th century proved to be more tremendous than the slow Cajun lifestyle could adapt to. Following trends that manifest across various agrarian minorities during the process of the 20th century, Cajuns demonstrated a loss of their traditional mode of life. Although generally avid sportsmen and women, as is true across many rural areas, Cajuns were engaged in the mechanical and oil jobs that threatened the bayous, and were making good money off of this

²³ Ibid. 38

²⁴ Ibid.37

²⁵ Ibid. 38

²⁶ Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia : The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765-1803*. 91

market.²⁷ The perception of Cajuns by outsiders (and by themselves) as a people of the bayou is a romanticized one, which constituted the fabric of a Cajun mindset more so than a Cajun reality. Cajuns were rooted in the image of agrarianism, regardless of the actuality. The ecological destruction of modern society, therefore, represented not only a physical loss of territory, but also more importantly a mental loss of lifestyle. Cajuns could, in theory, always return to the bayous if modern life didn't work out for them, and many still maintained fishing or hunting lines in the swamps.²⁸ This was typical of Cajuns, whereas Acadians cut their roots entirely from the bayous, and moved into towns and cities.

For Cajuns, the 1920s saw another key aspect of Americanization: the passing of a new state constitution, determining that schools would be taught in English. The 1921 Louisiana constitution provided that all public schools were taught in English,²⁹ an act that the Cajuns would eternally view as persecution and an attempt to eradicate their language and culture. French could no longer be taught to children in schools, but as many Cajun children barely attended school, their exposure to French still remained strong, as it came from the home.³⁰ This trend did mean, however, that any Cajun interacting with the official levels of Louisiana society had to learn or understand English, and Louisiana was no longer a bi-lingual state.

The transition to an English-only language base was accelerated by the schooling system, and enforced the speaking of English in the young generations of Cajun youth.

²⁷ Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*. 37

²⁸ Christopher Hallowell. *People of the Bayou: Cajun Life in Lost America*. (Louisiana: Pelican, 1979). 38

²⁹ Henry and Bankston, *Blue Collar Bayou : Louisiana Cajuns in the New Economy of Ethnicity*. 157

³⁰ Bernard, *The Cajuns : Americanization of a People*. 33

For many Cajun youth, speaking French simply wasn't as cool as speaking English.³¹ Cajuns underwent a language loss process that was gradual, as over time the use of English to interact with other members of Louisiana society became equally or more important to speaking French. Bilingualism, or speaking English with the charming Cajun patois that many Louisianans think of when they discover Cajun country, became an essential aspect of Cajun life from 1900-1960. In order to deal with business, day to day transactions, religion, education, media, Cajuns had to know English. Television, the great Americanizing apparatus, brought English to Cajun homes. Cajun children watched the same TV shows as other children, all presented (with rare exceptions) in English. As most of the older generation of Cajuns was fundamentally illiterate in 1950,³² the generation of Cajuns that grew up watching and absorbing media in English. The loss of French speakers represented another way in which the Cajuns could no longer define themselves.

World War II represented an important aspect of the Americanization process, by which Cajuns lost another tenet of their insular group identity. Not only did the situation of the war bring out the American side of all Cajuns, as patriotism did across the country, but it offered Cajuns a new opportunity to interact with the wider world outside Louisiana. 24,500 Cajuns were a part of the armed forces during WWII, and many more were affected by the war's incredible production boom at home.³³ Although the migration of peoples from their rural homes into the urban areas has already been described, the Cajuns migrated further than that during WWII. Cajun men GIs were sent

³¹ Ibid. 42

³² Ibid. 41

³³ Ibid. 8

all across the country, encountering for the first time Anglos in other areas of the country, who had little to no exposure to Cajuns. Naturally, as is bound to occur among insular groups becoming mainstream, both acceptance and persecution occurred. Cajuns were both adored for their funny ways, and delicious cooking, or derided for their accents and lack of grasp on the English language.³⁴ Some Cajuns used French for translation in Europe, where others had to lose their French and learn a more European tongue in order to properly conduct military operations.³⁵ The experience of Cajun GI's was incredibly mixed during the war, in a micro-reflection of the overall Cajun experience.

Through the Americanizing process, it became clear that although most Cajuns were no longer impoverished as their ancestors had been, they still occupied a lower-income economic niche. By 1960, most Cajuns were engaged in manual labor jobs, such as manufacturing jobs, hunting or fishing, mining, and oil jobs.³⁶ This class mentality of blue-collar communities defined Cajuns. For example, in her ethnography, Marjorie Esman discusses Henderson, Louisiana, and calls it "The town that crawfish built."³⁷ Esman's work demonstrates that Henderson, Louisiana is a thoroughly Cajun town, built on the crawfish manufacturing industry, which combines both agriculture and manufacturing. Cajuns had lost their language and traditional modes of living, but still not only considered themselves Cajuns, they continued to occupy the same socioeconomic niche that they had previously, and continued to identify as Cajuns.

Although the vast majority of Cajuns were better off in 1960 than in 1900, their economic

³⁴ Ibid.8

³⁵ Ibid. 9

³⁶ Henry and Bankston, *Blue Collar Bayou*, 92

³⁷ Marjorie R. Esman, *Henderson, Louisiana: Cultural Adaptation in a Cajun Community* (New York: CBS College Publishing, 1985). 17

situation was still not wealthy. It was this class definition, and this class identity, that most Cajuns would adhere to. The upcoming decades would reveal that although many people called themselves Cajuns, it was only a few people who could agree on what a Cajun was. However, in 1966, a professor of British national origin at Southwestern Louisiana University began to decry the loss of “French” culture in Louisiana. Raymond Spencer Rodgers published several articles in local newspapers, as well as in academic press, and mobilized upper class Acadians for the cause of a Cajun ethnic revival.³⁸ This mobilization slowly, but surely, brought about the re-defining of a Cajun, which would face major road bumps as it became clear that no definitive Cajun culture existed.

The Many Faces of Cajun Identity

A solid Cajun identity was hardly coalesced by the early 1960s, and would not be conclusive even through modern times. The aspects of Cajun identity contained many facets, and demonstrate that the culture of Cajuns depended just as much as their socioeconomic class as their historical past. First, Cajuns were rooted in an agrarian past. Ethnographic or cultural sketches of Cajun country, and communities in Cajun country, show this by discussing the significance of trapping and fishing for Cajuns.³⁹ Relying on trapping muskrat pelts and fishing, these Cajuns are unaware and uncaring of the modern world that threatens their boundaries. One such sketch, “People of the Bayou”, discusses how the mechanisms of modernity literally threaten everything about the Cajun way of life, by insisting that the environmental destruction caused by oil rigs and the growth of cities encroaches upon the delicate ecosystem by which the Cajuns make their living.⁴⁰

³⁸ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 89.

³⁹ Hallowell, *People of the Bayou* 38-39

⁴⁰ Ibid. 39

Although such destruction can hardly be denied, at the time of the 1960s movement, most Cajuns did not live on a bayou and fish for their family dinners. They enjoyed seafood; foods represents a part of the culture of Cajuns, but were no longer the isolate bayou dwellers who relied solely on seafood for food.

Beyond the rural ideal, Cajuns still occupied a socioeconomic space in Louisiana that was blue-collar. By the 1960s and 1970s, although most Cajuns no longer lived on the outskirts of civilization, they remained laborers on oilrigs, fishing boats, mechanics, and other blue-collar jobs.⁴¹ This is an important aspect of Cajun identity. Some authors describe Cajuns as people who “work hard” at their jobs, which is not to say white-collar workers do not work hard, but it is not the manual labor that most Cajuns undergo.⁴² A working class identity was important to a majority of Cajuns, many more than the upper echelons of Southern Louisiana Society.

The physical location of a Cajun in Louisiana was another key point in a Cajun identity. The *Times Picayune*, the largest New Orleans newspaper, ran a series of entertaining columns highlighting the lack of Cajun unity in the 1960s. A geographical question of what exactly denotes “Cajun country” arose in 1960. Authors claim Cajun country to be everything from the entirety of South Louisiana, to merely the isolated areas of settlement where the original Acadians settled to a so-called “French Triangle” extending from the meeting of Texas and Louisiana at the Sabine river, up to Alexandria in mid-Louisiana, and down to the Mississippi Delta.⁴³ One of the *Times Picayune*

⁴¹ Henry and Bankston, *Blue Collar Bayou*, 93

⁴² Ibid. 93

⁴³ William Faulkner Rushton. *The Cajuns: From Acadiana to Louisiana* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Gireaux, 1977) 62

columnists, Maureen O'Dowd claimed that, growing up in Southwest Louisiana, she had never seen a Cajun.⁴⁴ This set off a vicious stream of letters to the editor, ranging for the duration of 1960, and the opinions went everywhere from agreement to vitriolic anger.⁴⁵ One reader even wrote that they hoped alligators ate O'Dowd.⁴⁶ This demonstrates the lack of solid identity among Cajuns, even when it comes to physical location. In this as well, a class system demonstrates that most Cajuns did not live in affluent communities. Although no longer isolated, as their ancestors had been, Cajuns still occupied small communities where the price of living was low, and remained in a blue-collar socioeconomic niche.

Another idea about Cajun ethnic identity connects Cajuns with Frenchness. Although it is true that the original Acadian settlers were descendants of French peasants, and Cajuns spoke French, by the 1960s many more ethnic groups were incorporated in Cajunness. In addition to traditional French names like Thibodeaux and Domengeaux, Cajuns were associated with Irish names like O'Bryan and Spanish names, like Guzman, etc.⁴⁷ Because "Cajun" was a socioeconomic term in the antebellum landscape, being "Cajun" incorporated more than just the original Cajun descendants. However, most of these people did end up speaking French, in order to be incorporated into the dominant French-speaking business class that led up until the 1900s. Antebellum Louisiana resembled Europe in its linguistic and ethnic makeup, as multiple language groups were forced to interact with each other on a daily basis in markets in New Orleans, an experience unique in the American South and in almost the entirety of the United States.

⁴⁴ Maud O'Bryan, in "Up and Down the Street". *Times-Picayune* April 5, 1960. 7

⁴⁵ Ibid. 7

⁴⁶ Maud O'Bryan, in "Up and Down the Street" *Times-Picayune*, April 24, 1960. 8

⁴⁷ Esman, *Henderson, Louisiana*. 7

Because of this, an O'Bryan could be a French-speaking Cajun just as easily as a Boudreaux could.⁴⁸ In the *Times-Picayune*, an "Irish American expert on all things Cajun" wrote in to correct the spelling of a certain type of food, typifying the mixed background of Cajuns.⁴⁹ Although the long-standing association of Cajuns is with Frenchness, because Cajun represented a socioeconomic label before it was an ethnic label, to be Cajun meant much more than just having a French heritage. The mixed identity of the lower socioeconomic classes of Louisiana demonstrated that, in general, most Cajuns were not descended from Acadians.

At the time of the Acadians' migration to Louisiana, and because of Louisiana's nature as a port area, immigrant groups had already well established themselves in the area. Over the course of Louisiana's history, Irish, German, Spanish, Latin American, Polish, Caribbean, African American, and Italian immigrants also represented significant groups of migrants, and significant minority communities. All had varying degrees of assimilation. Areas of Louisiana's coastline are still known as "The German Coast", reflecting the nationality of the people who settled there. Bayou Des Allemandes, or the German Coast, remains a strongly German area of settlement in Louisiana, and its location is right in the heart of the media-defined "Cajun country", right along the southeast Louisiana bayou line.⁵⁰ Irish immigration was strong through much of Louisiana, as Irish citizens came in two waves; the first a wave of entrepreneurs and

⁴⁸ Ibid. 8

⁴⁹ *Times-Picayune* January 13 1988

⁵⁰ John F. Nau, "The German People of New Orleans, 1850-1900," in *A Refuge for All Ages: Immigration in Louisiana History*. Lafayette: University of Southwest Louisiana, 1996.

businessmen, the second of immigrants, concurrent to the Cajun immigration wave.⁵¹

These varied immigrants would result in a multiplicity of Cajun identities. The Louisiana Historical Society would even confirm that the supposed “Cajun Country” was not founded by Cajuns, but by other immigrants.⁵²

These immigrant groups share much of the Cajuns’ narrative: they were escaping persecution (in some of the Irish cases, persecution by the British) to come to a new land, a classic American fairytale. Many settled in New Orleans, and many moved into the surrounding countryside, retaining communal identities well into the modern age. Cajuns did not remain separate from these groups, but rather incorporated with them. Intermarriage from the 1800s forward resulted in a group of people that knew themselves as Cajuns who did not hold Cajun ancestry. As previously stated, Cajuns with a broad range of ethnic last names identify as Cajuns. Because of this, Cajuns were not, in the period from 1960-1990, a group that contained a pure historical narrative. Rather, because of marriage patterns years before, and the inclusive definition of “Cajuns”, many who knew themselves to be Cajun in 1960-1990 were of varied ethnic backgrounds. This would clash strongly with the purist Acadian ideal of Cajun-ness, and would result in the failure of the Cajun movement.

Perceptions of Cajuns.

The interaction between Cajuns and other groups is an interesting aspect of the cultural identity of Cajuns. On the one hand, the old division between Acadians and Cajuns points out that Acadians wished to be synonymous with the elite upper class of

⁵¹ Earl F. Niehaus, “The Old Irish, 1803-1830” and Earl F. Niehaus, “The New Irish, 1830-1862,” in *A Refuge for All Ages: Immigration in Louisiana History*. Lafayette: University of Southwest Louisiana, 1996.

⁵² *Times Picayune*, Sunday February 18 1962

Louisiana. On the other, there were immigrant groups flowing into Louisiana, and these came to identify with the lower-class “Cajun” identity, resulting in Cajuns with a multitude of last names and identities. An interesting thing to note is that not only were many ethnic categories included in a Cajun identity, but that Cajuns would be compared to and incorporate blacks as well. However, if one accepts the self-definition of Cajuns as identity, then Cajuns were incorporating of blackness into their ethnic identity.

Cajuns, as their identity grew to be separate from Acadians, became increasingly equated with blackness, an aspect of their multicultural identity. For example, one of the possible roots of the word “Coonass” is equating Cajuns with “coons”, which was a derogative term for blacks.⁵³ Because “Cajun” began as a socioeconomic class, it was not necessarily limited to ethnic or racial markers, as demonstrated previously. Some late 19th and early 20th century sources use the term “Cajun” to describe anyone of a certain income level, regardless of skin color or language.⁵⁴ In addition, because of the multi-ethnic dimension of Louisiana society, Cajun-class people were of mixed racial boundaries. Cajuns were known to intermarry with local Native American tribes, such as the Houma, which further complicated their degree of blackness in an American South that was unable to distinguish between any racial category other than white and non-white.⁵⁵ In addition, the lack of historical documentation of French-speaking rural peoples before the 1900s resulted in a lumping of all French-speakers, regardless of race, into the label of “Cajun”, which proved problematic for those later sorting out a “true”

⁵³ Hallowell, *People of the Bayou*, 76

⁵⁴ Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun*. 3

⁵⁵ Jaques M. Henry and Carl L. Bankston III, “Ethnic self-identification and symbolic stereotyping: the portrayal of Louisiana Cajuns,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24 (July 2005): 1024

Cajun culture.⁵⁶ Small, isolated rural communities in Louisiana in the 1960s contained people that, once a definition of “Cajun” had been promulgated and accepted by popular media, were carefully classified as not Cajun, were called “Sabines”. Little to no scholarship exists on the Sabines, but they claim their own heritage as a mixture of Cajun, Houma, and black ethnicity.⁵⁷ Black, Native American, and white became blurred in the rural communities of Louisiana, especially since many of the “...negroes [sic] of the area, many of whom speak French and consider themselves Cajun...” were more than just a historic memory.⁵⁸ Many Cajuns had more in common with blacks than with wealthier members of society, as they were both engaged in subsistence agriculture and sharecropping during the late 1800s and early 1900s.⁵⁹

During the 1960s, blacks were not isolated from Cajun communities, and ethnographers noticed they shared the Cajun values of hard manual work, without much racial tension and dissent.⁶⁰ This identification of Cajuns with blackness developed as the two groups shared an economic niche, and the culture of Cajuns changed once they were able to ascend from this niche. The later Cajun movement would mimic the Civil Rights movement. After 1980, slogans like “Cajun Power” appeared in Louisiana, echoing to the “Black Power” of the earlier movement.⁶¹ Although the Acadian ideal was of a pure Acadian heritage, leaders like Jimmy Domengeaux embraced the blackness of blue collar Cajun culture more after the implosion of CODOFIL, and attempted to demonstrate Cajuns as a group, like African Americans, who had suffered injustice and who

⁵⁶ Brasseaux, *Founding of New Acadia*, 90.

⁵⁷ Hallowell, *People of the Bayou*, 98.

⁵⁸ Roy Reed, “Louisiana’s Cajuns, a Minority with Power”, *New York Times*, May 9, 1972.

⁵⁹ Hallowell, *People of the Bayou*, 98.

⁶⁰ Esman, *Henderson, Louisiana*. 66

⁶¹ Bernard, *The Cajuns* 110

demanded recognition because of it. This point will be discussed further, in the aftermath of the implosion of CODOFIL.

The outside perceptions of Cajun society also demonstrate how Cajuns were identified with a lower class. Pastoral Cajuns were portrayed as rural, simple, and wholly better than the corrupt city dwellers. The larger environmental movement of the 1970s and 1980s added to this perception, as writers about Cajuns made them an organic part of the South Louisiana landscape. Both William Faulkner Rushton and Christopher Hallowell, in their discussion of Cajuns, use the bayou-dwelling hero as an example of an organic extension of the threatened marshland of South Louisiana.

The perception of Cajuns as pastoral was one perception of Cajuns that was romanticized, but did not reflect the reality of Cajuns. William Faulkner Rushton traces an ancient Cajun family, Jim Daisy, in his daily life.⁶² Careful to point out not only the inherent goodness in Daisy's life, but the ways in which modernity was ruining it, this writing demonstrates Cajuns used as a foil to modernity. Hallowell discusses the delicate balance of the marshes and swamps of Southern Louisiana, tying them to pastoral Cajun communities who come to the marsh to escape the difficulties of modernity.⁶³ Another memoir, *Atchafalaya Houseboat*, is written by a Ph. D educated woman who seeks to return to her family's roots, and lives with her partner on a houseboat in the Atchafalaya Swamp of Louisiana.⁶⁴ Going "back to the land" was common among many people during the 1960s and 1970s, and the romanticized Cajun lifestyle was a way in which

⁶² Faulkner Rushton, *The Cajuns*. 95

⁶³ Hallowell, *People of the Bayou*. 35

⁶⁴ Gwen Roland, *Atchafalaya Houseboat: My Years in the Louisiana Swamp* (Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

people sought to do this. By creating a romantic image of Cajuns and their agrarian roots, outsiders re-asserted this idea of Cajuns and ruralness. This image stemmed from, and would contribute to, the tourist narrative of Cajun life that vividly clashed with the actuality of blue-collar Cajuns.

Tourism was essential in the perception of Cajuns during the 1960s. The Louisiana state legislature, urged by Acadians like Domengeaux, promoted a Cajun tourist identity that alienated most blue-collar Cajuns, because it was an identity that did not belong to them. Longfellow's poem *Evangeline* became famous to even the non-literary. Longfellow's heroine, an Acadian milkmaid in Acadia, was torn from her love during the eviction of Acadians from Acadia, only to find him again in Louisiana.⁶⁵ Tourists were charmed by the idea of an Evangeline, and Cajuns wove the Evangeline idea of persecution into their cultural makeup. Statues and homes claiming to be the town of the fictitious milkmaid abounded in Southern Louisiana, regardless of authenticity.⁶⁶ Louisiana legislators capitalized on this market, recognizing its ability to generate revenue for the state. Over the course of 1960-1990, "Cajun" businesses and museums sprang up all over Southern Louisiana, including areas in which Cajuns had not historically been established. Advertisements in the *Times Picayune* attached "Cajun" onto mundane groceries like eggs and butter, and called for people to come and work at new businesses like the "Cajun Inn".⁶⁷ Cajun fine dining, once an oxymoron for such an impoverished rural group, made an appearance in full and half page advertisements,⁶⁸ and retirement communities beckoned retirees to come enjoy the "quaint" life in Cajun

⁶⁵ Dean Jobb, *The Cajuns: A People's Story of Exile and Triumph*. (New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, 2005). 205

⁶⁶ Ibid. 206

⁶⁷ For Example, advertisements in *Times Picayune* February 29, 1968

⁶⁸ Ibid.

villages.⁶⁹ By the 1970s, so many tourists were attending “traditional” Cajun life that Cajuns were often being pushed to the back.⁷⁰ This tension, of a cultural identity imposed on blue-collar Cajuns by other Acadian lawmakers, represented another clash of cultures between the rich and poor Cajun groups.

Outsiders had also been using Cajuns as a medium for jokes for a long time. For example, *The Great Big Doorstep* was a play written and shown in Louisiana in 1942, but re-shown several times. The characters represent overly stereotyped Cajuns.

Impoverished, lazy, obsessed with food, uneducated, and with a large family, the comedy was a great success in the era before CODOFIL. The father, a ditch-digger, is unable to provide for his family because of his obsession with food. The mother can barely speak English. Their world doesn’t extend beyond their town.⁷¹ Audiences in New Orleans greeted the play with excitement.⁷² Many humorists, generally making fun of the Cajun accent, perpetuated the practice of telling Cajun jokes. Printed in the *Times-Picayune*, this story typifies that kind of humor:

“[A Cajun] struck oil on his swampland and became wealthy overnight. He ordered an architect to build him a big house, and took off around the world. ‘All he told me’ the architect said to a friend, ‘was that he wanted eight bedrooms and a halo statue in every room.’

‘A halo statue?’ the friend said

‘He must be a very religious man’ the architect said ‘Anyway, I’m putting a statue of a saint with a halo in every bedroom.’

When the Cajun returned from his journey, he was surprise to find his house so cluttered up with statues. “But you said you wanted a halo statue in every bedroom” the architect said.

‘Oh, no’ the Cajun said. ‘What I wanted was one of dose tings you pick up and say into “Halo. ‘s dat chew?”’⁷³

⁶⁹ Such as advertisement *Times Picayune* June 9, 1963

⁷⁰ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 119.

⁷¹ Frances Goodrich, *The Great Big Doorstep: A Delta Comedy* (Dramatic Publishing: Chicago, 1943)

⁷² “Comedy of Cajun Life to Open” *Times-Picayune*, April 22 1962

⁷³ Joe McCarthy, “In One Ear...” *Times-Picayune*, April 9, 1960

This humor mocks the Cajun accent and ignorance, but was also incredibly popular, and ran in weekly columns in the *Times-Picayune*. Cajun humorists were well appreciated by average Cajuns, and understood to be a humorous way of interpreting Cajun life in the 20th century. This humor was rejected by wealthy Acadians, but enjoyed by blue collar Cajuns.

The Failure of CODOFIL

In many ways, the Cajun ethnic revival was most applicable to its leaders and most famous members than to the average Cajun. We have seen the growth of a Cajun culture that identifies itself with a blue-collar working identity, and has occupied that niche for quite some time. This stood in stark contrast to the Cajun identity that others would create. Jimmy Domengeaux, Raymond Lala Lalonde, and others on the board of CODFIL were the men creating a narrative of what it meant to be Cajun. This narrative did not apply to a great deal of Cajuns, because the narrative created by Domengeaux and others applied to an elite group of Cajuns. This is reflected in several key debates and controversies surrounding Domengeaux and CODOFIL. The failure of CODOFIL was the result of class conflict. The upper class definition of Cajuns rejected that of the identity of blue-collar Cajuns, and this manifested in many ways. The first of these is the unsuccessful French language in schools.

CODOFIL was a failure in the sense of teaching French as a second language in schools. By conscripting teachers from France and Montreal to serve in the program, Jimmy Domengeaux had made a somewhat ironic mistake. In his quest to preserve Cajun French among the Cajun youth, Domengeaux and CODOFIL had brought in non-Cajun

French speakers to teach. In his mind, he felt that there were no teachers suitable to teach French to Cajuns that came from Southern Louisiana.⁷⁴ Thus, students were not learning the French spoken by their ancestors and grandparents. Cajuns wrote complaints that CODOFIL was trying to “...make Frenchmen out of them” by teaching French and Montreal French instead of Cajun French.⁷⁵ This fundamental paradox of CODOFIL partly led to its destruction. In addition, by recruiting teachers from Montreal, teachers in Louisiana felt that their own job security was threatened.⁷⁶ Teaching French, the fundamental mission of CODOFIL, had failed, as by 1980 there were 75% less French speakers than when CODOFIL began.⁷⁷ Clearly, through the actions of CODOFIL, most of the Cajuns that the organization was interacting with did not ascribe to the “frenchess” that Domengeaux and others were placing on them.

Domengeaux also used CODOFIL to create cultural definitions of what “Cajun” meant. He launched a tirade against the popular “Cajun jokes” humorists.⁷⁸ This contradicted with the popularity of these humorists among blue-collar Cajuns. “Coonass” was also subject to Domengeaux’s hatred. Domengeaux traced “coonass” to a derogatory term used during WWII, by Frenchmen in describing Cajuns, meaning “a prostitute without papers.”⁷⁹ Other sources, however, cite it as being much earlier, and a positive, even friendly term Cajuns had for each other.⁸⁰ In her study of the Cajun community of Henderson, Louisiana, Marjorie Esman noted a Cajun woman saying “Around here we’re

⁷⁴ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 125

⁷⁵ Ibid. 126

⁷⁶ Ibid. 127

⁷⁷ Ibid. 191

⁷⁸ Ibid. 95

⁷⁹ Ibid. 96

⁸⁰ Hallowell, *People of the Bayou*, 76

coonasses...”⁸¹ “Coonass” was popular from 1960-1979 as a way of stating Cajun pride, and appeared on bumper stickers, signs, tourist brochures, and local slang.⁸²

Domengeaux, however, equated it with “nigger” as an offensive term, and fought (fruitlessly, before 1980, and with success in 1981) to have the term banned from Southern Louisiana.

In addition, Domengeaux refused to acknowledge any Cajun who could not trace their ancestry to Acadia.⁸³ This alienated all Cajuns who had last names that were not French, who were not white, or who were unsure of their ethnic makeup. Domengeaux was particularly offended that anyone could draw up a Cajun genealogy that included blacks.⁸⁴ For Domengeaux, the only Cajuns were ones that could trace their ancestry from Acadia. He vigorously pursued this definition, a mission that turned into a family affair when his nephew took it up, and defined Cajuns (contrary to the Dictionary definition, which was vastly more inclusive) as only Acadian descendants.⁸⁵ In sharp contrast to this, Cajun identity is also recorded by authors as being much more organic, where anyone who feels they are a Cajun, is in fact a Cajun.⁸⁶ The division between these two forms of identification demonstrates the inclusivity of some brands of Cajunism, and the exclusivity for others. Defining Cajuns as descended from Acadians only denied their heritage. Marjorie Esman, author of several texts studying Cajuns, wrote to the New Orleans newspaper to decry this definition of Cajuns. Esman eloquently argued that

⁸¹ Esman, *Henderson, Louisiana*, 106

⁸² Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 97

⁸³ James Harvey Domengeaux, “Native Born Acadians and the Equality Ideal” *Louisiana Law Review*. (1985-1986) 1160

⁸⁴ Roy Reed, “Cajuns Resist the Melting Pot” *New York Times*, February 29, 1976.

⁸⁵ Domengeaux, “Native Born Acadians” 1157

⁸⁶ Hallowell, *People of the Bayou*, 87

“...The category ‘Cajun’ is not a genealogical one. It is a cultural category that has little connection with Acadian antecedents save for vestiges of language, some ancestry and geography. The group that calls itself Cajun today is descended of Germans, Welsh, Scots, French and others. It is possible for a modern Cajun to have no Cajun ancestry at all.”⁸⁷

The upper class ideal of Cajuns were ones that could incorporate more of this history as Acadians, and was promoted through tourism and the Evangeline myth. The majority of Cajuns, however, found this myth to be not only non-inclusive, but also invasive to their daily lives.

Domengeaux’s thinking reflected a class bias that had been present in Louisiana since the differentiations of “Acadian” and “Cajun”. Because Cajun had been a way to describe anyone of a certain socioeconomic class who spoke French, it is absolutely natural that their descendants between 1960 and 1990 called themselves “Cajuns” and swelled with the ethnic pride suggested by others. What Cajuns did not realize, however, is that for a blue-collar Cajun, being a “Cajun” meant a very different thing than it did for a wealthier “Acadian”. The Cajun movement was one used by wealthy Cajuns to gain the support of blue-collar Cajuns, and when this movement sought to create a universal identity for Cajuns, it could not, because the two classes came from two very different worlds. Of genteel background himself, Domengeaux reflected the old divisions of “Acadian” and “Cajun”, perpetuated again by new economic introductions into the Louisiana landscape. Domengeaux, and CODOFIL, were creating a version of Cajunism that Cajuns could not identify with.

By the late 1970s, the “Cajun Power” movement had lost steam. This changed when a U.S. District Court decided *Calvin Roach v. Dresser Industrial Supply Company*,

⁸⁷ “Cajun Status a Folly” Letters to the Editor, *Times Picayune*, Sunday May 22 1988

in 1981. In the case, Calvin Roach (whose last name was apparently spelled “Roche” before it became Anglicized) was fired by his employer, Dresser Industrial Pipe and Valve Supply Company, and alleged that he was fired because he was a Cajun, and was known to consort with other Cajuns.⁸⁸ Roach sued his company for Title VII discrimination, which applies to situations in which discrimination is not based on race, but on gender, religion, or ethnic identity.⁸⁹ The case was picked up by Domengeaux and others, and was eventually won, in Roach’s favor. Roach was the ideal way to heal the divide between the two classes. He was a blue-collar worker, who could trace his ancestry back to Acadian roots. Domengeaux and others would use the lessons they learned to bring about a narrative of persecution, which would unite both the top-down and bottom-up Cajun identities.

Change in the Movement.

After Calvin Roach’s court case had been won, Domengeaux and CODOFIL took another attempt to instate ethnic pride among Cajuns, but this time incorporated a wider variety of Cajun experience. The court case brought the ideas of discrimination to light the touchstone by which all Cajuns could relate, and a narrative of persecution emerged as that touchstone.

There is absolutely no discounting that Cajuns were discriminated against. The perception of Cajuns by outsiders has long roots of being negative. Harper’s Weekly described Cajuns as being lazy and ignorant as early as the 1800s, a perception that

⁸⁸ “Cajun Claims Discrimination in Job Firing” *Times-Picayune* Sunday, April 20 1980

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 1160

continued well into modern days.⁹⁰ Cajuns were known during the Civil War for their reluctance to fight for the Confederacy. Accounts insist that Cajuns had to be tied to a tree in order to have them complete their duty.⁹¹ Cajuns were a people that lived in poverty, and were derided for it by others

After *Roach v. Dresser* in 1980, Raymond “Lala” Lalonde, state senator, attempted to push a bill through the Louisiana State Legislature that would establish Cajuns as a legal minority in Louisiana. Previously a member of the genteel “Acadians”, Lalonde expanded on the idea of persecution by using, in the language of his bill, persecution as a reason that Cajuns should be considered a minority. Cajuns, he said, had been driven from their homes in Acadia, and then upon arriving in Louisiana, were sometimes indentured servants, or even enslaved.⁹² It is unclear what “enslavement” Lalonde was referring to in Louisiana. Some scholarship exists on the condition of Acadians as slaves in the Caribbean colonies, but documented cases of Acadians becoming slaves in Louisiana are not part of the historical dialogue. The bill was regarded as a joke by many of his contemporaries, who referenced it as the “ha-ha” bill.⁹³ Lalonde, however, insisted on its legitimacy. This thread of persecution, however, was picked up by other leaders, and publicized in national newspapers. Barry Jean Ancelet, an academic, said “Several generations of Cajun children wet their pants because they didn’t know how to go to the bathroom in English... does that count as minority misery? I think

⁹⁰ Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun*, 88.

⁹¹ Lisa Belkins, “A Legislator’s Bayou Boyhood is at Root of a Bill to Aid Cajuns.” *New York Times*, June 14, 1988.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

it does”⁹⁴ in the Washington Post. Other reporters portrayed Cajuns as the minority who had “won” and as such were the “only happy minority in the United States”.⁹⁵

Domengeaux, Lalonde, and the new growth of Cajun academics demonstrated the idea of Cajun persecution to newspapers nationwide, which highlighted the Cajun discourse and issue of discrimination in the wake of the *Roach v. Dresser* court case decision.

Black lawmakers were quick to react to this law, as they perceived it as making a mockery of the civil rights they had struggled to attain. They pointed out that, by the Cajun logic, anyone could be a minority, and could not find valid ways in which Cajuns had been discriminated against.⁹⁶ In order to qualify for minority status, state Senator William Jefferson argued, a group should suffer persecution in the United States. Cajuns had suffered no such persecution, as was witnessed by people in places of power.⁹⁷ Black lawmakers asked how the Cajuns were discriminated against, citing that the popular governor at the time, Edwin Edwards, was a Cajun.⁹⁸ His election, in fact, had included “Cajun Power” as a slogan.⁹⁹ Ultimately, the Cajun governor rejected the bill, but Lalonde promised to launch further investigation into the persecution of Cajuns, which was picked up by academics.

The explosion of secondary literature during the 1980s brought out the narrative of persecution as well. Especially favored by the secondary literature was the idea of language persecution. Aside from Ancelet’s comment about Cajun children wetting their pants, the idea that Cajuns were subject to persecution because they were not allowed to

⁹⁴ Mary T. Schmich, “Minority Status for Louisiana’s Cajuns?” *Washington Post*. May 31, 1988

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Times-Picayune*, “Cajuns” Wednesday, June 29, 1988

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Hallowell, *People of the Bayou*, 75

speak French in schools, and were punished for speaking French, was a strong part of the narrative of persecution. *People of the Bayou* discusses claims that most people over thirty remember being punished for speaking French in a small rural community on the bayou.¹⁰⁰ *Blue Collar Bayou* interviews several older members of Cajun communities, who both recall being punished for speaking French in schools.¹⁰¹ Shane K. Bernard, in his epic *Cajuns: Americanization of a People* gives great weight to the persecution of French by English teachers in schools. Bernard, however, points out that this was not universal, yet continues to give enormous weight to the idea of suffering for speaking French, using it to show how Americanization was forced upon the Cajuns.¹⁰² Bernard has an important point in that this situation was not universal, nor was it a policy that was sponsored by the State of Louisiana, and was probably just a result of teachers' preference.¹⁰³ It is important to remember that, for the Cajuns who went to school before 1940, teaching methods were vastly stricter than they were today, so some of the punishment could have been situational rather than discriminatory. However, this narrative of forced loss of language gave both classes, genteel Acadians and blue-collar Cajuns, something in common. Once the Cajun elite did not militantly enforce their idea of a Cajun identity, they were able to stop the alienation of most Cajuns, and include them. In this, the shadowy grasp on what makes a "Cajun" helped them, because blue-collar Cajuns and wealthy Cajuns alike could identify with the politics of persecution.

Domengeaux and others were finally reaching out to the majority of Cajuns. They had included the narrative of persecution in order to identify a common culture between

¹⁰⁰ Henry and Bankston, *Blue Collar Bayou*, 157

¹⁰¹ Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 18-22

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 22

the two classes. The lower class, identified with blackness, ethnic mixing, and blue-collar working attitude, could point to the Calvin Roach and see one of their own, a working man who had been treated poorly by his boss because of his ethnicity. Domengeaux, who particularly disagreed with the association of Cajuns and blacks, or any other type of ethnicity, and others could find in Roach an Acadian heritage that validated their upper class Acadian heritage. In addition, the loss of French served as a concrete way in which the two classes could share an identity. Both groups had lost their French over time, and so could point to the persecution of Cajuns for their language as a distinctly “Cajun” characteristic. French, or some knowledge of French heritage, was often the only thing that the two classes had in common. Through this narrative, Cajuns were able to assert themselves as a distinct minority.

Conclusion

Class, more than anything, had a profound effect on Cajun identity. Few sources allude to this class bias, and as a result, their construction of a Cajun “ethnic identity” is confusing and fraught with contradiction. In this paper, I have relied on “Cajun” to mean anyone who self-identifies as a Cajun, as opposed to any definition from a dictionary or book. This demonstrates more accurately how people in Southern Louisiana felt about their own identity, as opposed to the characterizations of identity that other people could place them in. There was so much discussion of what it meant to be Cajun, because for all purposes, three separate Cajun cultures existed. There was the blue-collar Cajun identity, which the vast majority of anyone identifying as Cajun adhered to. This was characterized by the “working culture” across much of the south, with some twists. Blue-collar Cajuns had families that once lived in rural ways, or still lived there, but had either

migrated to cities to work menial labor jobs, or remained involved in hunting and trapping as a means of making a living. These Cajuns were represented in communities like Henderson, Louisiana, where they maintained a small town life. this life was most subject to Americanization, as Cajuns in this socioeconomic class were more likely to raise their families in a typical American way. Oil jobs, and other blue-collar jobs, pushed Cajuns into American mainstream, but also allowed them to retain their identity because they remained in the socioeconomic niche they had occupied for almost 200 years. Their kids attended schools, watched TV, and wanted cars just like other Americans, and these factors were part of a larger middle-class blue-collar worker class across America. They weren't living in dire poverty, for the most part, but retained a celebration of their lifestyle, a "coonass" lifestyle, through the knowledge that they were, and had always been, Cajun.

Upper class Cajuns, who tried to reclaim the purist identity as "Acadians" as opposed to the lower-class Cajun, pushed hardest for reform of The upper crust of Cajun leaders, Domengeaux et al, founded an idea separate from the "coonass" loving regular Cajuns. Theirs traced an Acadian trajectory, from Canada down to Louisiana, and reflected the old divisions in Cajun society. Domengeaux himself was of this genteel Acadian class, which demonstrated his understanding of "Cajuns" as someone who was an Acadian, a of Acadian descent. The rejection of the blue-collar Cajun identity was demonstrated by Domengeaux's version of French, which threatened the Cajun French already known among Cajuns, and alienated CODOFIL from reaching them. Domengeaux's ideas about what should constitute a Cajun deny the mixing that happened in Louisiana, and his rejection of blackness and Cajuns, as well as his opinion that there

were no suitable teachers of French existing among Cajuns in Louisiana, show his bias and his purist conception of an Acadian identity. The rejection of Cajun humor jokes, and Cajun humorists, further alienated Domengeaux from the Cajuns, because he did not identify with them in a cultural sense. In addition, Domengeaux rejected such cultural slang terms as “coonass”, claiming that they were pejorative definitions of Cajuns, and not the real version. CODOFIL, and Domengeaux, were ultimately failures at re-instating Cajun French in schools, until they were able to identify with Cajuns and use the language of both groups.

Tourist culture was sponsored by the state, and alienated blue collar Cajuns from identifying with the state’s idea of Cajun culture. This was the Evangeline culture, cultivated to be attractive to tourists, that gave an origin myth for Acadians to point to, and ended up being invasive in the lives of average Cajuns. This included the tourists who sought “Evangeline” in their tours, and who facilitated the commodification of Cajun culture. They crowded Cajuns out of “Cajun” establishments, but also put an enormous amount of money into the pockets of the local economies, and were not only encouraged by lawmakers, but also facilitated by the growth of “Cajun” establishments by enterprising businessmen all across Louisiana. This culture was a part of the Acadian-inspired culture imposed on average Cajuns, who rejected it, and found it invasive to their lives.

Class remains relatively unexamined in the case of the Cajuns, as it does across many areas of America. What we see in Cajuns is two classes, each with a specific culture, which can only be brought together by creating a common narrative of persecution. Some Cajuns remain part of a blue-collar class, and some are wealthy, but

both can agree that they have endured persecution as a minority, and thus deserve to be made a solid minority. This is critical in understanding not only how Cajuns understand their own rights, but in how the rights of white ethnic minorities manifest themselves. For the Cajuns, being proud of their heritage wasn't enough, because Cajuns, both rich and poor, had always known who they were. The two classes of Cajuns meant that these two ideas of what a Cajun was did not necessarily correspond to each other led to a disunity, and a loss of a sense of ethnic identity. Their resurgence of ethnic identity, then took place in the construction of a narrative of persecution, was essential to creating a solid Cajun group, and to creating a dialogue between wealthy and poor Cajuns that had been silent since before the Civil War. This will be crucial to Cajuns as they move into the 21st century, as events like Hurricane Katrina force Cajuns to abandon their ancestral homes once more. The narrative of persecution is a narrative that Cajuns can rely on, to say that they are Cajuns, that is who they have always been, and that is who they will always be.

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