

Lives of Quiet Desperation
The Ancestry of a Louisiana Frenchman

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Growing Up Cajun

A Personal Essay by
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My mother, Helen "Bobbie" Richard Lavergne, was in many ways a quintessential Cajun woman. She was verbal and very open to persons she knew, and quiet and reserved with those she did not. She seldom criticized or complimented individuals or groups, preferring instead to mind her own business. "Ms. Bobbie's" ultimate compliment was, "Those are good people." In her eyes, money, prestige, and position really didn't amount to much, but there was no greater honor than to be a good person.

The descendants of Acadian exiles, Cajuns, are one of America's most watched ethnic groups. During stressful times like war, recessions, and now, epidemics, the apparent free-wheeling, carefree lifestyle of Cajuns provided relief from the "me generation" mentality of the 1970s and the "greed generation" mentality of the 1980s. *Laissez les bons temps rouler* and the Cajun mystique provided fodder for an American establishment searching for a simpler way of life. Good music, good food, lots of drink, waltzes and two-steps, broken English and unique accents have become an antidote for the pressures of a technological era. For many, Cajuns epitomized a carefree lifestyle that most Americans admire, but would not likely lead themselves.

Most stereotypes have some basis in fact, and as a Cajun boy growing up in Church Point, Louisiana, I witnessed and experienced the food, drink—lots of drink—music, dances, and broken English. (Since English corrupted French and French corrupted English, some cynics claim that Cajuns are illiterate in two languages.) The Cajun people I know work hard and are not wealthy; but that has never stopped them from having a good time, and it has never prevented them from being good people.

My former teacher, Glenn R. Conrad of the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, once correctly asserted that many contemporary articles and works of history tend to homogenize the Louisiana French into a single "Cajun" culture.³⁷ Such a simple view does not do justice to the Acadians or other French speaking peoples of Louisiana. (See above my essay "Louisiana's French Amalgam.") My hometown, Church Point, once called "Bayou Plaquemine Brûlée," is distinctly Acadian (among white and multi-racial peoples), and growing up Cajun is a singular experience. What I am most proud of is the security and resilience of the Cajun people. By security I mean that, unlike many ethnic groups, Cajuns are very quick to laugh at and make fun of themselves. Most Cajun jokes and stories I've heard originated from and are repeated

³⁷ As an example see, "How Acadian Is Acadiana?," *Attakapas Gazette*, XXI (1986), 148-167.

by Cajuns themselves—with genuine glee. It is exceedingly difficult to insult a Cajun. "Cajun" was once a pejorative term. It was adopted by the Acadians and now appears to be a term of endearment. "Coonass" is considered an insult by most people, even by Louisiana's Legislature, which passed a resolution declaring the terms "Cajuns" and "Acadians" to be official. And yet, while growing up Cajun I don't remember a single instance where anyone ever burned with rage at being called a "Coonass" (unless, of course, they weren't Cajun). One of my father's favorite LP records was a French comedy album by a "Nonc Helaire" called "*For Coonasses Only*." Governor Edwin Edwards often used the term "Coonasses" on campaign stops throughout Southwest Louisiana to the glee of hundreds and thousands of Cajun voters who flocked to the polls to put him in Congress and the Governor's Mansion. I specifically remember him using the word "Coonass" during a speech celebrating Church Point's Centennial Celebration on September 29, 1973. "Coonass" is less common now, more because of a sensitivity afforded all minorities than a concerted effort from Cajuns to gain respect. Maybe that is best, but I am not sure.

Growing up Cajun was fun, and it still is fun to be Cajun. Even today, during unguarded moments I catch myself speaking "Franglish." Franglish occurs when a Cajun thinks in French but speaks English. (Hispanics have "Spanglish.") More specifically, Franglish happens when French usage and mechanics and English verbalization are combined. For example, in 1983 in Church Point I heard the following Franglish sentence: "Mr. Bacilla, him, he got two of his teachers pregnant at his school." In correct English the sentence is, "Mr. Bacilla has two pregnant teachers at his school." In French the adjective (pregnant) follows the noun (teachers); in English the adjective precedes the noun. Franglish often confuses civilians who don't know any better. Fine examples of Franglish include:

"Dean, there is a horse dead in the ditch by you house."

"Francis, throw the cow over the fence some hay."

While speaking Cajuns also tend to take short cuts. Interjections such as "Poo Yie!" "Kee Yoo!" "Cher!" "Mais La!" and "Ahn!" are paragraphs to Cajuns. At grand opening of the Cajundome just before a Kenny Rogers concert I heard the following conversation:

Lady: "Was it you or your brother who died?"

Man: "Oh *Cher*, it was my brother."

Lady: "An you momma died huh."

Man: "Yea, her too."

Better still, half sentences often suffice if meaning is obvious. "Come see" is really "come here and see this." "You sick" is really "are you sick?" and "an you" literally means "the characteristic you attribute to me is more applicable to yourself." Often, the retort to "An you!" is "An you, you!" Quite often, Cajuns corrupt or synthesize clichés. "Mais, dats how da cookie bounces!" and "Well if we lucky we can kill two birds wit one gravel."

Furthermore, it is not possible to argue with Cajun logic. My grandmother once told me, "Gary, don't complain about where you going because wherever you go—you gonna be there!" The remarkable thing about that is that it is so obvious that it is impossible to contradict. Wherever you go, you will be there!

On another occasion my grandmother warned me not to play in the mud "cause it will make you retarded." What? She quickly retorted, "Well then why do crawfish walk backwards?" How does a person argue or even reply to such a statement? Crawfish do walk backwards!

Exaggeration is an art form to Cajuns.

"Sim, did you hear dat ole Madam Belle died."

"No."

"Well, Madame Belle died and look, I was sicker than her!"

Everything is fun about being a Cajun, even spankings and punishments. Ms. Bobbie was a classic Cajun disciplinarian. She could never say more than one word without getting in a "lick" with a switch or a belt.

"DON'T—YOU—EVER—DO—THAT--AGAIN—DO—YOU—HEAR—ME!"

I always wanted to say, "No Mama, say it again." But I knew much better than to say such a stupid thing.

My father, Nolan Dale Lavergne, was less violent but much more terrifying. He had a George Washington stare, and as Gouverneur Morris once felt after a famous Washington stare, I wish the Earth would open up and swallow me. One rebuke I remember especially well went, "Boy, you better straighten up before I take your eyes out and look at your brain to see what's wrong with you."

In Cajun tradition, I too, try to make discipline a moment to remember. Just recently I told Mark, "Do that again and I'll shove my arm down your throat and squeeze your pancreas." My Cedar Park, Texas neighbors were mortified until they saw Mark laughing hysterically.

Meals in Cajun homes are real events. I learned at a very young age not to pile on food and eat at one sitting. It is much better to "eat three or four plates." The first meal I ever shared with my soon-to-be mother-in-law is a good example. In hopes of making a good first impression, I piled on the food and ate everything. She then asked me if I wanted any more. When I said "Oh, no" her reply was, "What, you don't like it?"

The problem with Cajuns and eating is, that while the eating occurs, good judgment disappears. I had a first cousin who wrapped boudin around his arm as he ate it; an uncle who would take off his belt and unbutton his pants whenever he ate gumbo; and frequently I myself will have to stop eating and stand so that "my food can go down!" My wife, Laura, and I were asked by the Texas Folklore Society to represent Cajuns in a book called *Tales of Texas Cooking*.³⁸ We contributed a recipe and an essay that the editor told me was one of the funniest stories she had ever read. It is based on a true story I heard from my aunt about a man from Opelousas who ate *four pounds* of boudin. He could barely breathe as he sat prostrate in a hospital bed in incredible discomfort. He was asked,

³⁸ Frances B. Vick, ed., *Tales of Texas Cooking: Stories and Recipes from the Trans Pecos to the Piney Woods and High Plains to the Gulf Prairies*, Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2015, pgs. 301-303.

"Why did you eat so damn much boudin?"

"Because it was good!" was his reply.

Another uncle of mine once ate four large servings of fried and stewed catfish with rice. After the fourth plateful he said, "You know, if I had some tea I could eat some more!"

Finally, there is the *cliché* of Cajun men who spent hours preparing a very elaborate supper. They drank as they cooked all day long and by the time the meal was ready they were too drunk to eat.

As someone who once made a living making speeches throughout the United States, I reached a point where I was no longer surprised at some of the silly questions that highly educated persons often ask me about my people. In Washington, DC, while my son Charlie and I waited to enter Skylab, on display at the Smithsonian Institute's Museum of Air and Space, a very polished, dignified, obviously well-educated, middle-aged lady asked, "Where are you from?" She had detected our accent. Very politely I explained that we were Cajuns from Louisiana. The ensuing conversation went:

Lady: "Oh, I know very much about you people!"

Gary: "You do."

Lady: "Oh, yes, especially about your wonderful food. I enjoy it very much, but I'll never eat rattlesnake."

Gary: "Madam, you'd love it if I cooked it for you!"

Lady: "Yes, I suppose so!"

As a political science fellow at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a good friend and classmate of mine from Tennessee innocently asked, "Are you a Coonass?" Our group consisted of scholars from all parts of the United States, and as soon as he asked that question a collective gasp was heard throughout the room and all eyes and ears awaited my reaction. "Yes" was my answer. I figured that there was nothing to be gained by being insulted just because I was in New Brunswick, New Jersey, instead of Church Point, Louisiana. While studying School Law at Harvard, a classmate of mine told me of a documentary produced by *Encyclopedia Britannica* which strongly implied that Cajuns use their children to lure alligators. "I know better than that!" she said proudly. "Thank you!" I replied.

More often, throughout my career, being Cajun worked to my advantage. People remembered me for my "delightful" accent and funny stories—many of which are absolutely true but they do not believe. During a meeting in Austin at The University of Texas, a delegation from France included an elegant woman with the last name of "Giry." She was French President Nicolas Sarkozy's Chief Advisor for Higher Education. Throughout the meeting Americans pronounced her name as "Jeery." During my presentation I used a good ole Church Point pronunciation. Stunned, she looked at me and before she could say anything I said: "*Je suis Gary Lavergne et je suis Acadien de la Louisiane. Mais je parle très peu français.*" I wasn't sure I had said that correctly, but she beamed. Later that year, I was invited to Paris for a series of lectures, including the Sorbonne and the Ministry of Higher Education, on the Texas Automatic Admissions Law.

Some of the questions I am asked about Cajuns are fair, like whether or not it is true that there is a Cracklin Festival, a Frog Festival, a Boudin Festival, a Praline Festival, a Crawfish Festival, and so on. I usually explain that in addition to hundreds of festivals there is *Mardi Gras* (Fat Tuesday) whose festivities can last several days or even weeks. Moreover, there are "Cajun Days" in most small communities. Religious holidays like Easter and Christmas, or events like First Communion, Confirmation, and Marriages can be festivals in themselves. While at Rutgers University a classmate of mine observed, "Well, you people are always looking for a reason to celebrate aren't you?" I guess we are. So what? We are good people.

I am proud to be a Cajun, and would never deny my heritage, if for no other reason than because Cajuns and many of their traditions have survived, except for the language. My great grandparents spoke no English; my grandparents spoke very little English; my parents were completely bilingual, and I envied them; I speak a little French; my children speak no French. Most elderly Acadians will readily admit to participating in a concerted conspiracy to eliminate the French language from Louisiana. They tell of spankings for speaking French at school and of the irony that government and the media now struggle to preserve and resurrect the Cajun culture they once tried to suppress and of how teachers are frantically trying to teach what children were once punished for. They were good people; at the time it seemed like the right thing to do.

But there is a dark side of life in Acadiana. *Laissez les bons temps rouler* exacts a price. Cajun food is very likely the eighth wonder of the world; the Cajun lifestyle is the envy of many in the United States, and rightly so. But Louisiana has the lowest life expectancy and one of the highest illiteracy rates in the United States. There is precious little to show for the "embarrassment of riches" of the oil boom of my youth. Cajuns pay little or no property taxes and have deplorable roads and schools to prove it. (These low taxes did not result in new business or jobs—at least none of any consequence that I've heard of.) After living in Texas for more than thirty years, I find myself paying property taxes that are unimaginable to my Louisiana friends and family, but I pay them and the world hasn't come to an end. Many Cajuns laugh at and are entertained by politicians who think corruption is funny; the price exacted, however, is corruption itself.

Cajuns are very tolerant people who pretty much don't care what other people think. The tendency is to "just let it pass." Cajuns do battle over things that are really important; it's just that there isn't a whole lot that is really important. Like almost everything else Cajun, that is a strength as much as a weakness. In the end, Cajuns have the greatest strength of all—they are just good people.

About the Author



Gary M. Lavergne is a retired Director of Admissions Research and Policy Analysis for The University of Texas at Austin. He has authored four books and is the winner of the Writers' League of Texas Award for Best Book of Non-fiction, the Carr P. Collins Award for Best Work of Non-fiction by the Texas Institute of Letters, and the Coral Horton Tullis Memorial Prize for Best Book on Texas History by the Texas State Historical Association. He has also written for the New York Times, CNN, and numerous magazines and scholarly journals. He is an elected member of the Texas Institute of Letters and has appeared on DATELINE NBC, the Today Show, Good Morning America, the History Channel, Biography, American Justice, The Discovery Channel and many other network and cable news shows.