

## The French Frontier of Settlement in Louisiana : Some Observations on Cultural Change in Mamou Prairie

Gerald L. Gold

Volume 23, Number 59, 1979

Le Québec et l'Amérique française : 2- La Louisiane

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/021437ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/021437ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

### ISSN

0007-9766 (print)

1708-8968 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Gold, G. L. (1979). The French Frontier of Settlement in Louisiana : Some Observations on Cultural Change in Mamou Prairie. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 23(59), 263–280. <https://doi.org/10.7202/021437ar>

### Article abstract

Changes in Cajun culture of the Southwestern Prairies of Louisiana can best be explained through the ethnohistorical study of pre-1952 cotton sharecropping communities, and the subsequent displacement of the tenant farmers to service centres. Isolation of the sharecroppers was culturally-reinforced by a strong egalitarian ideology. From this milieu, Cajun music emerged as a marker of an indigenous Louisiana francophone society. The decline of cotton cultivation reversed the demographic balance between countryside and village and favoured the emergence of merchant and service strata composed of former farmers. The new bourgeoisie sought means of cultural revival through the reinterpretation of rural culture in a town context. Using radio, newspapers and the strong external support of folk "purists" they selectively cultivated ethnic differences. French was strengthened in a public context even though it continued to decline in private and familial contexts.

The response to this transformation differs among occupation groups. Retired sharecroppers in Mamou, the most "Cajun" in their everyday retention of "traditional" social and linguistic behaviour, are the least likely to advocate the survival of that culture and its transmission to another generation.

## THE FRENCH FRONTIER OF SETTLEMENT IN LOUISIANA: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON CULTURE CHANGE IN MAMOU PRAIRIE

by

Gerald L. GOLD

*Department of Anthropology, York University, Downsview, Ontario, M3J 1P3*

### ABSTRACT

Changes in Cajun culture of the Southwestern Prairies of Louisiana can best be explained through the ethnohistorical study of pre-1952 cotton sharecropping communities, and the subsequent displacement of the tenant farmers to service centres. Isolation of the sharecroppers was culturally-reinforced by a strong egalitarian ideology. From this milieu, Cajun music emerged as a marker of an indigenous Louisiana francophone society. The decline of cotton cultivation reversed the demographic balance between countryside and village and favoured the emergence of merchant and service strata composed of former farmers. The new bourgeoisie sought means of cultural revival through the reinterpretation of rural culture in a town context. Using radio, newspapers and the strong external support of folk "purists" they selectively cultivated ethnic differences. French was strengthened in a public context even though it continued to decline in private and familial contexts.

The response to this transformation differs among occupation groups. Retired sharecroppers in Mamou, the most "Cajun" in their everyday retention of "traditional" social and linguistic behaviour, are the least likely to advocate the survival of that culture and its transmission to another generation.

**KEY WORDS:** Cajun, cultural revival, Louisiana, sharecropping, urbanization

### RÉSUMÉ

**Gerald L. GOLD: Le front français du peuplement en Louisiane : réflexions sur les mutations culturelles à Mamou Prairie**

C'est à travers l'étude ethno-historique des communautés de métayers d'avant 1952, et des déplacements subséquents des tenanciers vers les petites villes, que l'on peut le mieux interpréter les mutations culturelles cadjines des « Prairies » du sud-ouest de la Louisiane. L'isolement des métayers francophones fut renforcé par une idéologie égalitaire. De ce milieu, la musique cadjine émergea comme l'un des indices de la société louisianaise francophone. Le déclin de la culture du coton entraîna des perturbations dans l'équilibre démographique entre le milieu agricole et le village, favorisant ainsi l'éclosion d'une classe marchande issue des rangs des agriculteurs. Au moyen d'une réinterprétation de la culture rurale en milieu urbain, cette nouvelle bourgeoisie chercha à garantir la survivance culturelle. Utilisant la radio, les journaux, et se servant de l'appui externe des « puristes » du folklore, ils exploitèrent d'une manière sélective les traits ethniques. Bien que promu sur la place publique, le français continua à se dévaloriser en milieu privé ou familial.

L'impact de cette transformation diffère selon les groupes. Les métayers à la retraite de Mamou, les plus authentiquement cadjins par leur attachement quotidien aux valeurs sociales et linguistiques traditionnelles, sont les moins susceptibles de promouvoir la survivance et la transmission de cette culture.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** Cadjin, survivance culturelle, Louisiane, métayer, urbanisation

Tu pouvais homestead 200 arpents de terre. Tu couchais 9 jours là-dessus, là tu envoyais ça là-bas au gouvernement. Je connais pas où c'tait... j'coutait 25 piasses... tu faisais ta maison. Ça mettait un an. Ça donnait des coups de main, le monde s'aidait beaucoup dans ce temps-là...

Là c'était pour toi la terre... les petites récoltes, des bêtes qu'élevait dehors. C'était *grand, grand prairie*... j'avais pas rien.

(Retired Mamou farmer and story-teller)

To talk of a *French frontier of settlement* in the Great Southwestern Prairies of Louisiana is to identify two simultaneous and interconnected processes; the first, is that of a frontier of European settlement where communities have flourished and withered with successive economic and technological changes. The second process, and that which is of concern in this discussion, is the cultural transformation of the frontier, and its continuing permutation within the relatively short period of settlement. These two processes, the demographic and the cultural, first emerged in the production of cotton, corn and sweet potatoes (*coton-mais-patates*) most of which were produced by tenants through share-cropping arrangements with local landlords. These rural households later shifted to the village service centres after technological changes in the cotton industry and after an economic re-organization of farming in which rice and soybeans replaced the historic staple of cotton. This most recent change followed the Second World War and was accompanied by a massive out-migration from the countryside. The concentration in villages was a centrifugal process which led to the rapid collapse of rural communities and to the burgeoning of a special type of small town.

The displacement from the countryside also led to the emergence of a Cajun commercial and white collar middle class, a group that was willing to take dramatic and visible measures to deploy publicly their Cajun French identity. This regional or popular consciousness of Cajun leaders was particularly significant in that the Cajuns, who had never had a national ethnic elite, could hardly have turned to the white Creole families of the towns who demonstrated little interest in the preservation of "Acadian" language and culture.

Our comparative study of the cultural and social base of three Louisiana regions (Dorais, Gold and Waddell, 1976) supports the assertion that resettlement on the Prairies and its consequences for nurturing ethnic identity in the Prairie towns may be unique to this sub-region of what is now referred to as "Acadiana"<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in the Prairie region, oral tradition has persisted strongly through constant renewal and reinterpretation. The Prairies has also been the most successful of the regions of Southern Louisiana, in excluding the extremes of mass merchandising capitalism while retaining a public role for French in business, public services, regional politics, broadcasting and festivals. Specifically, our hypothesis is that *the retention and even the extension of French in the Prairie towns, and its tentative revival in new contexts are related historically to the Cajun settlement pattern and to the social and economic differentiation in cotton farming that emerged in the 19th century*. The outcome of economic, social and moral homogeneity in the French-speaking farming communities is clearly reflected in statements by ex-tenant farmers on the settlement of Mamou Prairie and the development of the village and then the town of Mamou.

#### SETTLEMENT IN MAMOU PRAIRIE—A FRANCOPHONE MELTING POT?

Y a pas rien pur dans un Cadjin... Ça pourrait être leur grand-père, ou plus loin que ça, qui venait directement de la France. Mais y a un tas qui leur grand-père venait de la Canada ou de Nova Scotia. Ça c'est pas « Acadien »... Je connais d'Américains... venu ici des années passées et leur petits a commencé à ramasser du français cadjin... Ça peut être des nègres, des mondes de couleur. C'est tout un boiling pot !

(Merchant, age 45)

Mamou and the Prairie of Mamou are situated on the northwestern boundary of French Louisiana 34 miles west of Opelousas, 30 miles north of Crowley and Interstate 10. Several miles to the north, within the very limits of its outlying hamlets, are the piney woods and the abrupt beginning of anglophone North Louisiana (figure 1).

With the town limits now surrounded by wide expanses of rice and soy beans, a casual observer might be easily persuaded that the Prairie has always had a low population density, with farmsteads scattered across the polder-like landscape. Yet the historical reality is diametrically opposite to the contemporary demographic and spatial reality. Share-cropping neighbourhoods once radiated outward from Mamou in all directions. Each of these was a named neighbourhood—l'Anse Meg, La Pointe aux Pins, Tit Mamou, Duralde, Grand Louis, Anse Johnson, La Pinière, Soileau, l'Anse des Priens Noirs, and others, where several dozen families of sharecroppers worked shares for a town-based landowning-class or, in fewer cases, for the descendents of the original homesteader who, occupied the "big house" nearby. These communities, the *anses* (or the coves), as they are still called, were once the focii of the intensive daily interaction of the French-speaking farmers of the Prairie. (figure 2).

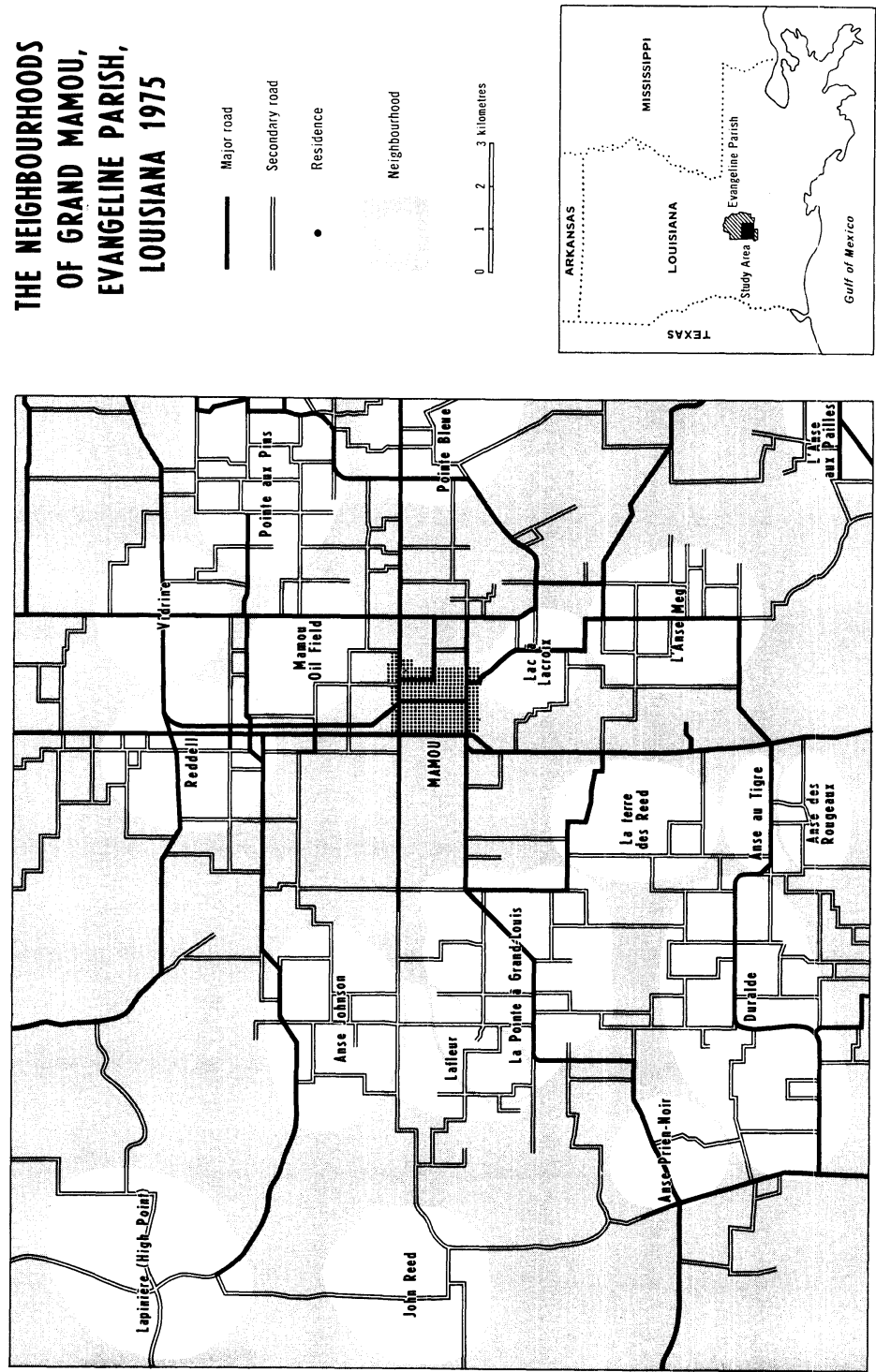
The tiny village center, from its founding in 1910, was primarily an outpost of the cotton merchants, the commerce of national capitalism and the agencies of the state. As long as tenant farming continued to be the predominant economic arrangement—from the days of Reconstruction at least to the early 1950's—the majority of the Prairie population remained in the coves. As it was elsewhere in the South (Vance, 1932, 203) compulsory English schooling was slowly introduced beginning in the late 1920's. Initially, schooling was fitted into the child labour demands of the tenant farmer's seasonal cycle and French remained in the coves. As it was elsewhere in the South (Vance, 1932, p. 203) compulsory cannot be explained by the common cultural origin of Cajun farmers.

The Prairie-dwellers share a single Cajun culture with a distinctive regional dialect that is Louisiana Acadian in origin. However, most of the francophone families in Mamou—Fontenot, Soileau, Deshotels, Fuselier, and Guillory—came directly from France<sup>2</sup>. While others, the Tates, the Reeds, the Wests, and the O'Connors come from Ireland or Anglo-America. Still others, came from Savoy (Pierotti) and Germany (Shenayder). Some of the large families, such as Guidry, and Cormier, are Acadian in ancestry. Many others have intermarried with Acadians. Surnames in the black population (15% of Evangeline Parish) are either distinctively Anglo-American (Thomas) or Cajun names adopted from white families—Fontenot, Guillory, Ardoin.

However, among the small group of *gens de couleur* or *créoles*, most of whom live in three of Mamou's rural communities, family names are derived directly from a group of endogamous families, many of whom claim European and Indian ancestry (Papillon, Gradney, Celestine, Larochelle, Deculus). Family origin is a critical marker or the *gens de couleur* who historically had a special racial and ethnic status on the eastern fringe of the Southwestern Prairie and elsewhere in Louisiana (Opelousas) (McTigue, 1975; Woods, 1972). The socially isolated *gens de couleur* have long emphasized the Frenchness of their identities, rather than that of being "less than white". In Mamou, *créoles* are among the most prosperous farmers. The only other group to retain an ethnic separateness are the Germans who own the largest of Mamou's owner-operated farms. But they have kept aloof of local Cajun politics and out of town cliques. The Germans hire black fieldhands, and have maintained amicable relations with their neighbours while building up modernized and extensive farms<sup>3</sup>.

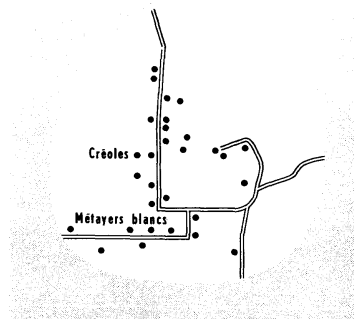
More significant than family origin in Mamou Prairie is its insignificance! When asked where their families came from, all but a handful of householders provide a vague desi-

Figure 1

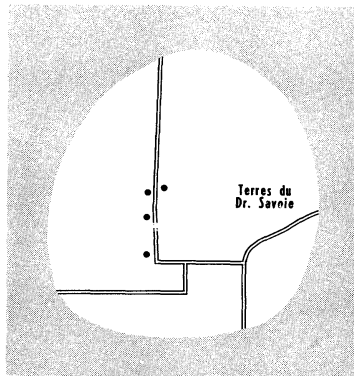


# CHANGING RESIDENCE PATTERNS IN SELECTED NEIGHBOURHOODS, GRAND MAMOU 1937-1975

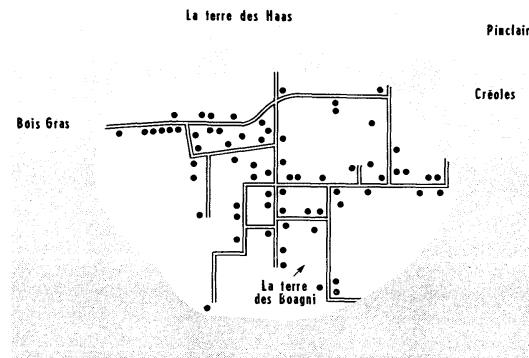
1937 JOHN REED



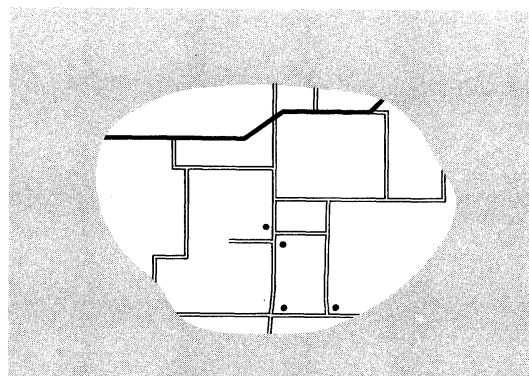
1975



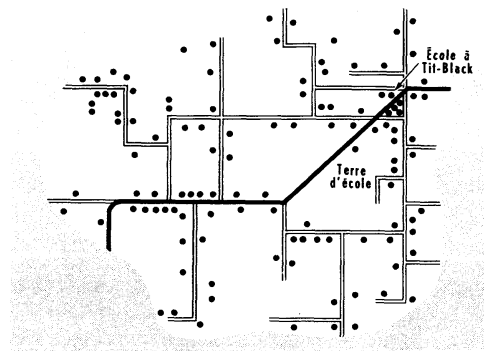
1937 ANSE JOHNSON



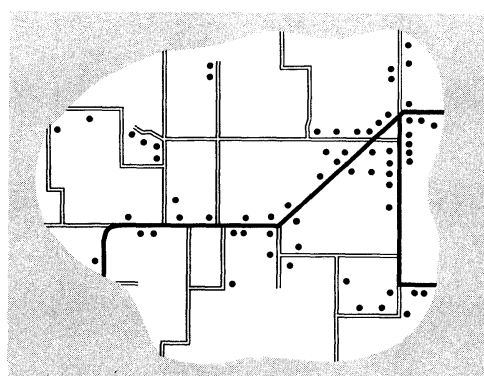
1975



1937 LA POINTE À GRAND-LOUIS



1975



0 1 2 3 kilometres

Figure 2

gnation such as "la Canada", "Nova Scotia" (sometimes erroneously), "la France", "Italy", or "Irish". Some have caught on to the relatively recent interest in tracing their roots although few have actually tried. Others refer to one of the rural coves or to the synthetic and indigenous character of their identities...

Un Cadjin ? C'est du sang mêlé. Y'a des différents qualités... des Français, des Allemands, des chauvages, y'avait des Américains. Et le monde se marie mêlé. (Retired farmer)

The only social groups who explicitly and repeatedly maintain a genealogical charter are two of the wealthiest families in town who, when asked, will emphasize their original ties with France or with Nova Scotia and, as mentioned previously, the *gens de couleur*, for whom genealogy is an essential component of identity.

This selective erasure or retention of identity is somewhat clarified when placed into the perspective of language retention and completely understandable when seen in the context of the organization of production. The latter must await a discussion of the coves, but the absorption of anglophones into the French-speaking population is immediately relevant. In the words of a middle-aged retired farmer:

Pop (un McGhee), pouvait parler en anglais, i'avait un tas de ses parents qui pouvait parler en anglais. l'pouvait signer son nom, mais i'avait pas d'éducation, i'faisait récolte toute sa vie. C'était un petit habitant et i'étais élevé misérable. Il était à la part (métayer) et i'restait chez mon grandpère.

Although such assimilation into the Cajun group was only occasionally accomplished by *Américains*, only rarely did it go the other way for those who stayed on the Prairie. Parenton found a similar pattern in North Lafourche Parish in the 1930's but even there, the direction of linguistic assimilation had begun to change (Parenton and Smith, 1938). In Mamou Prairie in the very same period, some parents are reported to have spoken English with each other (one parent being anglophone) and French with their children to give them a better chance in the world of the coves.

But in spite of this homogeneity in Mamou Prairie, there has consistently been a strong awareness between the people of the Prairie and those who live in the Piney woods seven miles to the north. These are *Américains*—different in language, diet, religion and in general lifestyle. An insurance agent (age 41) perceives the differences this way:

À Pine Prairie et Liston, sept milles, en allant dans le nord, c'est différent affreux... c'est des *cous rouges*... just 7 milles et la vie est changée. C'est tout différent.

Physically, the lines is marked by a small bayou and a bridge where treed prairie gives way to higher land. It is significant, as Bertrand (1955, p. 21 et 27-8) has also noted, that the boundary is "buffered" by dispersed populations of *gens de couleur* and mixed-blood Indians ("red-bones") the latter being the remnants of a pluralistic "Creole Louisiana" (Waddell, this issue). The rural communities of John Reed and Pinclair represent such interstitial areas (figure 2) with a diminishing colony of *créoles*, and a growing group of white Cajun farmers. Here, as in all of the rural communities that surround Mamou, there has been considerable population flux over seventy years of settlement.

In its short history, the Prairie of Mamou has been affected by three significant changes in transport technology: bayou navigation, that brought the first major settlement, railroads that created the towns, and highways that ended the physical isolation of the Prairie from the cities of Lafayette and Lake Charles. Each of these changes came at the same time as new inputs of government presence and the expansion of smallscale enterprise. Moreover, these transformations are also related to dramatic shifts in the importance of "Frenchness" and of "Cajun-ness" in both the private and public domains.

## FRONTIER AT THE END OF THE BAYOUS

The bayou era brought settlers and freight to Mamou overland from Washington, the terminus of westbound bayou traffic from New Orleans, some 30 miles east of where the village of Mamou was to be built. Washington remained a major access route to the Southwestern Prairie until the late 19th century. Nearby Opelousas, the seat of St. Landry Parish, was the region's most important commercial and administrative centre. In this era, most settlers in Mamou Prairie lived on homestead land, although some were tenant farmers, from the beginning of their residence in the region. The isolation of the Prairie settlers was explained to a retired farmer by his father:

Y avait pas de moyenne... autrement que de faire venir du fret d'un bayou (Courtableu) au Washington au ras d'Opelousas. Y'a toujours un vieux warehouse au bord du bayou-là. Les petits bateaux i venaient, i amenaient du fret, des groceries, y avait pas un autre place en nul part ici tu pouvais en acheter.

Peddlers sold basic foodstuffs and tools in the Prairie settlements where cash was scarce. At the turn of the century, there was only one store in what was to become Mamou. Other merchants were itinerant:

Ça amenait des petites boutiques là. Les marchands... allaient là-bas à Washington au wagon pour chercher des groceries, puis i vendaient... partout dans la campagne. Moi je me rappelle quand y avait une boutique dans Mamou ici.

Even in this era, cotton was a major crop, although through most of the 19th century Prairie cotton was ginned by hand and, until the civil war, with the labour of black slaves (nearly 90 on a single large farm in the rural community of Pointe aux Pins).

The end of slavery in Louisiana, and the rise of the poor white share-croppers, was mirrored in the French-speaking Prairie as share-cropping in cotton gained momentum in the late 19th century. Accordingly, one of the first functions of the new village of Mamou would be to act as a place for the ginning of cotton and its shipment by rail to urban markets. Land accumulation, however, had already begun, aided by the economic crises that followed the Civil War. By 1910, financial interest in Opelousas, including several members of the Jewish community<sup>4</sup>, owned large tracts of land on Mamou Prairie.

The developers of Mamou worked in conjunction with the expansion of the Rock Island railroad from Crowley to Alexandria. Its first prominent citizens, were among the largest (Cajun) landowners. The largest number of landowners in 1910 were still small Cajun farmers who were relatively uninvolved in village affairs. Mamou, incorporated on January 4, 1911 was thus "created" by developer C.C. Duson who had planned the founding of Eunice 10 miles to the south and Crowley, 29 miles further down the track. The town was laid out in a grid between the new Rock Island track and the Southern Pacific track that ran parallel to it, three-fourths of a mile to the east. The nearest village was Chataignier, several miles southeast, where a church had been established in 1858. Both embryonic Prairie communities were incorporated into the newly-created Evangeline Parish in 1910, but Mamou failed to become the parish seat, that prize being taken by the more influential leaders of the town of Ville Platte, 8 miles to the northeast (Gahn, 1973).

For the dwellers of the coves, Mamou was, by present standards, a boisterous frontier community of 400 (1915), with three dance halls where cajun music was played, a saloon, several warehouses by the railroad tracks, and a country doctor. The first one-room school was housed in Mayo Vidrine's dance hall (Reed, 1977), but, by the early 1930's, Huey Long's expansion of public education had been felt by all the residents of the Prairies.



Schooling was in English only and children were severely reprimanded for speaking French on the school grounds. Mamou, inhabited by francophone Cajuns, had become the point of entry for American culture. The French language, the sole means of communication in the coves, gradually assumed a secondary role in public life.

Significantly, the mercantile elite of the village did little to stem the tide of anglicization. They had no ties with national francophone organizations (there were none) and there was no ethnic parish system that favoured the interests of the Prairie Cajuns. Moreover, the village and regional elites were socially segregated from the people of the coves, who sometimes referred to them as *gros chiens*. The wealthiest of these persons, those who operated the four cotton gins, lent money against future crops, and controlled local politics. They also had extensive interpersonal relations with the *habitant* sharecroppers of the coves. These were paternalistic, patron-client ties, with the negotiations carried out entirely in French.

One unilingual farmer, now in his 60's, explains how the owner of the latest cotton gin (*moulin à coton*) acted in the roles of banker and financial broker before the establishment of a permanent Mamou bank in the early 1950's. His position grew in importance after the pre-war failure of the town's first bank.

On faisait affaires des années avec Andraste Landreneau. L'prêtait de l'argent après que la banque a cassé. À Mamou, c'était lui qui était le banquier. L'a eu un moulin à coton. Lui, l'empruntait de l'argent avec les grosses et il prêtait à les habitants.

Farmers could not make it through the year without borrowing:

Ceux-là qui se défendaient bien, faut emprunter. Y'en a qui pouvait pas emprunter. Lui (Andraste), il prêtait de l'argent à huit piasses pour cent par mois. Lui il empruntait pour 6 de les grosses banques... Apparemment, y' a du monde qui s'en lamentait, mais moi, j'étais bon pour moi. C'est lui qui m'a aidé acheter ma terre ici (1957).

The landed families of Mamou were able to provide professional educations for some of their children, and in most cases, obtained sizeable lots in town before the large influx of sharecroppers after 1945. In fact, originally much of the village land belonged to the La-Haye family, whose descendants operated a rice mill and were instrumental in the founding of the bank (Gahn, 1973). Some of the Fuseliers, the LaHayes and other large landowners, accumulated land during the depression, sometimes from indebted farmers, keeping on large numbers of share-croppers and hired hands. By the end of the depression, the number of small landowners continued to dwindle and large tracts of land were rented to tenants by absentee landlords, anglophones or *Américains*, who lived in Ville Platte or in Opelousas. For example, a substantial part of one rural neighbourhood, l'Anse Johnson, residents insist that the Haas family of Opelousas would never sell to farmers looking for security and that the share-croppers' houses and equipment were permitted to deteriorate. Although poverty was not restricted to the coves (not all the village families were prosperous), even those who worked in the cotton warehouses, managed to send their children to outside schools. An important example is the father of the town's first lawyer, who managed to send his son to the Baptist Academy in Church Point. The poorest group in the village was a small group of black field hands (*les nègres du village*) whom all farmers would hire during the cotton harvest.

It could be said that events in the small village centre, were a forewarning of a major transformation in the scattered coves. The farmers, whether landowners or share-croppers, were, from the beginning of the century, dependent on the vagaries of the cotton market and the cash economy for supplementary income. After the 1930's the rural Cajuns also were dependent on the State for compulsory education. Both of these dependencies

became more important after World War II when the share-croppers' social and economic system collapsed, together with cotton production and the communities of the coves.

### HABITANT AND BOURGEOIS

Small landowners had from two to a half dozen or more share-croppers working their land. Large landowners had as many as several dozen tenants. Each family farmed between 20 and 30 acres of cotton, corn and sweet potatoes or rice, depending on the size of their labour force. Share-croppers, the *habitants à la part* (the term *habitant* is used for all farmers), struck an annual oral contract with a landowner (*le bourgeois*) to work either "thirds" (farmer provides mules, livestock, tools, seed and feed) or "halves" (everything provided by the *bourgeois* except the labour) (Post, 1974, p. 141-4). The latter was particularly onerous for the farmer, who frequently had to both give up half of his replacement or subsistence fund as well as plant only what the landowner thought should be planted. Landlords wanted more cotton and less corn and vegetables but this could and did place the farmer into greater debt with the supply stores in the village and with the *bourgeois* who guaranteed the debt. Vance describes this dilemma as characteristic of the mono-cropping cotton system in all of the American South. Dependence on a non-food staple by relatively unskilled farmers left the tenant vulnerable to wildly fluctuating cotton prices, buyers with no storage facilities, and high interest rates that encouraged vicious cycles of debt (Vance, 1929, p. 168-173).

Spatially, the clusters of rural settlements led to a dense settlement pattern within the coves, in which small frame houses were almost always within sight of each other. Socially, the implication was a two strata system in the countryside, with the share-croppers forming an egalitarian and regionally-mobile society in which local identities or cove identities were very strong. The *habitant's* defense against the landowner was both a determination to move on after the harvest for a better deal from another landlord and an extensive system of cooperative labour and food-sharing which acted as insurance that no family would go hungry and that no one's field would remain untilled. However, despite the economic differences between *bourgeois* and farmer, there is no clear evidence that, within Mamou itself, the latter formed distinctive agrarian gentry in the countryside. These rural landholding families, locally referred to as "land poor", often included share-croppers and their kindred, even the sons and daughters of the landowner. Given the peculiarities of Louisiana's Napoleonic code with regard to inheritance, many properties were fragmented into very small holdings. In this way, a few share-croppers were able to purchase some of their land, but subdivision appears to have been of greatest benefit to the large landowners.

The village had its representatives of the regional elite: the LaHaye family of merchants and bankers, and the Savoy, a family of doctors descended from a selfless but enterprising country physician who came to Mamou in the 1930's and purchased large tracts of valuable but forested land in the distant neighbourhood of La Pinière. These families far exceeded in status the owners of the cotton mills. The LaHayes and the Savoy's came to form a professional elite of bankers and doctors; the former opened a bank in 1952 and the latter founded a thriving regional hospital. But both of these families are associated with the village and not the coves, despite their extensive landholdings.

The coves were thus relatively egalitarian communities that fostered a cooperative parochialism centred around relations of work in cotton production. The wealthiest and the poorest inhabitants of the Prairie lived in the village. A majority of the household heads in the town of Mamou, in 1976, had had some experience as share-croppers in one or several of these coves. Most came to town after a tour of duty in the service, or after wage work in Texas in the oilfields, or in the Merchant Marine. A few found local jobs, and even

fewer stayed with share-cropping into the 1960's, when they came to the town to retire on welfare or old age pension cheques. Whatever their life history, all informants dwell on the arduous work of cotton cultivation as a common work experience that ties them together and separates them from others who did not share the tribulations of cotton share-cropping.

The experience of share-cropping often began with marriage, although most newly-married couples were already quite adept at farming from the time-consuming tasks of hoeing and picking cotton for their parents. The Cajun of the coves married the girl that he met at the *bal*, in the fields picking cotton, or at a relative's house (the three most frequent replies). When the *Cadjin* selected a local *cadjine*, he would, after the crops were in, make his bargain with a *bourgeois*. In the words of a former share-cropper (now a rice farmer), this was a major *rite de passage* in a farmer's life:

L'année j'ai me marié, je restais chez ein de mes oncles, j'y aidais à faire la récolte... quand la récolte a été finie je me marié et j'ai gone.

Je travaillais pour un habitant riche. Quand je suis revenu à Mamou j'ai acheté un team et j'ai commencé à faire du coton, du maïs...

Quand i te louait, i te demandait comment de coton pouvait planter? Si t'avais une famille, tu pouvais planter peut-être 8, 10, 12 acres... y voulait que tu puisses travailler bien... et 10, 15 acres de maïs, faire des patates... Si tu faisais pas... i loue ta place à une autre. J'entendais bien avec mon boss... Ya du monde ça travaillait, ça chauffait, pouvait pas avoir du crédit... Le boss se mettait bon pour 150 piasses dans les boutiques.

In practice, few share-croppers would stay with one boss or in one neighbourhood during their working years. Most would manage about a half dozen major moves and reside in at least two rural communities. Thus share-cropping not only favoured local endogamy, but also led to the creation of large and mobile kin networks that spilled over the boundaries of neighbourhoods and eventually, with out-migration, reached into the village.

Cooperative labour, the "*coup de main*" assured that everyone would make ends meet, and was a way of being less dependent on the cash economy by drawing resources beyond the generalized reciprocity of kin ties. The same farmer insists that he would not have been able to survive without cooperative labour.

La deuxième récolte j'ai fait, j'ai eu une grande fièvre, j'ai resté à peu près dans le lit, ça venu proche à crever.

Quand est venu le printemps, mes voisins a tous planté leur récolte... Mon boss a été voir tous les voisins alentours. Dix-huit ou vingt teams i'a eu, i ont labouré toute ma terre à maïs, ont planté mon maïs plein la journée... Ça arrive à du monde, je vas aider.

Although wage labour conflicted with the demands of cotton production (April through November or December), many share-croppers sought seasonal work with large rice farmers in the region, particularly with Germans in Acadia Parish and *Américains* from Gueydan. During and after the war years a large number of Mamou families migrated to Lake Charles, Louisiana, or to Port Arthur and other Texas communities. For some, this was a means of accumulating land, for others, it was an act of desperation (Leblanc and Louder, this issue):

On a ramassé le coton à la main. On vendait ce coton à 5 sous la livre. Un bal de coton au dessus de 500 livres te rapporte 25 piasses. Là faillait que tu lâches le 1/3 sur le 25 piasses. Ça t'es resté peut-être 15-16 piasses à ta part. C'était un bal de coton que tu avais planté, travaillé, et vendu — ça avec des pauvres bétailles à charrue.

## THE ENCAPSULATED WORLD OF THE COVES

The rural communities were made up of groups of kindred and neighbours or *sociétés* as they were called. More than simply a cluster of houses the *sociétés* were the foci of local loyalties and of networks of reciprocity. In some coves there were small general stores, a school-house, a cane or a corn mill, and occasionally, a chapel. Neighbourhood loyalties ran high and each neighbourhood had its "bully", who met with the champions of other neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods also had their own musicians and there are cajun waltzes and "two-steps" named for practically every cove in Mamou Prairie. Often this is the community where they were first played (e.g. Duralde Waltz, l'Anse Meg Waltz and les Blues de la Pinière). Neighbours were guaranteed a share of fresh meat through the rotating *boucherie du bloc*. Even festivals were cove-centred, and before Lent, most communities ran their own *Mardi Gras à Cheval* when masked riders danced for chicken and rice in a house to house procession.

Since few of the communities were racially mixed, a guarded civility reigned between members of the same sex, usually between males. Blacks and Creoles of colour (*gens de couleur*) each had their own dances, and their own variants of cajun music. Nevertheless, music and local horse racing were two domains where there was always considerable inter-racial contact.

The *bal de maison* was a neighbourhood affair in the share-cropping communities. There were no automobiles to carry people to night clubs and money was scarce. An accordionist recalls that these were a focal point of social life, the ambiance of which was often marred by fighting, stabbings and shootings.

J'ai joué ein tas de bals dans les maisons. Y en avait dans la semaine, où on débarrassait des fois deux salles pour danser... on jouait d'la musique dans le chemin en allant.

Much of the cajun music played today was created for the *bals* of the rural communities. The themes of many of the songs reflect the joys and hardship of family life in the coves. Prominent is the theme going away to work and returning to an unfaithful lover. Also important are courting themes (going to the dance, difficult relationship with a girl's mother, death of a lover, jealousy), songs of life crises such as being an orphan, an alcoholic, or a destitute hobo. Work and religion were separated from the *bal*, and there are only a few Prairie songs that mention either God or agricultural toil. There are no songs that refer directly to events in Cajun history such as the Acadian deportation or the westward migration. The oral tradition of the Prairie, while undoubtedly influenced by its cultural component, is indigenous to the encapsulated world in which it was generated. In other words, it can be regarded as a traditional ethnic boundary marker or as an element of primordial identity for a people who have come out of a unique historical context. Recently, the music of the western French frontier has been generalized to some of the other regions of French Louisiana, although its accordion-moved laments are not as appreciated by the fishermen and trappers of the southeastern bayous. Understanding the displacement and the redefinition of "traditional" culture adds another dimension to socio-demographic changes in the Prairie.

As early as 1945, life in the coves was transformed radically from the pre-war years. A critical peak was reached in 1950-1952. With the mechanization of agriculture in Mamou Prairie the village began to fill with rural migrants. Demographically, this transition is observable in Table One, where the growth of the incorporated village is compared to that of Ward 3, its closest civil-political unit in the countryside. The gravity of the demographic shift shows up even more clearly in agricultural statistics since well over half of the country-dwellers are not involved in agriculturally-related work.

Table 1

## MAMOU, EVANGELINE PARISH AND 'WARD THREE' — POPULATION CHANGES FROM 1920 TO 1970

	1920	1930	% change	1940	%	1950	%	1960	%	1970	%
MAMOU (village) .....	649	800	23,3	1 379	72,4	2 254	62,0	2 928	29,9	3 275	11,9
WARD 3 .....	5 785	6 829	18,0	7 342	7,5	7 155	- 2,5	6 320	-11,7	6 585	4,2
EVANGELINE PARISH .....	23 485	24 483	8,5	30 497	19,7	31 629	3,7	31 634	0,0	31 932	0,9

Source: U.S. Census, 1940, 1960, 1970.

Mamou had expanded rapidly in the late forties reaching a population of 2 254, 72.4% over the pre-war figure (table 1). The town registered another 62% gain between 1950 and 1960. The decade of the sixties saw a slower growth rate of 29.9% but the share-cropping neighbourhoods were already emptied (Ward 3 loses population), leaving commercial farmers, ex-urbanites, and the rural poor to populate the countryside. It follows that we could only locate several dozen active farmers in a stratified sample of what is left of three rural communities (Grand Louis, Duralde, and l'Anse Meg), and all of these farms are devoted solely to rice and soybean cultivation. There are no remaining share-croppers and no cotton farms although many farmers rent land from retired farmers or from former farming families. Also, most farms are over 200 acres in size. In comparison, in 1930, Evangeline Parish had 3 842 cotton farms (83.3% of all farms in the parish) of which 86.6% were under 50 acres in size and 75.5% were farmed under a tenancy arrangement, with 3.7% of these tenants paying cash rents!

In less than forty years Mamou Prairie had changed from petty commodity production to capital-intensive agriculture. The culture of the coves was shunted to the village, while the village tempered its reliance on agriculture as new opportunities arose in offshore oil drilling, and Mamou expanded commercially and attracted government and urban institutions. The consequences for ethnic boundaries and for what had been the French Frontier in southern Louisiana are significant.

#### EXODUS FROM THE COVES

It is difficult to find a single explanation for the abandonment of the coves, although the non-profitability of cotton production, the costs of mechanization, and the attractiveness of wage labour in the petrochemical industry were all factors. Nonetheless, even in the early 1950's, a number of young men tried to begin a farming career by share-cropping in the traditional manner, only to learn that this option was no longer viable. For instance, according to the younger brother of an insurance agent:

Il allait chez le boss pour lui emprunter d'argent pour faire l'année... Quand il a eu fini [le boss] de faire l'arrangement, i dit à mon frère 'asteure tu vas avoir besoin de tant et tant de graines de coton.' Et mon frère dit—'ouais'. l'dit: 'Moi, je vas te vendre ça ici...!' et il a ôté ça sur le montant j'avait prêté. La i dit: 'tu vas avoir besoin de fumier', et il a calculé combien de fumier j'allait avoir besoin. Et quand il a ôté dessus le montant d'argent pour tout, j'restait proche pas d'argent.

Ça fait mon frère, il a dit à mon père: le boss il fait du bon business... lui, il a toujours autant d'argent, et moi, je suis toujours pauvre'. *C'est joliment comme ça la fin de l'habitant dans le temps.* Y a des années passées, que l'habitant il a pas d'argent—ça prenait pas un tas d'argent pour vivre... On se chauffait avec une cheminée, on coupait notre bois, et on avait des lampes... L'élasticité, on avait pas.

For whatever specific reason families migrated to town, there were so many new arrivals that land became scarce and the cost of living rose sharply within the village. Dozens of small businesses were established saturating virtually every possible line of self-employed "traditional" skills employment. Within a two year period (1950-1952), the Savoy family built their long-planned hospital, the LaHayes with financing of other land-owning and commercial families opened their bank, a school teacher launched a Mamou page in the Ville Platte weekly newspaper. The LaHayes also built a rice mill which was to symbolize a rapid and massive switch from labour-intensive cotton to capital-intensive rice production. Then in 1952, a Rotary Club was started with the largest merchants and the professionals as the founding members. Mamou rapidly began to acquire the veneer of the

class system of urban Louisiana, although most of its population still was guided by the egalitarian ideology of the coves.

It is in this period that the strongest pressures for anglo-conformity were exerted by parents on their children and, at least indirectly, by the schools. Almost to the year, the generation born after 1950 was forced to learn English, and French language use began to decline in public contexts. Conversions away from Catholicism, mostly through exogamy, had begun in the 19th century, but were accelerated by the demographic mobility of the 1950's. The Catholic Church itself did little to stem the "Americanization" of the village, although a French language mass was instituted early on Sunday mornings. In contrast to the isolation of the coves, schools and television represent the strongest exposure that the Cajuns of Mamou Prairie have ever had to American national culture.

When all appeared to be irremediably lost, in a momentous turn of events, the merchants of the town together with the town's first lawyer and a school teacher-editor of the newspaper, began to manifest their concern for retaining the most valued elements of cultural difference between them and the *Américains*. The rural Mardi Gras "run" which had been either discontinued or had fallen into disrepute, was reinstituted with the lawyer as *capitaine* and the town's merchants as active masked riders and organizers. Cajun musicians from Mamou began to record their music in nearby Ville Platte and the school teacher started a live Cajun music and news radio show broadcast from a used car showroom. Two other broadcasters from Mamou began similar shows several years later. All of these broadcasts were supported by the small merchants and tradesmen who paid minimal sums for French-language advertising (Gold, 1976a).

The songs of the share-cropping coves have become essential Saturday listening and the music of the *bals de maison* and the village dance halls is played weekly at night clubs and in new countryside dance halls where friends and relatives meet on Saturday evenings. Ethnic holidays were added to the "festival" of Mardi Gras, "Cajun Day" and an expanded version of traditionally important "onze de novembre" festivities when politicians publicly announce their political plans. All of these occasions are tailored to the French-speaking generation that had moved from the coves. The response to the "new" institutions varies from one segment of the village population to another. The most significant contrast is that of the merchants and new professionals as opposed to the retired ex-share-croppers.

#### DIFFERENT WAYS OF BEING CAJUN—SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION IN MAMOU

The new group of merchants, tradesmen and teachers in Mamou and other Prairie town are tied together by friendships, political alliances and the older standby of kinship ties in a way that is found in no other group in the community. While retired share-croppers live out their days within a constantly-shrinking circle of kin and neighbours, the merchants and tradesmen form peer groups that cut across neighbourhoods and family ties (Gold, 1978). The only other occupations to be nearly as strongly connected on peer group lines are the offshore oil-workers and the rice farmers, and their involvement in the public life of the town is minimal.

Significant in the present analysis is the role of the new commercial white-collar group in actively redefining the symbols of "traditional" identity from the coves and in deploying these symbols in a regional context. As such, the frontier of Frenchness has shifted from the share-cropping community to an occupational stratum. Being Cajun for this group becomes a valued option that is generated by common interests rather than by the common

experience of work in the coves. There is also an important continuity between the shared legacy of the merchants as ex-farmers and the symbols that they have chosen to validate in a new context. In other words, what appears to be a "popular revival" of Cajun culture (Gold, 1976b) comes both from the grass-roots and is a selective management of certain symbols and markers of the past. Primordality is regenerated through symbols that attempt to extend the communities of the earlier days to a more complex setting.

Speaking Cajun French is both a valued and a valuable asset for the merchants, assuring them a virtually protected market within Mamou. French is the language most used in everyday business transactions in such establishments as the town's largest car dealer, the police station, the bars and restaurants, repair shops, the numerous groceries, and small stores and by construction crews. It is also used, but with less frequency, in the post office, the band and between school teachers.

It should not be concluded that the merchant group uses French in all public and private contexts. As with other Cajuns in Mamou, most merchants interviewed, including the leaders of popular revival, have socialized their children in English, and in a number of cases, these children are only passively bilingual. Furthermore, it is the context that determines language use and the business context is frequently more French-speaking than the home, except when parents are visiting. English predominates in parent-teacher events and in all public education although private conversations between teachers are sometimes in French. English also prevails in establishments serving teenagers or young adults such as drive-in restaurants and at a community centre. In general, the merchants are the most aware of the situational value of Cajun French and its value as an instrument of collective identity. They are also an active group in local politics, which has been carried on almost exclusively in French (Gold, 1979). Also, it is this group that in 1978 launched the *Mamou Prairie*, a weekly newspaper, as a means of furthering public support for their campaign to support the survival of Cajun culture.

The retention of traditional institutions extends to occasions such as the *boucherie*, the *coup de main*, and the Cajun *bal*, all of which are still functions in a modified form even if their original purpose has long since disappeared. Given their attention to "traditional" Cajun culture, the advocates of popular revival have the most contact with francophones from Québec, France, Belgium and Switzerland, and with the American national folk festival. The outsiders seek from contact with the remnants an "authentic" Cajun French culture and the Mamou group derives considerable regional legitimacy therefrom. Significantly, these advocates of cultural revival at first received greater support outside their community than within their own region where Cajun French and Cajun music have taken longer to recover from the stigma ascribed to them during the first contact with urban American culture. The outside contacts legitimate the symbols of Cajunness in a manner that might have been accomplished fifty years ago were there to have been a national organization of Louisiana Cajuns at the time. The cultivation of ethnic difference comes at a time when those who define ethnic ideologies have a relatively receptive audience, people already structurally assimilated into middle class American society. It is striking that those ex-share-croppers who spent their career in farming and who had few options in the village, also have a different notion of ethnic difference and of the value of the culture of the coves.

Initial analysis of interviews in one of twelve sample neighborhoods within the town shows that almost two-thirds of the inhabitants of the older parts of the community can be classified as retired share-croppers. Of this group, the vast majority have given up the various service jobs they obtained upon arrival in the village and most depend on social security or welfare to survive.



The social relationships of these former cove-dwellers remain structurally similar to former networks of the coves. Qualitatively, these relationships have atrophied in the village context. Most inter-personal ties are kin ties. When the families became more dispersed, these relations were more difficult to maintain. Most of the ex-share-croppers are functionally unilingual French-speakers who can cope best with the changed world around them by staying close to home and near the services that they can get in their own language from the bilingual merchants and professionals. Sitting on their porches or standing at the fence with a neighbour, they attempt to recreate the sociability of the old days that disappeared with air conditioning and television.

The retired share-croppers have much the same perception of ethnic difference that they had when they lived in the rural coves. This is often a negative, stigmatized identity in that being Cajun is seen as an ascribed obstacle that prevents them from reaping the full benefits of the society around them. This stigmatization even surfaces in their children:

[switching to English]... I don't think that I'm Cajun but if I were somewhere else, they would think that I was. To me, a Cajun is an older person, like my grandmother and grandfather, who knows the old ways, the ways they used to have—but I don't think that it's necessarily someone who talks funny.

When we went to school, we said things like "*mais yes*" and I say that all the time. They'd say: "look at that Cajun" and laugh—not to be mean—but just to say... so I guess that I am.

(Woman, 39)

## CONCLUSION

This comparison of the situational uses or non-use of ethnicity by merchants and by retired share-croppers was intended to underscore the original hypothesis that "Cajunness" and "Frenchness" in the present context must be related to the historical pattern of settlement and of cotton cultivation in the rural communities. Most of the elements of what is now recognized as "traditional culture" were developed during the most intense period of share-cropping between Reconstruction and the end of World War II. The experience of the coves shared directly or indirectly by most householders in Mamou, contributes to egalitarian sentiments that cross-cut the socio-economic differences of the village. Family ties and loyalties still relate to the rural communities and to political alliances that were nurtured during the height of cotton cultivation. The legacy of the French Frontier even touches new occupational groups such as offshore oil workers who tend to follow the lead of the merchants and new professionals in seeking to preserve certain aspects of cove culture as markers of their Cajun identity.

There is a singular irony in the situation whereby those who cannot build their social networks beyond the primary ties of the coves, the former and retired share-croppers, the unilingual francophones, and the uneducated, are also the "most Cajun" in terms of absolute cultural retention. They are the means of assuring cultural and linguistic survival, although they rarely are more than passive ethnic advocates. It is becoming clear that the merchant-professional leaders of "popular revival" have been intent on salvaging what they can from the elderly Cajuns who live their oral tradition without consciously choosing to sustain it.

Further analysis of the Mamou data is explicitly concerned with the ability of those advocating popular revival to carry their message in its new context. Of particular importance is whether they will be able to socialize a generation of village-born children to value the symbols of a share-cropping past.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Research in Mamou was sponsored by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and by the Canada Council. The results of fieldwork in the winter and summer of 1976 served as a pilot project for further interviewing in St. Martin and Lafourche Parishes. My thanks to Pascal Fuselier, Jean-Claude St. Hilaire and Robert Anderson for their detailed comments on earlier drafts of this paper. A more detailed version of this material will be included in a monograph on Mamou families.

<sup>2</sup> Recent work by Glenn Conrad and his associates (Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana), suggests a need to reevaluate the magnitude and importance of non-Acadian francophone immigration to Louisiana in the 18th and 19th centuries.

<sup>3</sup> Germans on Mamou Prairie may situationally define themselves as Cajuns.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Opelousas Jews, see Ben Kaplan's comparative study of Opelousas, New Iberia and Clinton, Louisiana (Kaplan, 1962). There is little or no consciousness in Mamou of Jews as a separate ethnic group, although there is some evidence that Jews and Italians were excluded from residing in neighbouring Ville Platte.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BERTRAND, Alvin (1955) *The Many Louisianas: Rural Social Areas and Cultural Islands*. Bull. no. 496. Louisiana State University, Agricultural Experiment Station.
- DORAIS, L.J., Gerald L. GOLD, Eric WADDELL (1976) Ethnicity and Adaptation: A Macro-level Study of the "Cajun Revival" in Southern Louisiana. A research proposal submitted to the Ford Foundation.
- GAHN, R. (1973) *The Opelousas Country*. Baton Rouge, Claiton's Publishing.
- GOLD, Gerald, L. (1976b) *Some Notes on the Popular Revival of Cajun Culture*. Paper read at the American Anthropological Association Meeting, Washington, D.C.
- GOLD, Gerald L. (1976a) *Radio and Ethnic Boundaries in French Louisiana*. Paper read at the Northeastern Anthropological Association Meeting, Middletown, Conn.
- GOLD, Gerald, L. (1977) *The French Movement in Louisiana*. Paper given at the American Anthropological Association Meeting Houston, Texas.
- GOLD, Gerald L. (1978) *The Changing Criteria of Social Network in a Cajun Community*. Paper read at a conference on New Directions in Structural Analysis. University of Toronto.
- GOLD, Gerald L. (1979) Cousin and the Gros Chiens: the Limits of Cajun Political Theoric. *Working Papers/Documents de Travail*, no. 1, *Projet Louisiane*.
- KAPLAN, Ben (1962) *The Eternal Stranger*. New York: Bookman Associates.
- McTIGUE, G. (1975) *Forms of Racial Interaction in Louisiana, 1860-1880*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University.
- MILLS, G.B. (1977) *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press.
- PARENTON, V.J. and T.L. SMITH, (1978) Acculturation among the Louisiana French. *American Journal of Sociology*. 44, 365-78.
- POST, L. (1974) *Cajun Sketches from the Prairies*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press.
- REED, Revon, (1976) *Lâche pas la patate, Portrait des Acadiens de la Louisiane*. Montréal, Editions Parti Pris.
- VANCE, Rupert, (1929) *Human Factor in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- VANCE, Rupert, (1932) *Human Geography of the South. A Study in Regional Resources and Human Adequacy*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- WOODS, F.J. (1972) *Marginality and Identity: A Colored Creole Family through ten Generations*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press.

