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“We Know Who We Are”

*An Ethnographic Overview of the Creole Traditions & Community of
Isle Brevelle & Cane River, Louisiana*



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**"We Know Who We Are":
An Ethnographic Overview of the
Creole Community and Traditions of
Isle Brevelle and Cane River, Louisiana**

**By
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**Respectfully Submitted to:
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Errata

Page i -

"Jean Lafitte National Historic Park and Preserve" should read, "Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve. . . ."

Please define "emic" as the point of view from the culture as opposed to the anthropological, descriptive view of the culture - the outsider's point of view(etic).

Page vi -

"Dr. Allison Peña" should read, "Ms. Allison Peña. . . ."

Page 13 -

"The first was literary-folkloristic which resulted in local color novels and romantic history - all but 'outside' authors and artists" should read, "The first was literary-folkloristic which resulted in local color and romantic history - all by 'outside' authors and artists. . . ."

Page 14 -

"Whenever Creoles tried to explain who they were, who they felt they were, it ultimately was, and is, interpreted as an attempt to *passer pour blanc*" should read, "Whenever Creoles tried to explain who they were, who they felt they were, it ultimately was, and is, interpreted as an attempt to *passer pour blanc*, or to pass for white. . . ."

Page 47 -

"Until the populations were so widely dispensed" should read, "Until the populations were so widely dispersed. . . ."

Page 59 -

"*Mardi Gras Couri* . . ." should read, "*Courir de Mardi Gras*. . . ."

Page 73 -

"Cape Jasmine . . ." should read, "Cape Jessamine. . ."

"*Merlitons*" should read, "*Mirlitons*. . ."

Page 101 -

"Powhattan, Louisiana . . ." should read, "Powhatan, Louisiana. . ."

Page 107 -

"It circles a plowed field and is identifiable only be the gates . . ." should read, "It circles a plowed field and is identifiable only by the gates. . ."

Page 117 -

"These have been called 'slave bracelets' by local oldtimers. . . ." should read, "These have been called 'slave bracelets' by local oldtimers, referring to ornamental bracelets, not shackles."

Page 152 -

"People can rent it and use it, but it is no long used weekly . . ." should read, "People can rent it and use it, but it is no longer used weekly. . ."

Page 163 -

"Several Isle Brevelle people give Father Nicky Hussein . . ." should read, "Several Isle Brevelle people credit Father Nicky Hussein. . ."

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Executive Summary

There have been novels, historical accounts, and popular articles written about the Cane River Creoles. Romantic images of a "forgotten" people, of people "lost between" cultures, of people who lost their identity, of people without real genealogical perspectives have been strewn across sixty years of "outsider" research.

With funding from the National Park Service, Jean Lafitte National Historic Park and Preserve, it was decided to pursue an old-fashioned ethnography of Isle Brevelle and adjacent areas of Cane River. Methodologically, the study was to be field oriented with oral interviews, providing a tape archive, and would attempt community involvement at all levels. The St. Augustine Historical Society had developed on Cane River to protect and preserve Creole patrimony and culture. Virtually an all-Creole organization, that group was asked to help, to keep the "study" within their social boundaries, to keep the study as unobtrusive and emic as possible. A local Creole artist, well known for his ethnological photography, Joseph Moran was asked to join Hiram F. Gregory, anthropologist, in the study. The society agreed to help them and has. Some fifty to sixty people have been involved with this study.

Fieldwork, with an on-going review of the literature, has yielded a different picture of Creole culture. It has a national dimension; families who participated in the exodus from rural Louisiana to urban areas not only developed a brokerage system in which relatives found work and provided newcomers with resources until they were established, but also developed homecomings and traditions of children's visiting their rural relatives. As highways and airlines became better, back-and-forth visitation became national as well as local. The apparent loss of Cane River population was in no way to be taken as cultural loss.

By the 1980s, a nationwide network - California, Illinois, New York, and Texas having the largest colonies - had developed. The Creole Heritage Day at Isle Brevelle, held on Augustin Metoyer's birthday, attracts people home from across the nation. Louis Metoyer's *Bayou Talk*, a Creole newspaper based in Los Angeles, now is distributed nationwide; Kathleen Balthazar-Heitzman's *Cane River Trading Company* operates as a news and genealogical newsletter from her home in Climax, New York. Computer networks are developing, and the extended family has become almost a nationwide group. Active politically in state, local and national politics, both secular and ecclesiastical, Creoles have an unbroken history of cultural agenda and leadership in civil rights and multi-racial, multi-cultural issues.

Buried in the traditions of Creole family, church, and foodways are always the roots of cultural transmission and maintenance. A deep reverence for things which operate as metaphors for Creole culture and survival has preserved much of Creole material culture and the Cane River landscape. This study has tried to define Creole identity and to show how it, as the French proverb says, has changed but remained the same, *plus ça change plus c'est la même chose*.

Emphasis has been on sampling a wide range of Creole culture, so the past/present interaction is seen as a dynamic, but maintenance and tradition do not overpower the fact that Isle Brevelle is tied to a wider world. Creoles on Cane River have mastered being who and what they are. There is no identity crisis for the whole culture group, even though stress sometimes rises for individuals. As one leader expresses it, Cane River and Creoles are "comfortable," allowing a place and a culture where people can be who and all that they are.

Over sixty informants, thirty years of conversation, one lifetime of dealing with identity and expression, and a two-year span of fieldwork have produced this view. Creole culture,

defined by Creoles, is for them, by them, and whatever happens, it will remain a state of being "comfortable." It keeps Cane River as its metaphor for continuity and stability, a safe place in nostalgia and for children to visit and slow down in. In short, Creoles see Isle Brevelle, no matter where they go or what they do, as "home."

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of the notable Cane River Creoles of this century who exemplified and protected their culture, especially those who have passed on:

Mr. Lewis "Sonny" Jones
Mr. Tillman Chelette
Mrs. Blanche Monette Sers
Mr. Wood Antee
Mr. and Mrs. Mose Beaudoin
Mr. "Ti' Cont" Constance Chevalier
Mrs. Winnie Conant
Mr. Collin Roque

Mrs. Cecelia Dupree
Mr. Lawrence Mezieres
Mr. Isanor "Tony" Metoyer
Mrs. Annie Dell Severin
Mr. Harvey Kochinsky

Moreover, it is dedicated to those elders who still work at keeping the culture, getting it right and passing it along to their children and grandchildren. Hopefully, this work will contribute to that effort.

It is also hoped that the current generation of Creoles will find something of their world here, too. Younger people are the culture bearers. What happens to a culture is up to its youth. It will be well into the twenty-first century before we will know if our version of Creole culture has survived. We dedicate this work to their efforts as well.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Creole community of Isle Brevelle, adjacent Cane River, and Natchitoches for their help and insight. This is, in many ways, their own study. Joseph Moran's constant efforts are obvious here, but both he and I have had constant encouragement and help throughout this work.

The late Sonny Jones and his family have always led me to understand and appreciate the Creole people, their hospitality and caring attitudes. Mrs. Gloria Jones has never failed to advise us, teach us and guide this work. Unfortunately, Sonny Jones could not see our project to fruition; we hope it would not have disappointed him. I have tried to keep it up to the standards I think he would have wanted.

Terrel Delphin and the St. Augustine Historical Society have unflaggedly supported this effort, hoping it will help guide the National Park Service in their efforts to understand Creole people and culture. My family and I have come to cherish Mrs. Bernadine Delphin and her family and to appreciate their hospitality and generosity more than can be acknowledged here.

As these acknowledgments are written, I can only recall the efforts of John and Janet Colson; their efforts at conserving the Creole heritage have inspired us all.

Mrs. Myra Friedman and Mrs. Marie Dupre, teachers always, have guided us in understanding the change and continuity at the entire Cane River community. Mrs. Marie Roque and her friends at R.S.V.P. not only make beautiful quilts, cakes and conversation, but allowed us to interrupt their days with our sometimes obtuse questions. They were always patient and helpful to us all. Mickey and Diane Moran have spent more of their time on this study than we could have expected and we thank them.

There is appended to this paper a list of all the wonderful people who, over the years, have tried to care for their community and who have shared it with us. We acknowledge their good efforts.

We lost a lot of wise, good people from the Cane River community over the past two years. Fortunately, we had time with them, brief though it was at times, and we dedicate this effort to them. Like the community, we mourn their passing and acknowledge their contributions.

Dr. Kass Byrd has encouraged us, advised and facilitated this work. Her efforts have steered us through the administrative snarls of the university and have helped us more than she admits. We appreciate her help.

Over the course of the project, Mary Linn Wernet and Pati Threatt, of the Cammie G. Henry Research Center at Northwestern State University, provided us with immeasurable help in locating archival material for this report. For this help, we are greatly appreciative.

Ms. Susan Dollar has typed, computed, edited, interviewed and administered throughout this work. We owe her efforts major accolades. It would never have been finished, much less this coherent, without her efforts.

Mrs. Janet Broadway and Ms. Brenda Falcon have transcribed long interviews, fought our use of bad French and Creole and still provided us a set of great documents.

The office of financial affairs, particularly Vice President Carl Jones, Ms. Rita Graves, and Ms. Carla Howell have stood by us and have helped us solve the exigencies of fieldwork and budgets.

We also want to make clear our debt to Jean Lafitte National Historic Park and Preserve and its staff. Particular assistance has come from Dr. Allison Peña. She has been an active player

in this project. She has facilitated all our work, heard our sorrows, solved our problems, and, we hope, enjoyed her involvement in Creole life and research. Hopefully, again, we have met her high expectations.

This work began on the watch of Superintendent Robert Belous, and his concern about adequately hearing the Creole people spurred it along. Newly appointed Superintendent Geraldine Smith has since continued support for this project. Both the community and I appreciate their concern and efforts.

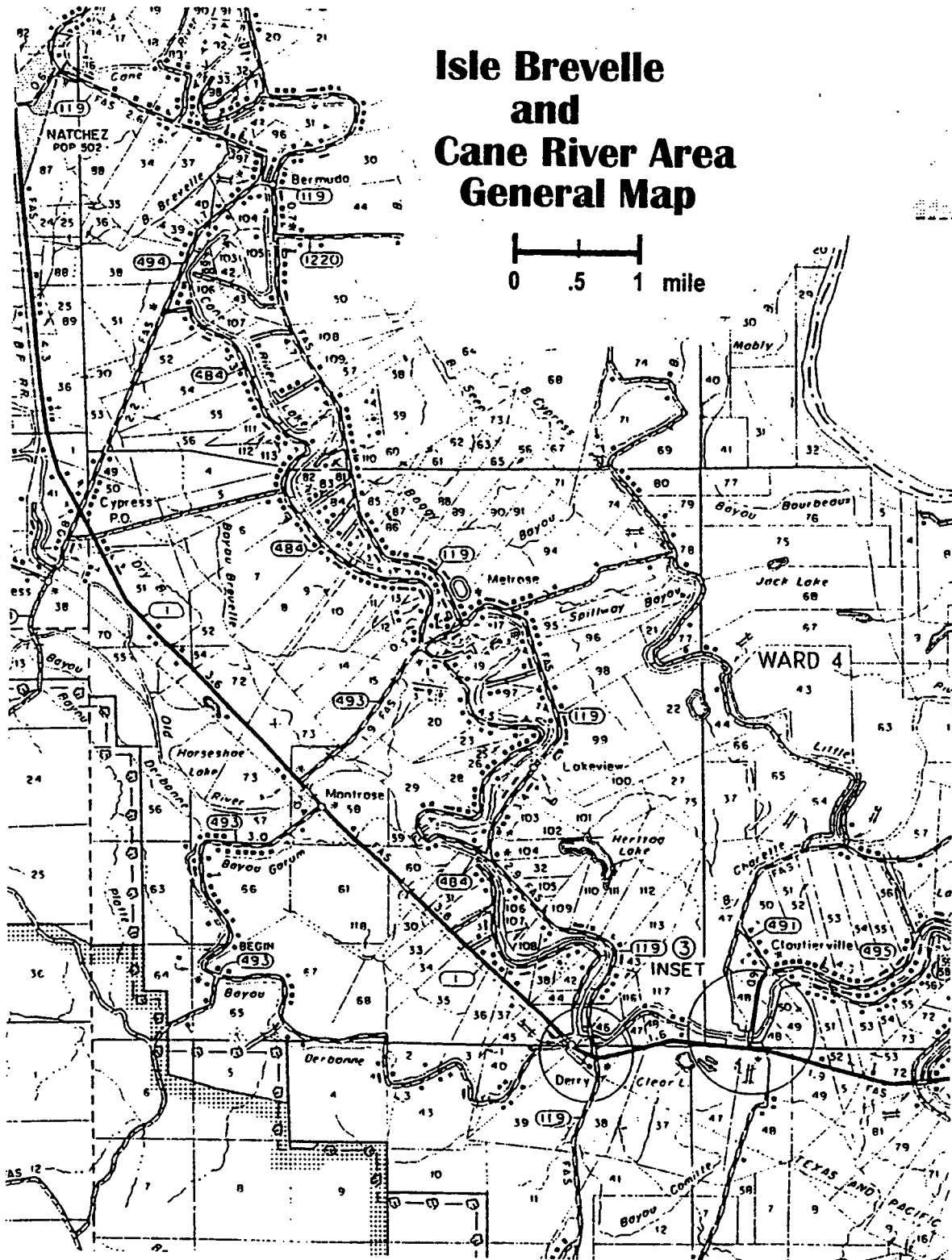
Here I am afraid we have missed someone, but have to end this by thanking my family, particularly Jeanette Fried Gregory, for patience and help. Jeanette and my daughters, Leslie and Susan Gregory, likely know the Creole community better than I do and have always shared their affection for them with us all. Joseph Moran's family, especially Judy Moran and his son and daughters, have aided and abetted our work many ways. They have run errands, been our best informants, and put up with the weird hours and schedules that research imposes on us all. I appreciate their kindness and their friendship.

If there are errors or omissions in this study, I take the responsibility. I realize we are only scanning the obvious elements of Creole culture here. Isle Brevelle and the Creole people deserve a much longer, more intensive effort. I hope they realize that we consider this only a starting point and, as always, will forgive and help correct errors they find.

H.F. Gregory

Isle Brevelle and Cane River Area General Map

0 .5 1 mile



Introduction

When the National Park Service, Jean Lafitte National Historic Park and Preserve, notified the residents of the Natchitoches area of an impending park on Cane River, the Creole community reacted immediately. Representatives from the community along Cane River, particularly Isle Brevelle and Melrose, have attended every public hearing and have sponsored public hearings at St. Augustine Church.

For at least twenty years, the Creole community has been at work protecting its culture and patrimonial resources from outside exploitation.

Inquiries from representatives at the meetings with Secretary of Interior, Bruce Babbitt, and Senator Bennett Johnston (Dem., Louisiana) on Cane River led to the fact that no ethnographic overview was available for Cane River. Consultation between the authors, St. Augustine Historical Society and various community leaders led to the development of this study sponsored by Jean Lafitte National Park. With the encouragement of Superintendent Robert Belous and the park ethnologist, Allison Peña, a research program was funded and initiated. It has continued under the administration of Superintendent Geraldine Smith.

This fieldwork could not have developed without constant community involvement. Joseph Moran became so involved that he stands as a co-author as well as photographer. The leaders of the St. Augustine Historical Society, Terrel Delphin and his family, Mrs. Gloria Jones, and the community as a whole have contributed to this project. H.F. "Pete" Gregory began this work with a community partnership. The whole community has responded in such a way that this is, we hope, more their message than his. As will be seen in the methodological discussion to follow, it is hoped that the National Park Service and any others who wish to know about

Creoles, on Cane River and elsewhere in Louisiana, will realize they should start with the community, not with outside "expertise."

"Inside" outsiders, like Gregory and Moran, can only hope to measure up to the high standards of the community they represent. We thank everyone - over a hundred people at this point - from the community who have actively helped us. We hope we are not too "romantic" nor too pragmatic. Our greatest hope is that this study will still be a "Creole" endeavor. Yet, there is no apology offered here for coming away from this work with the warm, wonderful feeling of Creole culture, an extended family that survives the exigencies of the twentieth century and works at survival into the centuries on the horizon.

Goals of this work soon led to a general overview with specifics about culture, the cultural landscape, and the nature of the community. As is the case with previous works, only the tip of the iceberg is to be found here. Less than two years of active fieldwork in a community of hundreds is likely only, at best, a start for all of us.

Method

This project, funded by a grant (Subagreement #001 to CA7029-4-0013) through Jean Lafitte National Historic Park and Preserve, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, was funded for ten months and was extended for another twelve months.

Fieldwork has concentrated on a combination of techniques. Joseph Moran has helped coordinate fieldwork, directed the project to key consultants and done the field photography which breathes life into this study. His efforts to keep this work "Creole" have given it whatever validity it holds. His photography speaks for itself and needs little, if any, verbal explanation.

Both Gregory and Moran have tried not to disturb the community. Some attempts to tape interviews have been abandoned in favor of old-fashioned, informal interviews which relieve much of the tension engendered by taping. Still, in keeping with the proposed scope of work, we have taped when we could. Hopefully, the taped informal interviews represent a broad spectrum of people connected to Isle Brevelle and Cane River. The tapes represent opportunity rather than formal interviews in most cases and, doubtless, have suffered some for it. However, since we were working with older people in many cases, interviews are fairly non-directive. People along Cane River lead full lives, work hard, and have a range of deeply felt responsibilities to family, jobs, and church. Our project developed its own priority, and the community helped when and if it could. Again, we have tried to be unobtrusive.

We have averaged working a minimum of five to ten hours per week on this overview. Inasmuch as we could not work full-time, either Gregory or Moran, other responsibilities have confused scheduling and the fact that Creole schedules have to mesh with work has not allowed participant observation to develop as it normally would.

Some glitches seem related to taping. Neither Moran nor I have had trouble taping informally, but in order to get permission, tapes have formalized. Some traditional people have politely declined to make tapes, but none have declined interview time. In order to avoid complications, we have avoided direct quotes where we could. Many Creole people have told us their intentions are to write their own books. Once we were invited to just settle down and help with that.

Gregory's connection to the University has been a blessing and a curse. There is deep respect for education, and Creoles have been involved with Northwestern State University for decades. They continue to hold prominent positions in financial affairs and continuing education. They hold managerial jobs in the properties, library, and the post office. Still, until the 1960s, the University was not open to Creole students. Like African Americans, they had to leave home for post-secondary education. Memories of conflicts over civil rights and the fact that Northwestern was not an institution which defended Creole identity and culture sometimes rise to the surface. Having Creole help, and making this a community rather than a university project as much as possible, has helped. It certainly would have been better to contract directly with the Creole community, but finances would not have allowed that. Methodologically, this has not been an obstacle to overcome, but it has doubtless changed the research orientation of this fieldwork. In spite of the fact that the Gregorys have old connections to the community, many Creoles have articulated clearly that the University is interested in only its students. Whatever prior fieldwork has been seen as training, etc. Unfortunately, none of the Creole university students have been anthropology majors, not to mention, history or related majors. So, the University is cast in its self-maintaining role, extraneous to Creole affairs. At least Creoles have not been too polite to

make their sentiments apparent during this project. Perhaps the relationships with the University will be seen as less manipulative, less self-interested, as more community/university projects can develop.

The community is increasingly interested in its history, genealogy, and culture. Moreover, the community has begun to empower itself so that presentation is powered by the community, not outside interests. Hopefully, the National Park Service can understand the need to help with that process.

Some interviewees had more formal things they wanted to say. Terrel Delphin had given much thought to the "Creole Definition" and his work was so personal, but so important that we have requested he allow us to append his text under his copyright so that he does not encumber his own right to use it elsewhere (See Appendix I). Again, we let the individuals understand copyright and rights to this material.

In order not to bother people, we have used a few earlier tapes, all obscure and unpublished. These have all been made by local people and were made available to us. Particularly helpful in this respect were several tapes made available through the R.S.V.P. Program, directed by Mrs. Marie Roque. The Louisiana Folklife Center also opened its files to us.

With the good services of Mickey Moran, a series of strip maps were made of the community. We toured and taped and located people. It turned into a combination of note-taking and mapping. Joseph Moran helped, particularly on the upper (northern) areas.

Each field interview was preceded by formalizing a minimal set of cultural inquiries, and some later interviews grew from these. Questionnaires were not employed. Ms. Susan Dollar,

well known to the community, helped with interviews, particularly those with community women. Her perspectives on questions about education, women's roles and community relations added much to those interviews.

Early in this project, we were fortunate in that our project overlapped with the development of a community-based workshop on Heritage Area Development. Mrs. Marie Roque, Mrs. Janet Colson, Mrs. Lair LaCour, Terrel Delphin, and Mickey Moran made presentations for that, and they also collaborated on the definition of important sites and landmarks along Isle Brevelle and Cane River. We discussed identity, settlement pattern and historical development, kinship and genealogy, folkways and food ways - including a Creole meal at St. Augustine Church Hall. Not only was this important for the workshop and its participants, but it accumulated much of the information used in this project as well. Consultants were paid, nominal amounts, but that freed their tapes for our use here. It also was a voluntary project and one the St. Augustine Historical Society took great interest in.

This whole project developed with an understanding that we try in every way to allow the community control over the information. Written sections were passed around for comment, and we kept almost constant contact with Terrel Delphin, Mrs. Marie Roque, and Mrs. Gloria Jones. They were our first-line "connections" to the community. Copies of tapes and texts will be provided the St. Augustine Historical Society as our agreement with the National Park Service stipulated.

Participant observation has also given us some deep insights into the Creole community. There have been weddings, wakes and funerals, church fairs, homecomings, christenings, First Communion, Confirmations, Creole Heritage Day, dances, trail rides, and a whole series of

community-based activities. The agricultural year and the ecclesiastical year have merged and passed. The extension was necessary for that.

Through the Creole newspaper, *Bayou Talk*, and the help of Louis Metoyer, editor, we gain insights into the national comings and goings of the people from Cane River. Theresa Demery, Janet Colson, and Kathleen Balthazar-Heitzman have explained the genealogical "web" in such a way that it guides us into the depth and strength of family and history. Balthazar-Heitzman's *Cane River Trading Company* newsletter has helped tie tradition and family together in a modern, dynamic way. History and genealogy have worked their way subtly into this effort. History, particularly, has been a two-way street for Creole people, as it has been used to write about them, by outsiders. Still, documentation has served to engender pride in their culture and accomplishments and, gradually, to represent their view of their culture. Genealogy is seen locally as important as history. Family is history and the primary vehicle for holding tradition together.

The emic view of Creole has, to the best of our ability, been left alone here. The outside world has long been fascinated with the word, *Creole*. It is, in much of Louisiana, a point of pride and engenders some conflict. The community on Cane River is part of a larger Creole world, and it is actively developing that perspective. Hopefully, that perspective will make its way into this work.

This is merely an introduction to the Creole community on Cane River. It cuts across age, sex, occupation, and economic statuses. We opted early on for a broad sample. Creole life is full, and individuals vary from one to another. Unifying experiences, shared experiences, were what we hoped to find. Life histories sort of worked themselves into this, but that was not our primary goal. It would likely be good to do more life history interviews, but time already needed

expansion and our sample needed to be corrected for that. Rapport needs deeper roots for that.

Whatever errors are contained here are likely the contribution of the principal investigator who sometimes failed to "Creolize" this work as much as the people felt it needed to be. The ethnological theory minimally operative here contains enough good, old-fashioned description in order to compensate for that weakness.

Isle Brevelle is a place, complex in its simplicity, that does not yield easily to the quick overview, and it deserves more time, money and consideration than a few part-time ethnologists, inside or out, have given it here. Hopefully, for a place, sacred to many, at least loved by a lot more, and the people who have created and protected it for generations, this little effort will help the community put some more of its heritage together.

Previous Work and the Community

The Cane River Creoles received historical literary attention early in the nineteenth century when the Freeman-Custis expedition described their community on Cane River (Flores 1984). Both that expedition and another traveler, named Malley, described their ethnicity and mentioned their community (Flores 1984).

Debates about Creole identity seem to have developed in south Louisiana, particularly about New Orleans. The classic acrimonious debates between George Washington Cable, Alc  e Fortier, and Father Adrien Rouquette about Creoles of color have been detailed several places (Jordon and DeCaro 1996:31-59, Dominguez 1979, 1986). The term *Creole* is still emotionally loaded and has long been considered the label of preference by Creoles. So, while whites argued about it, mixed racial and cultural Creoles tried to explain their position (Desdunes 1914). They continue that struggle today.

By the nineteenth century, literary figures began to focus on Cane River, particularly Kate Chopin, whose short stories often seem to have Cane River settings, and since she lived in Cloutierville, she likely was the first local colorist to fictionalize the region (Jordon and DeCaro 1996). The works of George Washington Cable (1883, 1884) brought Creole culture to the attention of the world, too. Eventually recoiling from fierce opposition, Cable slowed down.

The first three decades of the twentieth century saw the literary and artistic crowd move to Melrose Plantation. Mrs. Cammie Henry, *doyenne* of Melrose, brought writers and artists there to work. The folklorist Dorothy Scarborough (1925:19) visited and gave us descriptions from Melrose of race relations, material culture and music. Most notable of these was Lyle Saxon; his novel *Children of Strangers* focused on Creole and African-American relations on

Cane River. Rose Ann Jordon and Frank DeCaro (1996:31-59) have discussed this period of Melrose history as part of their discussion of Louisiana folklore. François Mignon, Lyle Saxon's friend, came to Melrose to visit and remained. He left his impressions, very romanticized, of Cane River and its people: *Cane River Memoires*. This little work is an example of the rich mix of folklore, fact and fantasy that developed in the 1930s.

It would be the 1950s before writers discovered the Cane River Creoles again. Sister Jerome Woods, a nun in the Order of Sisters of Divine Providence, began sociological research at Isle Brevelle. In an era when sociology and anthropology shifted their interests to community studies, Sister Jerome Woods uniquely recognized the power of ethnicity in community development. Moreover, she caught the dynamics of urban migration (Woods 1972) by Creoles.

Recently Lucy Cohen (1984) has noted the inter-marriage of antebellum Chinese with Cane River and Campti Creole families. Particularly, she met the Creole families who accepted these non-white, usually Cuban, additions to the Creole community.

Another clergyman, Father J.J. Callahan (1956) began writing a history of St. Augustine Church and parish which really is the history of the community at Isle Brevelle. Resident priest at the church, Father Callahan was in a unique position - an inside outsider - to understand local historical developments. His history would stand alone until the 1960s.

In that period, the historians Gary Mills and his wife, Elizabeth S. Mills, came to Natchitoches to do historical and genealogical research. Primarily focused on Melrose Plantation, their interests extended to the Creoles. The Mills' work, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*, has become a standard reference on the region. In that it emphasized the role of Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin in the formation of the community, it broke new ground. The

