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“We Know Who We Are”

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



H.F. Gregory, Ph.D.

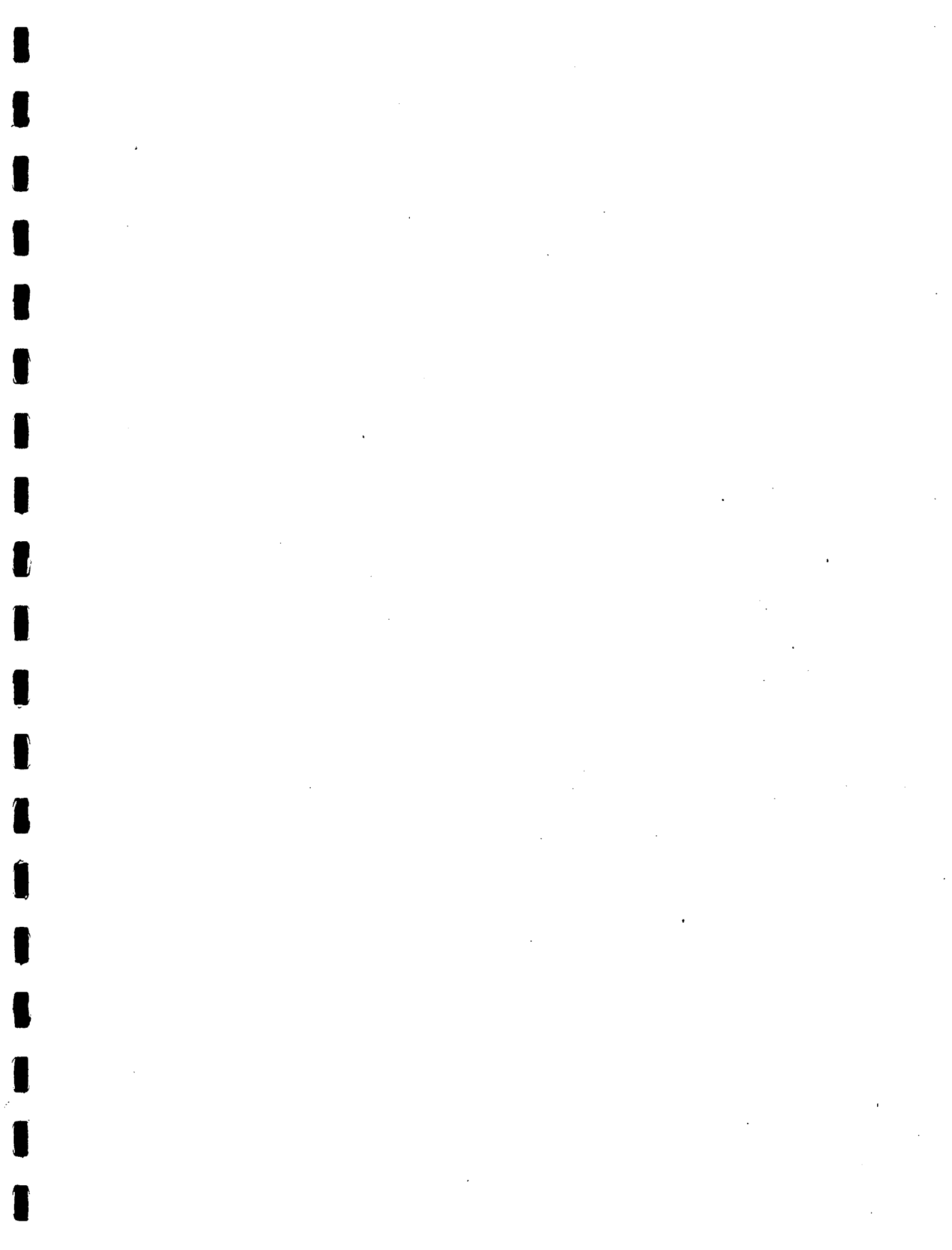
Joseph Moran, M.A.

**"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:
Jean Lafitte National Historic Park and Preserve
U.S. Department of the Interior
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December, 1996



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	Mrs. Cecelia Dupree
Mr. Tillman Chelette	Mr. Lawrence Mezieres
Mrs. Blanche Monette Sers	Mr. Isanor "Tony" Metoyer
Mr. Wood Antee	Mrs. Annie Dell Severin
Mr. and Mrs. Mose Beaudoin	Mr. Harvey Kochinsky
Mr. "Ti' Cont" Constance Chevalier	
Mrs. Winnie Conant	
Mr. Collin Roque	

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.

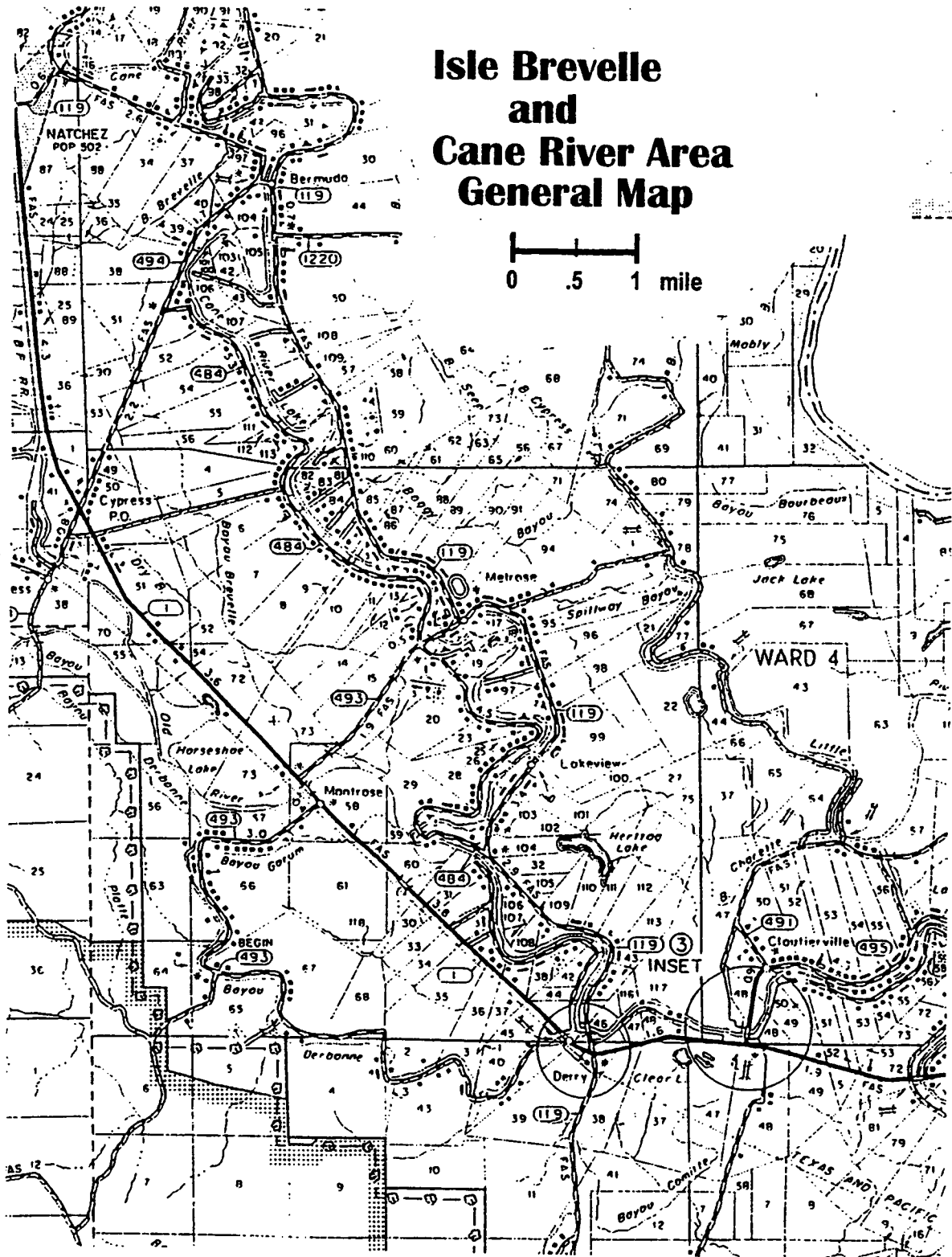
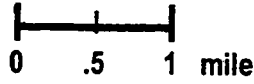
This work began on the watch of Superintendent Robert Belous, and his concern about adequately hearing the Creole people spurred it along. Newly appointed Superintendent Geraldine Smith has since continued support for this project. Both the community and I appreciate their concern and efforts.

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



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 Communions, 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, Alcée 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 Còin-Còin in the formation of the community, it broke new ground. The

Creole community found its description and genealogy of great interest, and the Mills stimulated a wave of local history - from the Creole point of view - which continues. As one Creole author, Kathleen Balthazar-Heitzman (Personal communication 1996), has put it, "The Mills made me aware of our history. That we had history."

The Mills' work seems to have been stimulated by the contradictions that surrounded Melrose Plantation. Sold by the Henry family to a corporate farm and then donated to the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches, Melrose was opened to the public year round, and local legends began to become part of the tours. A local historian, Louis Nardini, pointed out that Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin did not build at Melrose, but it was the plantation of her son, Louis. In fact, he pointed out that her grant and house were upstream, nearer Bermuda, Louisiana. The local preservationists, seeking to rationalize the controversy, engaged Gary Mills, and serious research on Melrose began. His initial work resulted in a small work entitled *Melrose* (Mills 1973). Mills continued his work, extending his interest to the whole Creole community on Cane River. Elizabeth S. Mills began translating the records of St. Francis Church, contributing a valuable tool to local genealogists of whatever group.

By the 1980s, only Father Callahan's work seems to have emanated in the Creole community. Still, younger Creoles were beginning to be interested in their genealogy and history. That interest began developing in several directions: history, genealogy and the arts.

In 1986, Virginia R. Dominguez published a classic work, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*. The Creole controversy had been re-opened, and while not denying African roots, the Creoles maintained their distinct ethnicity as well. It was their traditional position, and the Civil Rights movement in the South had seen their legal status shift,

but their identity had not. Younger Creoles read Dominguez's study and found themselves there. Coupled to earlier work, it reified traditional Creole identity. Creoles retain fiercely the right to be who they think they are.

The obscure work of the Creole Rudolphe Desdunes (1911), *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, had early argued the traditional Creole definition of Creole, and while non-Creoles had argued about it, he held his ground. Contemporary Creoles have now begun a national, if not international, movement to identify themselves as a distinct ethnic group (*Bayou Talk* 1996).

Genealogical studies attracted Creoles early on. A major overview of Creole history and genealogy was begun by Theresa Demery, a graduate student at Northwestern State University in the 1980s (ms in the Cammie Henry Research Center, Watson Library, NSU). Later, she and Janet Ravarre Colson began collaborating on a genealogical database for Louisiana Creole genealogy (See Appendix II). On the west coast, Creoles began gathering and sharing family information. Louis Metoyer and his family began publishing a monthly newspaper called *Bayou Talk* in 1993. Published in Los Angeles, *Bayou Talk* is nationally disseminated.

In the north, inspired by the Mills' work, Kathleen Balthazar-Heitzman started another New York-based newsletter, *Cane River Trading Company*, to further exchange of stories and genealogy among the nationally scattered Creole families. A desk-top publication, *Cane River Trading Company* is widely distributed among Cane River families.

Joseph Moran, a trained artist, mounted a photographic exhibit on the people of Cane River. His black and white photographs spoke clearly of continuity and identity. His drawings, paintings, and photographs have been shown widely. He has also designed and written brochures for the St. Augustine Historical Society, particularly one on the church. He is collaborator in this

study, the "Creole voice" of the team.

A recent Creole artist, Earvin LaCour, has produced a series of local theme paintings. His work stresses the Cane River country. His tryptic, on a discarded door from Melrose Plantation, stresses Creole architecture, *Grandpère 'Gustin*, and St. Augustine Church.

In summary, there seem to be three major intellectual developments that focus on the Cane River Creole community. The first was literary-folkloristic which resulted in local color novels and romantic history - all but "outside" authors and artists; the second was sociological and historical and spawned the two major objective works on sociology and history of the Creole community. The third period has been stimulated by a national awareness of Creole culture. This last period has seen increasing Creole literary, artistic, and research participation, *i.e.* Creoles writing, painting, singing, doing genealogy for themselves, most often by themselves, to insure their children know who and what Creoles are about.

et al.

Creole Identity

Creoles on Cane River have a deep-seated feeling of identity. Their view of their history incorporates the sense that as long as France and Spain ruled Louisiana, they had space in the socio-political structure to exist as a culture. As several Creoles have put it, "There were blacks, Creoles and whites. Then, after the Americans came in, there were only blacks and whites." *American* is still not always a friendly term.

Creoles understand Anglo-American racism, especially their conception of "Negro blood," as a powerful tool for disenfranchisement, leaving them unprotected and at distinct legal and social disadvantages. Their Native American connections became confused in the Spanish period when, in the 1780s, Spain freed Indian slaves in Louisiana. Some were censused as Indians, others as freed slaves, still others as mulattos or mixed and some as blacks. 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*, an effort to deny an African connection. Regardless of their *errata* historical status as a separate, free population, the new American cultural regime had no real place for them. The lack of power came hard to a population that prided itself on its accomplishments: owning property, paying taxes, and working hard. These are ethical considerations still reinforced by the Creole family, their church and community.

Denial of the black status, that is to say powerlessness, was a necessity to maintain Creole identity. Acknowledging it has been necessary too, and in spite of the fact that historically many, if not most, Creoles could have left their region and drifted into the mainstream as whites, most chose to stay together even in distant places. Creoles have traditionally taken care of one another; kinship ties offered a tool for that, brokering jobs and security for those who left Cane River.

Attitudes about Cane River, almost nostalgic on the part of the first generation to leave the river, tend to draw them back. Many left in the 1930-1960 period, but virtually all of them kept their connections. Most moved to cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, and New Orleans. Rural life experiences rapidly turned into nostalgia. One Los Angeles lady recalled, "My daddy thought Louisiana was heaven. He talked to us about it all the time." Whatever the motivation, people came home. Christmas, Easter, other feast days, not to mention funerals, weddings, birthdays and the Fourth of July, almost any excuse set people visiting. The Church Fair in October and the Fourth of July rounded out secular holidays. The Fourth of July correlated with the old *Fête du Blé* or cornfest celebrated by Native Americans in Louisiana and is a first fruits ceremonial time. Whatever the origin, it was a good time to visit. Travel from Isle Brevelle to Chicago, or even Los Angeles, was commonplace. Isolation was certainly not geographic. By the 1950s, frequent cross-country trips were, and still are, common.

Sister Frances Jerome Woods (1972) noted the tendency of Creoles to settle together in some cities, but not in Houston. She attributed that to the fact that they had an easier time in Houston where they blended with Mexicans and other dark-skinned people. Her etic interpretation saw that action as avoiding black racial identity in the cities. Creoles, emically, explain such settlement patterns by the fact that they went to places where they had relatives, people to help them, to broker jobs and resources. Their communities clustered around black Catholic churches, and, in as many ways as they could, they struggled to preserve more traditional lifeways. Again, it was important for many to be Creole as opposed to exclusively white, Mexican, Negro, or Native American - any of the groups which could have, and occasionally did, accept them as individuals. Rather than to "*passer*," the Creoles tended to perpetuate and

maintain their group identity wherever they went.

The military offered most American minorities a "color-blind" institution, but only after World War II. Creoles recall struggles trying to maintain their culture and having to choose either a white or a black identity. In some cases, Creoles in the military, particularly those who chose highly segregated services like the Navy, had to choose to be "white." In the Army, some chose the segregated black units. In either case, they found no comfortable place where they could assert their roots. Some later explained to their children their regrets at not having been able "to be all they were" and at having made a choice either way.

Native American identity was the other alternative. In the first generation, some of the Metoyer family was descended from a *Cannechi* woman, an old eighteenth-century term for Apache slaves in Louisiana, and a part-white, part-black father. Still other families are easily traced to Caddo, Choctaw and Lipan roots. So, in terms of race, they were more genetically Native American ($\frac{1}{2}$) than either white ($\frac{1}{4}$) or black ($\frac{1}{4}$). Consequently, Native American connections can be made for virtually every family. Still, most prefer identity as Creole. Some who lived in the Midwest and Florida have found ready acceptance as Native Americans. One retiree, home at Isle Brevelle from Chicago, sought to organize an Indian group among the families. He was disappointed in the resistance he met. The related Clifton community, with Cane River connections but an Indian identity quest, rejected his efforts to connect with them.

Like white (French or Spanish), black, Native American or Indian mixtures are easily acknowledged, but only as a part of the mix - Creole. Identity is not tribal, not even racial. Contrary to other part-Indian groups in Louisiana, where only very low blood quantum is required and where Native American roots seem to overpower other cultural and racial connections, they

clearly do not on Cane River. Immediately southwest of Cane River, in the hills west of the Cotile region of Rapides Parish, the Clifton community does have a strong Indian identity. Carroll Jones, the free planter of color who raised some 13 children and added that gene pool to Isle Brevelle, had married Catherine Clifton, thought to be Native American. Many from Clifton who have married into Isle Brevelle are Cliftons, Neals, Terrels, Smiths and, of course, the original Jones family. Still, the Cane River families maintain their Creole identity while their cousins at Clifton hold state legislative recognition as an American Indian community. Another significant difference from the Clifton community is that the Cane River people maintain their ties to French culture and Roman Catholicism. The "hill" folks are more likely to be Protestant and to claim Choctaw, Lipan or Caddo connections. Most attempt connections to the Smith/Austin family (Choctaw) or the Thomas/Baptiste/Neal family (Choctaw).

Over the years, other ethnic groups have mixed in: Mexicans, Chinese, Jews, and others. As was the case with Native Americans, each group is acknowledged, but Isle Brevelle identity remains resoundingly Creole. The "mix" is more powerful than the "parts." The Creoles, like their American Indian relations, still feel their loss of status and community sovereignty. In both cases, their situations were complicated by the interposition of American policy at the end of the colonial period. However, the Creoles have never drifted into confusion about who they are. The government has never been a tool to turn them "white" or "Indjan," but only "black," and many rejected that.

So, the Creoles wish to reappropriate their own history. Their heroes and heroines are Creole - their rich heritage created by blending a wealth of cultures and races. Historians and sociologists who have cast them as caught "in between" cultures seem, to the Creoles at least, to

miss the mark. In the first place, their concept of "Creole" involves Old World cultural and biological processes. One has, as the local historians Terrel Delphin and Mickey Moran point out, to look to the Spanish-Portuguese connections to Africans in the seventeenth century to understand the "roots." In spite of a deep respect for Gary Mills's (1977) work on the history of the Cane River families - particularly beginning with Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin and Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer - most Creoles say simply it did not "go far enough." It is not felt widely that Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin is clearly identified as "all black." Little is known of her father and the possibility she was, herself, "Creole" of some West African or West Indian connection is an old tradition on the river.

No matter how the historical roots are elaborated, Creoles are quick to assert their own skill at what the French might call *bricolage*, that is, taking parts from many wholes to build something unique, adaptive, and creative on their own. Over the centuries, Creoles are proud of the fact that they have created a culture of their own - not just on Cane River, but worldwide. They note their involvement in the American Civil Rights Movement with pride. Literally, they see civil rights and equal opportunity - things denied them because of their African heritage - as important to all people. Legally and politically, they have been racially connected to black communities while culturally they have been distinct people, and that is resented as overt racism. Still, they have not denied their activism in the movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and they look with great pride on their efforts to open the socio-economic and political system for Negroes and Creoles alike.

Race, as an identifier, became, as one person put it, "a problem" only when one left home. In town, in school, in the cities - places where people had to "race" themselves - race was a

problem. Blanks for multi-racial or multi-cultural on school applications, driver's licenses, draft registrations, voting registrations, etc. confronted people at all turns. One young Creole lady remembers her white teacher who, when asked to count her students racially, asked the children to stand when she called black or white. The tension she expressed over having to make that choice among her peers haunts others. Blacks have stated they did not "understand" the Creole position, and a number of people have commented that black peers accuse them of being "uppity" or trying to be white. In Creole environments, there is more of what Terrel Delphin has characterized as "comfort." Since children generally know their family and since they learn about race as a cultural category outside the family, people cling strongly to Creoles - seeking their own "comfortable" identity, while not denying nor boasting of their genetic or cultural roots.

The 1960s brought activism to a proud people, and the obvious connections to both cultures became advantageous. For the first time, the bicultural, better educated and more culturally "acceptable" Creoles found themselves in leadership positions in the community. Teachers, law enforcers, lawyers - professional people of all sorts found niches where they could become cultural brokers, for both blacks and Creoles, not to mention for whites.

The 1990s are seeing a resurgence of Creole identity, to be discussed later, but Creole pride and new interest in presenting their culture and history from *their* perspective now powers a statewide, even nationwide, Creole identity.

Language

The French language persists on Cane River, but usage is restricted to the family setting. People under sixty are seldom fluent, but many over that age either can speak French or at least understand it.

Even among the centenarians and octogenarians interviewed, French usage varied. Most know some French, but also most asserted that its use had been restricted for most of their lives.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many elders used French daily but had already begun to limit access of their children to it. Still, contact between Cane River and Creole communities further into south Louisiana continued, and French language usage was constantly reinforced by those social contacts. Dances, homecomings, church celebrations and the rites of passage all offered opportunities for the use of French. Louisiana public schools censored the use of French, and even the nuns at Isle Brevelle failed to teach children in their native tongue, French-Creole.

S.D. Dickinson's discussion (1991) of the Creole *patois* fits Cane River, but there are notable exceptions. People remember relatively standard French which they use with outsiders, but they also know a local dialect which more appropriately would be termed "Creole." Dr. Miguel Fuster, of the University of Valencia in Spain, working on language retention and death, both in Louisiana French and Spanish, notes that French is very strong on lower Cane River (Personal communication 1995). Many people recall Cloutierville was almost monolingual to French well into the 1920-1930 period. Today, as in the past, francophones are more common as one moves south along Cane River. In some cases, too, children were raised by older people who used French more. So, two sisters raised by different people may not have had equal access to the Creole language. One spoke well, the other only a little.

The French language is, also, basically restricted to Creole and white populations along the river. Like Catholicism, the French language is seldom spoken by African Americans. Blacks in the region tend to be protestant and English-speaking. A few, like the late Clementine Hunter, knew French from a long association with Creoles at Melrose Plantation, but she was almost exceptional in that respect.

Fuster (Personal communication 1996) noted that his wife, a native French speaker, found the language on Cane River "standard." Still, elders have also been observed speaking "Creole" with its own particular syntax and pronunciation. One teacher of standard French, raised in the region, Susan Dollar, has noted (Personal communication 1996) that it was very difficult for her to understand the spoken Creole language. Apparently, Creoles speaking to standard French speakers most often modified their speech to that less personal, less colloquial, form. This may have been an unconscious effort or purposeful. It is hard to determine. Barry Ancelet (1994:LVI) recounted a similar experience in south Louisiana when Creole storytellers modified their French unconsciously to make their stories understandable to him, a Cajun French speaker.

Generally, the French Creole on Cane River follows the rules outlined in Ancelet (1994:LVI). For example, personal pronouns are *mo*= I, me; *to*= you; *nous* or *on*= we, us; *vous*= you; formal/ *vous autres*= you all; *ye*= they, them; *li*= he, him, and *la*= she, her. One sentence gives an example of this usage: "*Mo lame pas li,*" meaning, "I don't like him."

As late as the 1960s, a few elderly Creoles were monolingual to French, and others preferred it. Today, at least a dozen good speakers survive on Cane River although more and more French is used only in stories or as isolated words. One elder, in her eighties, speaks well and uses the language with her children, encouraging them to teach her grandchildren. Another

remarked that she “knew words” but could not “make sentences.” Apparently, there is, then, a wide variation in French retention and usage.

One lady recalled that her parents and their friends sent children “outside,” so they could speak French. This exclusion of children from exposure to the French language seems to suggest a deliberate effort by some families to force the children to speak only English.

Some elders reportedly pray in French, but most pray and go to confession in English. For many years, priests at St. Augustine Church have used only English. One person recalled that the nuns at St. Joseph’s school were mostly “Irish,” not French speaking.

People who have “married in” from south Louisiana, Frilot Cove, New Orleans, and other Creole groups, have better control of the language than younger Cane River Creoles. Families so “connected” have more French usage in them. As in most of French Louisiana, Cane River French tends to be familiar rather than polite, no matter what the source.

Joe Sampite, mayor of Natchitoches and raised at Cloutierville, is famous for his line, “I don’t speak French, but I don’t know English either.” Mayor Sampite’s English dialect is heavily French accented, as are the accents of many people on lower Cane River. Creoles, then, “sound Creole” even when they speak English.

Kinship terms, terms of endearment, *ti noms*, and terms for material culture, plants and animals are worked into English paradigms. For instance, people know their *Parrain*, and *Marraine*, as well as *Nonc*’ or *Tante* even if they use English most of the time. Lots of people talk of the *Toussaint*, the word preserved with the elaborate celebration of that feast day. Sister Jerome Woods (1972) was again the first to comment on these usages.

Music is another vehicle for French. People have collections of French music: records

and, more recently, tapes. Allen Metoyer, local band leader, has written only one song in French: *Ma Chère Tee Femme*, but he notes that most music on Cane River has been in English. Still, the late Mrs. Winnie Conant, accordionist, could sing some songs in French.

Still, the Creole English is distinct, easy to identify as having a French accent. Even younger Creoles have some French accent, whether they have studied French or not. Sister Jerome Woods's attempt at rendering this dialect stands alone (1972). West coast Creoles have identified the French language with Creole, saying that and Catholicism are requisite to being Creole (*Bayou Talk* 1995). Ideally, that may be the case, but in reality, the situation is less positive. *evata*

Recent efforts to instill pride in Creole usage are only just beginning. The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) has neglected Louisiana dialects in favor of Canadian or European French. Creoles and 'Cajuns have both been vociferous in their opposition to that emphasis.

Many younger people have studied French in school, but they do not use the language even in social and home situations. However, the swing to Zydeco, Creole and Afro-French music, with the concomitant re-vitalization of the dance hall scene, has begun to pull younger Creoles back towards the French language.

Both Cane River French and English are unique cultural resources of this region. Efforts to preserve them are only now underway. A pan-Creole effort to revive a monthly rotation of dances, moving from community to community and involving the youth from the various Creole groups began in August of 1996. Rougon, Frilot Cove, Grand Marais, Isle Brevelle, and Opelousas youth attended. This new social interaction may add the much needed emphasis to the

maintenance and practice of speaking French. Community-based, this pan-parish *Créolisme* may have the most effect of all efforts to hold on to Creole identity. Cane River Creoles have a major role in that.

A Center for Creole Studies in Louisiana is a popular idea. One of the first priorities of that effort is likely to be a series of detailed linguistic studies of Creole speech, both in Louisiana and the "colonies" nationwide.

Kinship

Nothing seems more dominant on Cane River than kinship. Family overrides many other things and is the strongest community bond.

This does not mean that families exist without social stresses; divorce is not unusual, but the Roman Catholic Church values do constantly reinforce the extended family. Ancestry or "blood" has much to do with who is or is not a Creole. Kinship seems more important than biological characteristics, and almost immediately upon meeting one another, Creoles begin seeking kinship. Sister Jerome Woods noted that Creoles in distant urban areas identified almost instantly with people from the Cane River area of Louisiana. Particularly, this is true of name recognition: Metoyer, Balthazar, Christophe, and others are clear signals of Creole roots (see Appendix III). So, for that matter, are physical appearances. It is not uncommon for people to say to other people that a person resembles another cousin some place. Creoles returning from distant "colonies" begin seeking relatives, making connections, and they return frequently. Some families in the cities have sent their children to uncles, aunts, or grandparents for visits in the summer. These visits may account for some of the warm feelings about Cane River that continue from generation to generation and the nostalgia that people accumulate. It is, from an etic perspective, a constant reification of cultural bonds.

The Fourth of July seems the most intense time of the year for families on Cane River. Individual family reunions occur throughout the year - at least four occurred on Isle Brevelle in 1994-95 - but families consistently try to get together on the Fourth of July. Families usually gather at the homes of the elders, on the river, coming from as far away as Los Angeles and Chicago. They may visit several parties during the day. In 1995, a videographer, himself a



Figure 1: Two men “pull” meat from a roasted pig (*cochon de lait*) for serving at a Fourth of July Family Reunion.

Ancestors of Terrell Alphonse Delphin

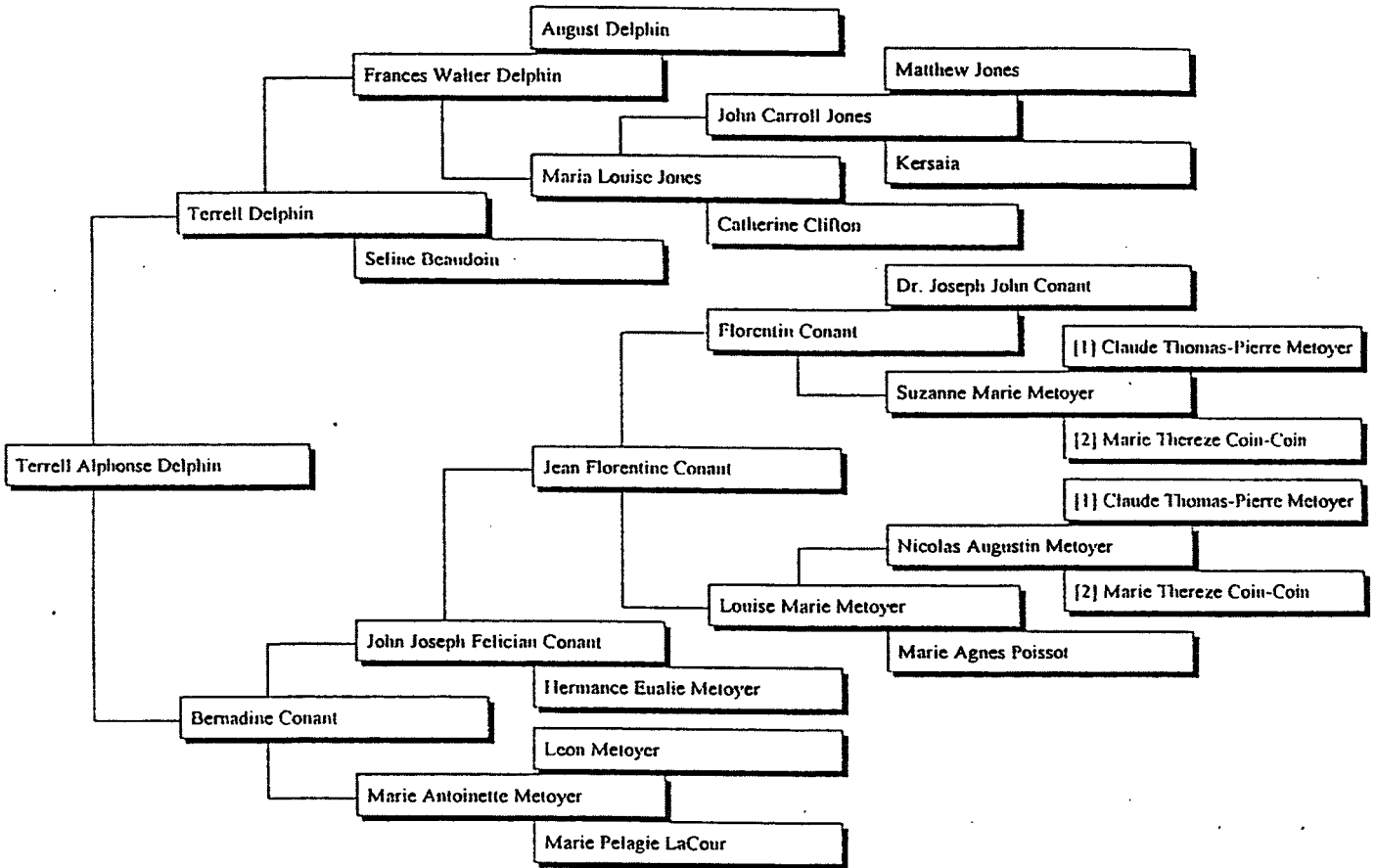


Figure 2: One branch of a Creole family tree reveals names commonly recognized as Creole.

Creole, came home from Florida and began videotaping for family groups. Local historians and cultural leaders were especially interested in his making individual tapes on local history and culture. He moved from party to party easily, being at least a cousin to almost everyone.

Most people try to visit at least both sides of their family on the Fourth. It is both a duty and a pleasure. Food and drink, boat rides, and sometimes fireworks keep everyone busy. Younger people try to do the work while elders visit and rest. Barbecues are popular, and families bring favorite dishes, potluck style (Figure 1). Nobody really seems to know how this holiday was chosen, but a secular holiday free from church obligations remains ideal for focusing on family gatherings.

Genealogy has always been part of Creole culture (Figure 2). So, while race was not discussed very much, kinship was, and is, an important thing. Since Creoles value Creole and Creole marriages highly, identity is important. Endogamy, usually to the third degree of removal, is not only common but smiled upon. First-cousin marriages, while not as acceptable because of Roman Catholic strictures, are not common, although people know of some such unions. These marriages, if church marriages, require dispensation by the Bishop.

Gary Mills (1977:9-15) has concentrated on the first and second generations of the family of Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer and the slave woman, Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin. Further, he points out how other Creoles join the Isle Brevelle-Cane River community.

Community oral traditions differ from Mills's documentary version at various points, but, in general, the community seems comfortable with the Mills presentation, the first to "name names." Sister Jerome Woods created pseudonyms for the people and places of her work, a standard method in the sociological study of a community. People from the communities now

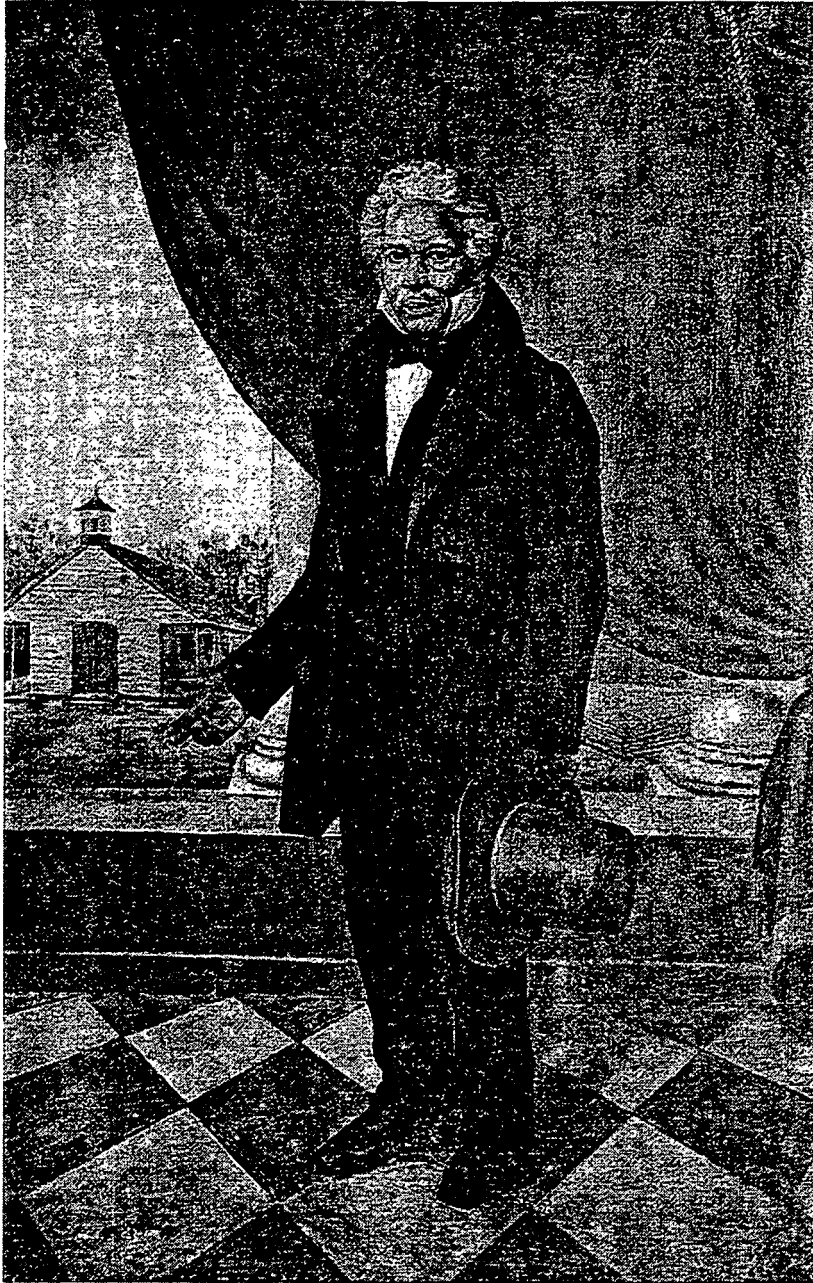


Figure 3: Portrait of Nicholas Augustin Metoyer, traditional patriarch of the Cane River Creole community, with St. Augustine Catholic Church in the background.

