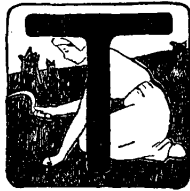


## THE ACADIANS OF LOUISIANA STILL LIVING AND WEAVING AS THEY DID CENTURIES AGO BEFORE THEIR EXILE FROM CANADA: BY CAMPBELL MACLEOD



THE path that leads to the heart of Acadia land in Louisiana is devious and scarcely discernible to the uninitiated. The most picturesque route, supposing one starts from New Orleans, is to go by rail to Morgan City. Take a boat there to New Iberia and catch the sleepy little train to Abbeville, where it is easy enough to find a boatman willing and waiting to pilot interested ones up Vermilion Bayou, the stream along the banks of which the exiles from Grand Pré settled.

This ride up the Bayou, which is ideally beautiful, is a succession of quaint pictures. Moving scenes of such old time tableaux, that one wonders if after all it isn't a comic opera stream, with groups of seventeenth century peasants in effective milkmaid dresses. Along the banks, almost hidden in a swaying veil of gray moss which festoons the cypress and oaks that stand watching, are the homes of the Acadians or, as they are called locally, "Cajuns." No particular type of architecture prevails. But most of the builders have preserved the primitive simplicity of Nova Scotia a century ago. Some of the cottages are pretty as pictures, but the average "Cajun" house consists of a one-room "main part," with another room piled on top of this, which is reached by winding stairs that ascend on the outside. In many places the houses have been patched on until the effect is not unlike that of a squat little train, marked like Napoleon Jackson, "for eternal rest."

The term Acadian, or "Cajun," is used to identify the descendants of the Nova Scotia wanderers, the theme of Longfellow's poem. Those who know these people best will be the first to tell you that "there are 'Cajuns' and 'Cajuns.'" Many of the men who have made chapters in Louisiana's history proudly trace their ancestry back to the exiled farmers of Grand Pré, and there are many descendants of these simple folk who preserve to a remarkable degree the primitive customs of the seventeenth century. They live as their forefathers lived. They can neither read nor write. They can not speak English. Their religion, which is Catholic, is the one tie that binds them to the folk of the

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bigger world. They make a superhuman effort to get to confession once a month, oftentimes driving fifty miles to the church. They are well called Acadians, for the lives they lead have the simplicity of the old shepherds of the hills. Imagine in this day and time a settlement of people, who, a hundred miles from a great city, preserve the pastoral peace and lack of progress that characterized their fathers. The occupation of these people is farming, but such antediluvian methods are employed that they scarcely get from this richest soil in the world daily bread.

They have progressed so slowly as to have become a term of reproach to their modernized neighbors. It is this class of "Cajuns" which presents the most interesting type to the big world to-day. And it is the womankind of these households that are the salt of the race. They have lost none of their grandmothers' thrift and homely virtues. The men have been more aggressive, through Saturday visits to "le grocerie," in picking up shiftless habits and shirking their responsibilities generally.

**W**E WERE the invited guests to "A diner des Acadiens," in the home of one of the most famous weavers of the beautiful Acadian goods. Madame Jules was our hostess and the whole family, from the oldest to the youngest, were waiting for us on the banks of the Bayou. The dwelling house proper sits half a mile back on a green rolling prairie. The path thither was dotted with sleek sheep, goats, cows and horses. The walk leading from Madame's front gate into the house proper is a lily-bordered avenue, and the whiteness of the blossoms is reflected in the gleaming floors and galleries in the background. The "Cajun" housewife is first of all a home maker, and her housekeeping makes a visitor wonder if she ever has occasion to do any spring house cleaning at all.

When you enter the front door of the "Cajun's" house you realize that here is hospitality even Arabian. Your hostess plants on your forehead a kiss and calls you *Mon Amie*. Not only are you her guest but her very dear friend. Indeed, one can find one's mind speculating on how lonely she must have been all these years separated from you! And is not this the perfection of graciousness?

You don't know what the nectar of the gods is until you drink "Cajun" coffee. It is a brew that stimulates the imagination and

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quickens the brain. How they make it is another question. But what they make, is a drink that you will want to make a note of to take with you to Paradise—to leave your order for it instead of the sweet milk of Biblical promise. *Café noir* is to the “Cajun” all that the cocktail is to the clubman—and those who have tested it can realize that, given the opportunities of gratification, this is a thirst that no mortal would pray to have taken from him. They serve this coffee in quantities just enough to tantalize you for more—about four tablespoonfuls in a cup bearing in gilt letters an appeal to “Think of Me” or “Remember Me” which is altogether unnecessary to one who has quaffed the magic brew. He will not forget! Just as you are beginning to grieve that the last drop is gone, dinner is announced. For the “Cajun” takes *café noir* before instead of after eating.

The following menu is appended for those who have not been favored by an invitation to such a feast.

### MENU.

*Gumbo de crevisse.*  
*Cochon de lait.*                      *Du pain mais.*  
*Potato Salade.*                      *Ris Jambalaya.*  
*Fricassée Champignons.*  
*Kush-Kush.*                      *Lait.*                      *Canard Farci.*  
*Ambrosia.*

It may be explained that the *gumbo de crevisse* is crawfish gumbo, one of the dishes for which the “Cajun” cooks of Louisiana are famous. *Cochon de lait* is a roast sucking pig, natural enough looking, as he was borne proudly aloft and deposited in the center of the table by our hostess, to walk off with the gleaming apple between his teeth. The *jambalaya* served with the pig was composed of—what? Truly one who had never tasted it before could not be expected to identify the ingredients. The foundation seemed to be rice flavored with all sorts of mysterious condiments and magical herbs, the whole colored brown and further enriched by the gravy from the pig. *Du pain mais* is corn bread that makes you wonder how people could support bakers’ shops. *Fricassée champignons* is a most delectable dish, wild mushrooms, with a wonderful tan sauce

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poured over them. "Kush-kush" isn't a lullaby—even if it does sound like one, but a dish held in high regard by the "Cajuns," who serve it in a dozen ways. The favorite method, however, is to eat it with syrup or with "claye" clabber. It is simply fried yellow hominy, but you would never identify it by the taste. The *canard farci* was glorified roast wild duck. The crowning joy of the feast—this was most apparent—was the dessert, the *Americaine ambrosia*—the recipe of which had been brought back from a visit to town. This was made of ancient shredded cocoanut, but not one could resist Madame's beaming, prideful eye as she set it before us. Not to eat, and eat appreciatively of that imported delicacy, it was easy enough to perceive, would be a breach of etiquette hard to forgive.

IT WAS largely through the efforts of Miss Patte Gorham Weeks of New Iberia, La., that the "Cajun" women found a market for their handicraft. Miss Weeks has a heart that yearns to help her fellow-women, especially those poor creatures whom Fate has placed so far from Opportunity's door. Living as the "Cajuns" do in isolated places—twenty to fifty miles from the nearest town—it may readily be seen that without help the difficulties of getting the public interested would have been an impossible undertaking. In various hunting trips with her father, Miss Weeks as a child saw and knew these people. She won their confidence and love. As she grew older she saw with understanding eyes the burdens laid upon the women of the families.

There was only one thing they could do superlatively well and that was to weave. And this art was fast dying out, being held in contempt by the younger generations. A plan finally suggested itself to Miss Weeks, and she proceeded to put it into operation. She visited all the homes accessible, and persuaded the housewives to let her see the handiwork of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Among these old spreads were some really wonderful designs and patterns. She argued with the daughters that weaving, if undertaken in the right spirit and as conscientiously as the older women had worked, might bring them in a comfortable income. After having persuaded the "Cajuns" to do the work, it was up to her to dispose of it. She proceeded to write to various arts and crafts guilds and to large department stores. It was necessary in these early days to

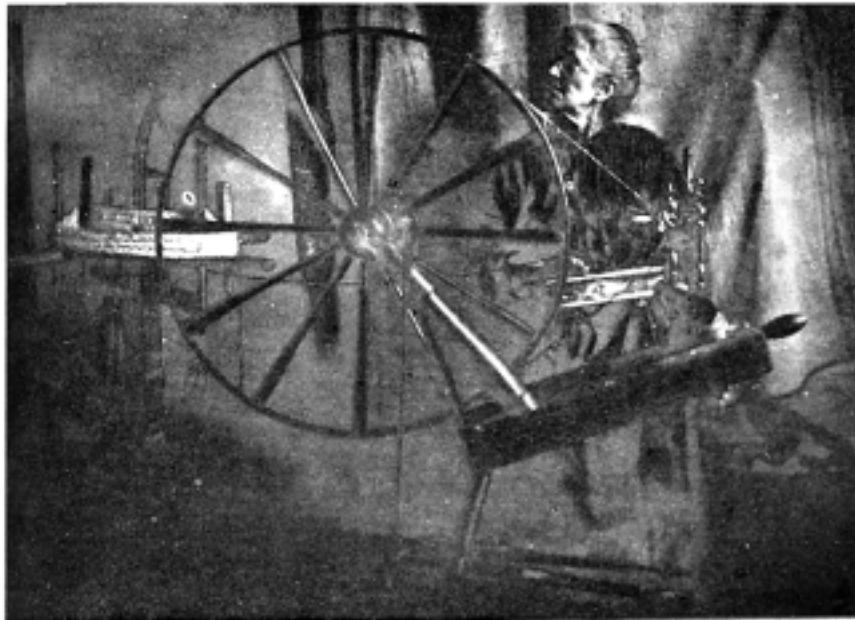
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do much writing to convince possible customers that the articles for sale were as represented. With each blanket and counterpane was sent a short history of the weaver and a picturesque description of the country in which she lived. Persistence finally won the battle, and now there is a wide and steadily increasing demand for the beautiful products of the "Cajun" woman's loom.

The handicrafts of the Acadians are comparatively unknown to even the Southerners. They are doing a number of beautiful things in the way of weaving, making rugs, baskets, and furniture. It is interesting to note in connection with the weaving done by these women that the cotton used is planted, plowed, hoed, and picked by them. It is then carded after the seeds have been taken from it by hand—the cotton gin as yet is not popular with this unprogressive people—and spun into thread which is then woven into "Cajun" cloth. The cotton used is of two kinds, the ordinary cotton of Southern fields and the nankeen, which is used undyed in the production of nankeen colored goods.

"Cajun" homespun may be either wool or cotton or a mixture of both. The excellence of the cloth depends largely on the skill of the weaver. Of this cloth, the commonest known is the bluejeans and cottonade. There are several grades of cottonade. Next to this is a thicker cloth in brown or blue, known as homespun. In addition to these grades, the weavers turn out many different white stuffs, for sheets, coverlids, clothing and blankets. The designs are varied, those in the white being ribbed and cross-woven most effectively.

Blankets woven of either wool or cotton have come to be recognized as among the most excellent articles turned out of these looms, and this is saying a good deal, since all the material woven by the Acadians is practically everlasting. The blankets are woven double width and sewed together. The favorite colors in the old days were the brown or nankeen colors. Next to these comes the blue, colored by indigo, which is planted, tended and converted by some secret process of the "Cajun" woman into a dye that never fades nor loses its original brightness. The different shades of blue that these artists evoke from a pot of this unsightly plant is really remarkable. They range from the most delicate baby blue on through the *ciel* shades to Delft and dark blue. Combined with white, these blues give most beautiful results. Many have found in the blankets and coverlids



"THE LIVES THEY LEAD HAVE  
THE SIMPLICITY OF THE HILLS"

MADAME BICOU-BODREAUX, THE  
WEAVER OF "EVANGELINE SPREADS"



"IT SITS FAR BACK FROM THE CHEROKEE ROSE  
HEDGES THAT LINE THE ROAD TO JEFFERSON'S HOME."

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woven in the soft "Cajun" colors all the individuality of carvings and paintings. There are of course a number of other dyes—pinks, reds and the various "store" tints which the women have seen, admired and tried to copy. But none of these compares to the original "Cajun" colors. A brown dye is made from walnut leaves, and a very effective maroon red used to be made from the bark of the red oak tree, but this is fast dying out of the forests of the fair Opelousas, and nothing satisfactory has been discovered as a substitute.

**M**ADAME JULES pointed to a table overflowing with the work of her busy loom. Here the homespun in all its varied beauty was shown to an excellent advantage. In this grade, light enough for dresses, suits and general wear, all the delicate shades of cream, soft browns, blues and a wealth of the white in its natural shades were ready for the market.

Some of the prettiest patterns were in Delft blue homespun and barred, loosely woven cream white. All shades ranging from the biscuit brown to the dark brown were shown. Aside from the beauty of the stuff, the sentiment back of it, the hand work, the patient labor of the women, who are in this way making their daily bread and supporting large families, all add a commercial value to the goods that the progressive spirit of more than one Northern "promoter" has been quick to perceive. In several instances, attempts have been made by firms of world wide advertisement to "corner" the output of the "Cajun" woman's loom. But none of these has been successful.

It is a pretty thought that interwoven with these goods is the story of the Acadian maiden who, whether a myth or not, has come to be to these people a creature not only of reality but in many cases a near and dear dead relation. They have immortalized her memory in Evangeline bedspreads, Evangeline rugs, and Evangeline portières.

The blankets are woven of wool or cotton and the colors employed are commonly called "Evangeline colors," cream, pale blue, and white. They also make Evangeline baby blankets, which are smaller, fluffier and suggest embroidered forget-me-nots massed, so delicate and deep is the down and of such an ethereal shade.

The Evangeline portières are woven of pieces of silk in the colors suggested, and show surprising originality and beauty. The same



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material by the yard may be employed in place of burlap on walls, for upholstering and couch covers. The "Cajun" woman will weave for a trifle these portières if the silk is sent to her, cut in narrow strips and sewed together. They also weave "Memory portières" or "Friendship portières" which they prettily call *portières des amis*. These are made of scraps of silk that are supposed to come freighted with tender associations.

One of the novelties that Madame Jules has put upon the market is an automobile blanket. This is woven in color and design to suit the customer. One could hardly think of anything more at variance than an Acadian woman weaving an automobile blanket.

Another art that these women have at their finger tips is rug making. The rugs are made of rags plaited and sewed together in many odd designs and pretty shapes. On the snow white floors they are most effective. Here and there over Madame's house were scattered stands made by the men, placed on the rugs and on these in turn were the flowers "Cajun" women must have. The men should have their share of praise. They don't do much, but semi-occasionally they have energetic spells in which they make beautiful hickory chairs, with white oak split, or hide, bottoms, bleached from their own cattle. Not a screw or nail is used in fashioning these chairs. From the great gourds, that grow about every "Cajun" home, the men whittle baskets that are cut and laced up with thongs of leather. These are used to keep the provisions in.

**A** NUMBER of beautiful baskets were shown us. They were woven of willow splits and rush grasses. In the old days a favorite diversion was the plaiting of hats from the long rush grasses. These were not unlike the Panamas of to-day. The furniture in Madame's house was simple and elegant enough to delight an artist. The rooms, all of which were thrown open for inspection, were characterized by a nun-like lack of ornament. The beds were walnut four posters, the armoires, of the same wood, some over a hundred years old. On the quaint bureaux, instead of the usual implements of feminine vanity, invariably stood a crucifix, a statue of the Blessed Virgin, and always the rosary.

The whole family busied itself to get the various implements of work out on the gallery to have the pictures taken. Madame's an-

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cient loom, over an ell in width, was of course stationary, but the various spinning wheels, carding boards, reels, and the dozens of different stands to hold the thread, the cloth and the crude cotton were arranged by the interested family themselves. Four generations of weavers grouped themselves about the homely distaff and spindle. Madame herself, then came *grandmere*, who in turn gave everybody to understand that *la vielle* (the old one) must not be left out. *La vielle* was her mother. Madame's daughter, a comparatively young woman, came in to complete the four generations. When the group was finally arranged the gallery presented a pretty picture. There was *la vielle*, the wrinkled crone, huddled crooning to her wheel, then came *grandmere*, looking about the same age—a hundred or so—then Madame Jules offset by her blooming daughter.

These women marry when they are mere girls, and by the time they are twenty-five or thirty they are the worn out, withered mothers of ten or twelve children. The children, so insidious is the modern smartness, scorn the simple tasks of their forefathers. The girls don't like the "Cajun" homespun dresses; they much prefer the store calicoes and cheap challies. On the *meres*, the *grandmeres*, and *les veilles* the task of supporting the large families rests. Here indeed is the affection that hopes and endures and is patient. One instinctively wonders if it ever occurs to these women, wives of the shiftless men and mothers of the more shiftless daughters and sons, how pathetic is their lot, how hopeless their lives. What do they think of as they sit patiently through the long days weaving the goods that perhaps they will not be able to dispose of, so cheap has commerce made other stuffs that serve the same purpose.

THE description of the Acadians and their lives would be incomplete without a thumbnail sketch of Madame Bicou-Bodreaux, the weaver of Evangeline bedspreads. She lives in a cottage the prototype of the Anne Hathaway abode that prosperous friends send back to you postmarked Stratford-on-Avon. To reach this retreat requires much patience and the unerring instinct of a carrier pigeon. For it sits far back from the Cherokee rose hedges that line the road going to Joe Jefferson's old island home. To reach it, you travel interminable miles over plowed cane fields and through endless gates. Stevenson's cheerful remark that it is better to travel hope-

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fully than to arrive might be called forth by some of the pilgrimages that we made to the Acadian homes, but not to this one. Peaceful and pretty, cool and enticing, it swam into the line of vision just when we were giving up in despair.

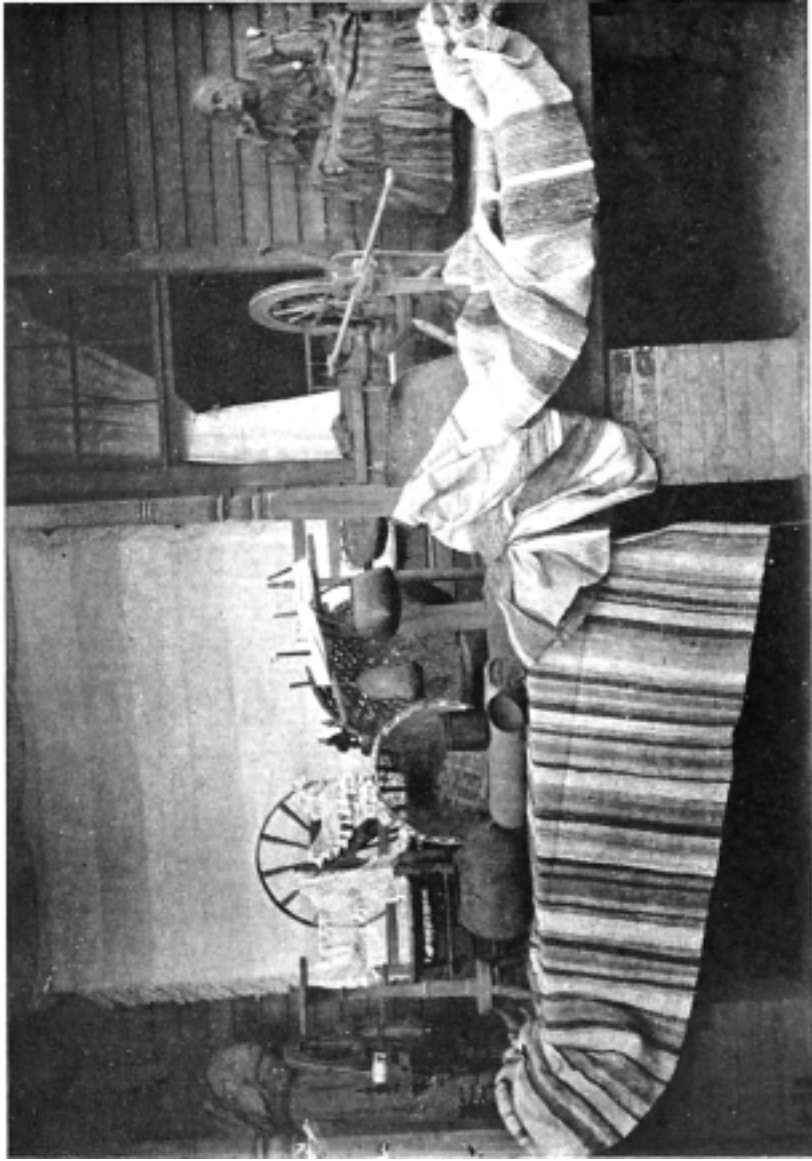
The object of our visit was explained and the much desired spreads cheerfully exhibited. These Evangeline spreads are woven in white, blue, or in the two colors, the preferred pattern being white blocked off with Delft blue, the whole finished by a fall of hand-made lace, knitted with the mingled threads. It is interesting to note that the housewives do the weaving, but only the *grandmeres* and *les veilles*—they are in every family—make the lace. They knit in the long winter evenings, and a “Cajun” woman never takes up lace-making until she joins the great-grandmothers’ ranks. With the spreads is sometimes made a smaller piece, also finished with the lace, for a bolster-cover. Madame Bicou opened an ancient press to display the various patterns on which she prides herself. Here, she explained, were several in which she had revived a certain ridged effect found in the counterpanes over a hundred years old, but which had in later years not found favor with the Acadian housewife.

Her workroom is in the attic, and thither she led the way.

Hidden under cobwebs and dust was all the old family furniture, discarded with the new prosperity to make room for red plush and imitation oak. Madame’s loom occupied nearly the entire room. This loom had been in her family for five generations. In addition she showed reels and cards, distaffs and spinning wheels; the most recent of these looked as if they might have been used by ancient Roman matrons.

Downstairs, after we had rested and been refreshed with more “Cajun” coffee, Madame led us into her garden. Madame Bicou at her loom is an interesting and quaint figure, but Madame Bicou among her old-fashioned, grand-duke jessamines and pink, rose-shaded walks is a good deal cooler memory to carry away with one. The entire family followed to the carriages, heaping upon us a wealth of sweet-scented blossoms that grow about a house.

“You’ll carm back, yais,” the son who speaks *anglais* most fluently acted as mouthpiece for his exuberantly cordial family group, “now you know de road?”



THE ACADIANS ARE DOING BEAUTIFUL WORK IN WEAVING, MAKING RUGS, BASKETS AND FURNITURE