

Fall 1984

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**Cajun Country  
Autos into Dinosaurs  
The Ultimate Gift**





# Cajun Country

## Louisiana At Its Wild Best

By IRENE LEAHY McMAHON

Cajun Annie's hawklike eyes point out a chicken snake in the fork of a tree. One of the passengers spots a nutria having the appearance of a large brown rat. Annie takes us close to peek into the nest of an eastern kingbird. Lo and behold, an alligator is following our boat as Annie calls, "Come on, Nick. Come on, honey." The alligator's powerful jaws clamp on the chicken leg she holds on a pole. She calls to another alligator and Boomer swims down the channel after us. That's Cajun country. And it is awesome.

We started on Route 82, the western edge of the Creole Trail. American egrets were flying white against a gray sky. Long lines of ibises were crisscrossing overhead and alligators were sunning themselves in roadside ditches.

We know now that these were but a small sampling of the delights ahead as we set off on the side roads that wind through the complex and abundant marshlands and bayous of southern Louisiana, following the part of the boot-shaped state that steps into the Gulf of Mexico. We were to be rewarded with glimpses of Tarzan, and tastes of Tabasco Sauce; the aura of Evangeline and the Acadians; the smell of *sauce piquante* bubbling in Cajun pots; the feast of jambalaya, crayfish boils, and shrimp festivals.

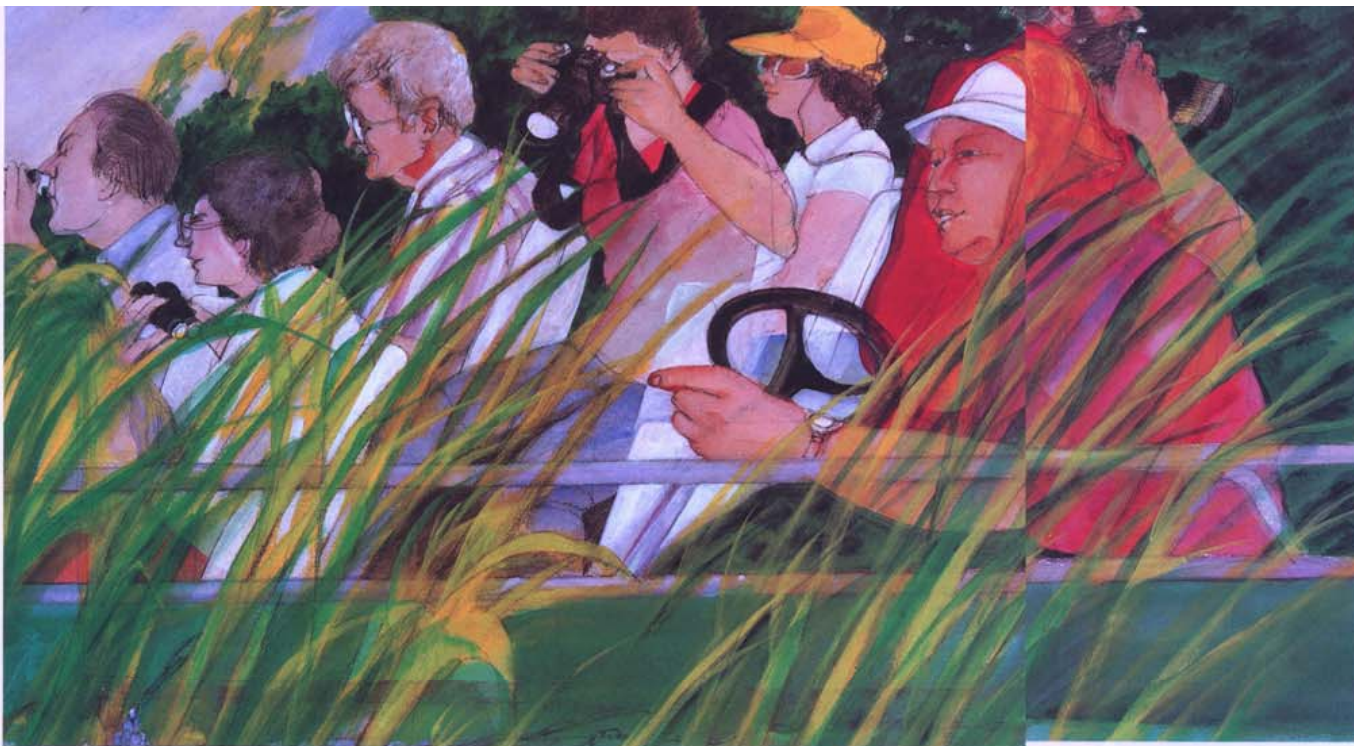
It's an unparalleled liquid largesse. The lakes, deltas, ponds, and bayous that make up this watery landscape, a 1,500 mile coastline extending between the Texas state line and New Orleans, support an immense industry of such delicacies as shrimp, oysters, and redfish. The marshes are densely populated with furbearing animals, nutria, and mink, making it the leading fishing and hunting state in the country.

Four to five million ducks and Canada geese winter in these wetlands each year. The wetlands are also a resting area for hundreds of thousands of smaller birds that fly on to Central and South America. The birds at times rise in flocks so dense they literally block out the sun.

We pick up our bird checklist and pamphlets at the Creole Walk Refuge Headquarters before we start on the mile-long, shell-carpeted walk. We hear a constant humming from the wildlife that we sense is everywhere. An occasional alligator stares at us, its eyes just visible above the water, as we walk through high grasses, tall as mature corn. An observation tower gives an overview: pink-feathered roseate spoonbills silhouetted against a plush green backdrop, blue heron, and red-winged blackbirds scuffling in the underbrush.

***It takes a lot of eating to work your way through Cajun country, especially when you find yourself elbow-deep in the bounty of the Gulf at a crayfish boil.***





**"Keep your fingers inside," warns Cajun Annie as you glide through the water on her famous swamp tour. "There's gators about and they're always lookin' for a snack."**

Original paintings by Franklin McMahon

Fishing is permitted on the refuge from March 1 to October 15. And many residents of the area make a living fishing and crabbing. Almost all Louisianians supplement their diets by catching this delicious high-protein food. As we watch, a crabber mistakenly catches a small alligator in his net.

Further on along the Creole Trail, past centuries-old live oak trees that line the road, is the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge. These 84,000 acres of coastal marshland serve numerous research projects, including plant ecology, pond culture, and life history studies of the many forms of fish and wildlife found in the area. So intense and successful has been the work done on this reservation that it has reversed the endangered position of the American alligator, David Richard, a resident biologist, told us.

It takes a lot of eatin' to work your way through Cajun country is a familiar phrase. And true. Sensational Cajun cooks can be found throughout southern Louisiana.

La Trouville is a "lucky find" of Cajun hospitality just outside Houma. Wilma and Eugene Dusenbery greet guests in

their sparkling blue-and-white gingham kitchen and serve shrimp gumbo, white beans, rice, eggplant fritters, and homemade root beer, followed by a medley of French Acadian folk songs.

The history of these Acadians (later contracted to "Cajun") is related in Longfellow's "Evangeline." (The anguish of their forced exodus from French Canada "through the forest primeval; the murmuring pines and hemlocks.") Generations have wept over that sad moment in literature when Evangeline and her love pass in the swamps, hidden from each other by the sage grass, cypress, and palmetto.

Longfellow never set foot in Louisiana, but Cajuns claim this story is that of Emmaline LaBiche and have made a tourist attraction of her grave in the Grotto of Our Lady, St. Martinville.

The Cajuns, after wandering for years, were welcomed by the French-speaking people of New Orleans and settled in the then undesirable murky, mysterious bayous. Some of the original houses still stand. At Montmere Plantation, a Greek Revival "cottage," reservations can be made for overnight accommodations. Breakfast is graciously served on the porch with a view of Bayou Tech snaking

through Iberia Parish.

The adjacent Armand Broussard House, a late 18th century "bousillage" (mud-and-moss), is a Cajun house with original woodwork intact and delicate handwrought iron hardware. Heritage Village in Loreauville displays the working tools of the hardworking Cajuns.

Avery Island is a 200-acre jungle garden growing over salt mines larger than the entire range of the Himalaya Moun-

ains. Typical of southern Louisiana's natural resources, this garden and bird sanctuary was the brainchild of Edward Avery McIlhenny, explorer, writer, conservationist—and in 1870, inventor of Tabasco sauce.

His factory now supplies the entire world with all those small orange-red bottles filled with liquid "Tabasco fire." Less known of him is that he also saved the white egret from extinction at the

hands of the plume hunters.

At that time these glorious birds were slain for their decorative aigrettes. The hunters left the bird's young to die unhatched, further heightening the crisis. E.A. built a large platform in the middle of his man-made lake and a cage to save all he could. At migration time, he released them to fly South and each year they and their descendants have returned to the lake to raise families.

Today, thanks partly to E.A.'s efforts, 20,000 white egrets that resemble new-fallen snow gather yearly on his floating island. Anywhere else this would be a spectacular phenomenon, but in Louisiana it's just another fact of life.

But we move on. The first Tarzan movie was made on a slice of Bayou called Swamp Garden, in the industrial environs of Morgan City. To this day, no other than the bellow of Elmo Lincoln can still be heard over the loudspeaker hidden in a tree. Yet no one would be more startled than this former circus strongman to see his jungle today, surrounded by oil rigs.

Five miles out of Houma and 57 miles southwest of New Orleans we have our ultimate swamp experience: Annie Miller's Swamp Tour. Cajun Annie has lived off the swamps for 30 years, trapping and hunting nutria, alligator, snake, mink, muskrat, raccoon, and otter. Re-

cently she has begun to take visitors through the waters she has known so well and so long.

"Keep arms and hands off the edge of the boat," she reminds us. "Alligators are wild animals, and are always watching. They can take a snack."

Her Suzuki outboard motor chugs along, opening paths through the duckweed as the early morning sun sparkles on the water. White ibises fly overhead in perfect formation; dragonflies perch on the top of immersed weeds. Swamp sounds surround us and the air has a scent of water lilies, sassafras, elderberry, and purple hyacinths in such abundance they are choking the channels.

At the turn in the channel, we gasp at the sight of an island covered with birds. One hears the sound of wings flapping as hundreds of great and snowy egrets, roseate spoonbills, and blue herons dart and glide. Annie passes out binoculars. Despite the number of times she has seen this scene, you know she shares our pleasure still.

We are caught up in Annie's enthusiasm. We understand when she says, "I could stay out on these waters forever. I never get tired of them."

Nor will you...nor will you.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

day celebration in the middle of August. Street fair, band concerts, *Fais-Do-Do*. Festivity ends with Fisherman's Mass and Blessing of the Fleet.

**La Trouville**, Route 1, Box 142, Chauvin, LA 70344. (504-594-9503)—Offering Cajun food, crafts, and hospitality; typical cottage. Wednesday and Friday, open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Cajun meal, \$4.00. Thursday; open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; beignets and coffee, \$1.00. First Sunday of each month; reservations required; complete dinner, \$8.00.

**Grave of the Traditional Evangeline, Emmaline LaBiche**, Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, 100 South Main, in church cemetery, St. Martinville.

**Montmere Plantation House**, The Armand Broussard House, 1400 E. Main, New Iberia, LA 70560—For reservations, call 318-364-6210.

**Heritage Village**, 403 Main Street, Loreauville, LA—Open from 9 a.m. to dusk seven days a week. Adults,

\$2.00. Senior citizens and children, \$1.00. 318-229-4740.

**Avery Island**—Spring and summer, open 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; rest of year, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. \$2.75, adults; \$1.75, children. Egrets are nesting from late March to July.

**Annie Miller's Terrebonne Swamp and Marsh Tour**, Houma—Call for reservations. \$15.00 for three-hour tour. Tours leave at 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Call 504-879-3934.