

**Chapter Seven:
Folklore, Symbols and the Codes of Film**

A recent compilation of very old fairy tales and folklore made into a single play by James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim from which a screenplay and film was adapted is titled *Into the Woods*. The title is drawn from the fact that a certain type of European folk tale often begins with a journey into the woods. It also comes from the fact that the device of the forest unites the varied actions and subplots of the play. However, the viewer is also drawn into a sense of being in the tangles and shadows of a literary and dramatic forest. The film Flaherty made could have been made in many places or environments as far as the Standard Oil commission was concerned. It was in fact made in the flooded wetlands forest which is the Louisiana swamp as compiled from various Acadiana wetlands locations in the Acadian prairie. This chapter is a bit tangles, labyrinthine and imagistic compared to some of the others and that is not by accident. More of that will follow these words from *Into the Woods*.

Into the woods,

It's time to go,

It may be all

In vain, you/I know.

Into the woods-

But even so,

I have to take the journey.

The scholar and the serious student of history perhaps are often drawn to books of history in pursuit of that refreshing freedom from the lack of rigor which seems to pervade so much of the human narrative of shared experience. Certainly this writer can relate to that sentiment. This chapter is a sort of wooded patch in this text as a whole. Here the child is intended as much as the adult and the inner savage as much the intended reader as the carefully developed

sophisticate in the same pair of eyes. This is not fiction or folklore alone but it is not pure history either. It is an effort to bring the reader into places that pure history will not get them.

This is not mostly a chapter about mermaids, the *Feu Faux Folleis*, *Loup Garous*, the little people ruled by *'Tit Pucette* nor all the other children's characters that inhabit the forests in the eyes of a small child in a truly traditional Cajun home. It is not about the function of such tales predominantly nor about the timny clothings and trails of acts involved in the purest fantasies. But it does demand that the reader be able to relate a little bit to that world of stories and imaginings. It is a step into the woods of a very particular folkloristic environment. It is thereby a step out of the traditional historic text.

Earlier in discussing *Louisiana Story* I have written about the meaning of the boy's names Alexander, Ulysses and Napoleon. I have tried to show that in and of themselves they showed a certain insight and comprehension of Cajun culture. Movies however are compromise. They are notoriously disappointing to those who know the cultural groups they portray the best even when the film is generally well received in the portrayed cultural group as a whole. The source of that compromise is not really the audience or viewership but the perceptions that the filmmakers and their backers have of what the large audience and viewership can tolerate. Here there is a wrong choice that comes down to a single word which was grossly inappropriate and that undermines the entire sense of authenticity of the film. The word is spoken on more than one occasion by J.C. Boudreaux as the boy at the heart of the film. It is the word "*Ou*" meaning "yes" in French. The word is spelled the same in Cajun French and has various pronunciations but it is central to the whole of Cajun identity that it is never given the standard French pronunciation Resembling the English sound "Whee!". It either is sounded as a variant of the first two letters of the English word wet or else as a variant of the first three letters of the English word whale.

It seems reasonable that any reader would question how significant the pronunciation of a single word can be. Yet I would assure that reader that unless he or she actually knows the significance there is almost no way that he or she would ever imagine how much that word means. But once the significance of the sound has been determined the question of why this horrific error was permitted will be revisited. For now let me say that this book is an exercise in transparency more pronounced than most in Cajun culture. It is possible that the right pronunciation was deliberately concealed from a mass market and not only the result of seeking

to be comprehensible in a film marketed without even the maximum possible use of subtitles or captions.

In order to understand Cajun folklore and the social fabric being documented on has to understand the four great divisions of the medieval Kingdom of France. To understand 1943 and 1953, one has to go back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries just a bit. France was made up of two divisions, the division between *Languedeouille* and *Languedoc* as well as the division between the *Paix des Coutumes* and the *Paix des Droits Ecrit*. Both *Languedeouille* and *Languedoc* translate in English as Language of Yes. Those who said yes as *Oui* had a variety of dialects but that word was central. Those who said yes as *Oc* had many dialects to but that word was central. In that word much of their civilization resided. The text that summarizes this vastly complex matter best and which has real scholarly authority which I know is the one quoted below. It is the 1967 third edition of Amos and Walton's *Introduction to French Law* produced by the well respected scholars Lawson, Anton and Brown at the time because of changes in France's Matrimonial laws in 1965. The second chapter is titled "A Short History of the Sources of French Law" the first subsection of the third subsection of that chapter is titled "*pays des coutumes and pays de droit escrit*" This whole subsection is not very long and it is tempting to reproduce it entirely here but we will settle for the most significant first half in order to keep the length of the whole chapter in perspective and really refer to the rest later on when it seems more relevant. Here are those concise sentences:

In the south of France the Roman civilization affected the the whole people. The population was much denser than in the north and it was on a higher level of culture. The customary law was the Roman law and when the renaissance of the study of law began and the Corpus Juris of Justinian came to be studied, it was received without question as living law.

The south was like a country which having lost their codes lived for centuries on their memory, and one day discovered them again. In the north on the other hand, the Barbaric element had early become predominant, and their law -- largely Germanic in origin --had become the customary law, though it varied a good deal in different localities.

The line of demarcation between the *pays de coutumes* and the *pays de droit escrit* corresponded in the main with the language boundary between the *Langue d'oc* and

the *Langue d'oïl*, but Alsace was a *pays de droit écrit* and there were certain "islands" of the *droit écrit* in the *pays de coutumes*.

The *pays de coutumes* comprised about two-thirds of the territory of France. The *Coutumes* were very numerous, almost three hundred in all, but many of them governed only a single city or a territory of very small extent. There were about sixty which were the laws of a whole province or large territory.

The period when the conditions described above pertained was one of great length and began to come to an end in about the year 1500. As ends of great systems of civilization go it was not a very brutal end and from many points of view the lands of the *coutumes* were the more successful and influential in creating the order that succeeded the one described in the quoted passage. However, there are always at least a few sides to every great story. This is a great story.

However, another interesting aspect of all this which the authors of the quoted text relegated to a footnote is that the border between *Langue d'oc* and *Langue d'oïl* as they name them and thus between most of the *pays de coutumes* and the *pays de droit écrit* as they also spell them was a line running East to West from La Rochelle to Geneva. Thus the Acadians can be shown to come almost exclusively from the Western end of the border land. In this uniquely fuzzy chapter I will assert that their *coutume* was largely in a triangle formed by straight lines connecting La Rochelles, Poitiers and Bergerac. That is a fact virtually impossible to prove by anything approaching rigorous historical standards. But it is ventured here anyway. In addition the passage quoted suggests that the people of the *pays de coutumes* held intact most of Roman law by oral tradition and local institution across the turmoil of centuries and then saw their system resurrected. Imagine how strong such oral and local traditions must be for that to be accomplished.

Thus the settlers of *Acadie* brought with them an enormous capacity for the preservation and defense of their local culture for keeping it intact through secrecy, cohesion and integration within the context of local and larger bodies of written law. The text quoted above also makes clear that the sophistication, skills and institutions developed in the

pays de coutumes were because of their highly developed nature very influential in creating the framework of private international law in what would emerge as modern European and Western Civilization. From the struggles around the expulsion to the founding of the New Acadia and then on into the States Rights controversies surrounding the development of the Confederacy and the onset of the War Between the States the Acadians and Cajuns continued to see the world through a consistent prism which gave them a means and method for interpreting their own history and an understanding of politics both as the pursuit of justice and as the pursuit of the possible as well as of individual interests.

These internal cultural forces forged over the years from about the year 800 had a number of points of origin. No strong historical evidence exists that it was from the Acadians as well as other factors that these internal structures in France drew their original impetus. Here again we are in the forest of the unproven as we make a few contextual assertions. With due deference to the appendix let us propose that the ancestors of the Acadians were already a distinct Hellenic minority in Western France in 800 A.D. Along with a few others they would already have possessed the skills and traditions which later formed this distinctive region and its whole nature. The traditions that actually support these views are not widely diffused but bits and pieces of evidence are scattered across the continents, oceans, languages and centuries which support that interpretation of the historical facts that do exist.

In addition the inner folkloristic story I would propose is at some points at variance with the fine scholarship of texts like the one noted above. Cajun secret and inner folklore would assert that at its peak there was a *Conseil des Chefs* peaking at 300 members which worked with one another to represent almost 450 *coutumes*. These all swore allegiance to the the King of France secretly and in words that did not have the same binding force as the words spoken in his own language. Thus the struggles of the future Acadians take on a very different look with this context

The High Chief of the Acadians was not a second king or any kind of ex-officio supreme president of the *Conseil*. However, Acadian heritage would assert that he was not rank and file either. One of a handful of high offices assigned perpetually to a particular chief would have been reserved to this chief. So now the reader find himself or herself in a whole world of insecurity compared to the relative certainties of the quotes from treaties, proclamations and petitions that characterize the best political histories. When such assertions are made let it be clear that the whole edifice of this text does not depend upon them. Rather an effort is made here to distinguish what does and what does not depend upon these special data.

Let us then consider at least not a people first forged on the shores of Acadie but a people led and shaped by a strong force which integrated with the small number of Scots, English and French settlers that joined them there. But the heart and soul of the colony was from the triangle formed around the towns of La Rochelle, Poitiers and Bergerac. They were even there a secretive people with strong cohesion who were barely assured of being a majority in the town and associated region in France which was the center of their coutume in the realm just before the settlers began to cross to the New World. For them the chance to come to the New World was a chance for rebirth as a society. The autonomy of both the people and the elite could be asserted more convincingly from this new location. This meant migrations involved in the founding of Acadie on the Atlantic seaboard in what is now Canada had ties back home and these ties were in the guilds of boatwrights and specially and uniquely important guild of Sauniers who specialized in levees, dykes sluices and salt collection. The aboiteau was a special water control device developed and deployed in Acadie to clear the marshes of enough water to render them suitable for grazing and agriculture without allowing to many problems with excessive drying, saltwater intrusion or other problems. the British especially but also the French were often offended by their unwillingness to trespass on MicMac lands, their unwillingness to gratuitously attack other aboriginal American peoples, their determination to preserve natural resources in proper proportions across the regions. There was a

reticence to note how much work their conservative colonial methods involved. but there are countless records indicating the indisputable proof of their enormous productivity, the variety and diversity typical of their economy and their capacity for military, paramilitary and political coordination among themselves. One of the institutions of this period was the oldest significant social club of European Americans in the history of North America. *Le Orde des Bon Temps* means “The Order of Good Times”. This order presided over in part by Acadian recipients of chivalric and noble titles in both France and the United Kingdom as well as by chiefs of the and holders of various titles and offices traditional to the ethnic community in Acadie and back in France. Although a thanksgiving prayer and gifts of food to the poor and trade with the Micmac tribe were all works of this order these were not their principal activities. Their principal purpose was simply to have a truly grand feast on regular occasions so as to maintain commercial levels of demand for the finest foods both able to be produced in the colony and able to be imported in cost effective quantities. The excess of these feasts was distributed to widows, orphans, wounded veterans of battle and others whom the British might call the deserving poor. Those who became wealthy were expected to participate and could possibly make a profit off of concessions and activities but more likely than not would spend much of their fortune in order to feed their families and dependents well and to gain some prestige. The cry of “*Laissez Les Bons Temps Roulez!*” is still required at most grand Cajun functions. That cry means Let the Good Times Roll but goes back to this organization, the survival of this order continuously cannot be proved or disproved. If it exists and always has then it truly perfected the secrecy much respected in the culture.

There were always problems in the colony where the Order of Good Times held sway and a great deal of serious debate has gone on for centuries but it seems clearly true that while there was a connection to the maritime communities, traditions and guilds of their homeland in France nonetheless it was New England that had the best of the competition in fisheries, naval warfare and

shipping over the centuries. Parkman's work is considered distorted from an Acadian point of view by the biased and partial collection of sources funded by the government of Nova Scotia to allow historians to tell only distorted tales. But nonetheless there is at least a kernel of truth to his account at all points and here is his account of early Acadian history:

The French province of Acadia, answering to the present Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, was a government separate from Canada and subordinate to it. Jacques Francois de Brouillan, appointed to command it, landed at Chibucto, the site of Halifax, in 1702, and crossed by hills and forests to the Basin of Mines, where he found a small but prosperous settlement. "It seems to me," he wrote to the minister, "that these people live like true republicans, acknowledging neither royal authority nor courts of law."i It was merely that their remoteness and isolation made them independent, of necessity, so far as concerned temporal government. When Brouillan reached Port Royal he found a different state of things. The fort and garrison were in bad condition; but the adjacent settlement, primitive as it was, appeared on the whole duly submissive.

[^] *Brouillan au Ministre, 6 Octobre, 1702.*

1700-1710.] THE FISHERY QUESTION. III

Possibly it would have been less so if it had been more prosperous; but the inhabitants had lately been deprived of fishing, their best resource, by a New England privateer which had driven their craft from the neighboring seas; and when the governor sent Lieutenant Neuville in an armed vessel to seize the interloping stranger, a fight ensued, in which the lieutenant was killed, and his vessel captured. New England is said to have had no less than three hundred vessels every year in these waters. Before the war a French officer proposed that New England

sailors should be hired to teach the Acadians how to fish, and the King seems to have approved the plan.[^] Whether it was adopted or not, New England in peace or war had a lion's share of the Acadian fisheries. "It grieves me to the heart," writes Subercase, Brouillan's successor, "to see Messieurs les Bostonnais enrich themselves in our domain; for the base of their commerce is the fish which they catch off our coasts, and send to all parts of the world."

What is clear is that the Acadians were autonomous and not independent. Although they were only a small colony they were reasserting their existence as a Coutume. They had plenty of institutions that were not available for visitors to review and those institutions maintained the complicated connections they had to Canada and to France. Pierre JdB Maisonnant and others maintained a minimal balance of terror with what seems to me great skill, integrity and caution. However all of recorded Acadian historical existence back to the year 800 is a history lived on the edge of great powers in the teeth of relatively existential challenges and threats. The documentarians came from the southern and cosmopolitan new England city of New York but they were still New Englanders coming to the Cajuns with their agendas, prejudices, predilections and aspirations and generally operating from a more advantaged position and they were in a tradition of that kind of interaction which went back over 300 years. They fabricated in a certain sense that primitive culture that Barsam rejoices in but they did so with real images affected by centuries of Yankee raids, an expulsion shaped partly in New England and a Civil War Yankee invasion at the time when American Northern armies were named after the New England community.

In some ways the documentarians were less likely to be singled for mistreatment in Acadiana because the Cajuns had become so alienated and because they were seeking to enter the American mainstream. But Acadians were committed to a

heritage and in that heritage there was trouble with all British Americans but also special trouble with the real Yankees. Yankees like the documentarians.

The thing about Acadian and Cajun folklore is that the blurring together of history and folkloristic tradition is somewhat distinctive. Especially compared to the Samoa of Moana and the Inuit hunting ranges of Nanook. Whatever else Flaherty's previous experiences brought to the documentary efforts of the SONJ years they brought comparison with two communities with much less documentation and mutual influence with American society, New England and the Anglo-American tradition. However, the *Man of Aran* might be a useful comparison to attend to more carefully than is possible to do in this study's review of the relationship between the state of Cajun culture and *Louisiana Story*. Cajuns can and many do know at some point in their lives that in 1689 Port Royal residents Abraham Boudrot (whose descendants use Boudreaux today) had 8 fruit trees, Anne Melanson widow of Jacques St. Etienne de la Tour had 84, Pierre Leblanc had 10 and Francois Broussard had two. The historian of the world, of the United States or of Switzerland may find those data uninspiring and trivial but they are real enough. For the Cajun however, they have real meaning. They show that mere escape from the cold, defense from hostiles and a meal for the morrow no longer demanded all of the energy and attention of their ancestors in 1689 when Diereville was doing the research for the work that would be published in Rouen, France 1708 under the title *Une Relatione de Voyage de l'Acadie*.

Abbeville native Chris Segura's *Marshland Brace* and *Marshland Trinity* make up three novellas that together compose the impressions of an informed and sensitive mind grappling with Cajun life and culture in the 1950s. One of the principle characters in this collection of stories is the Cajun Trapper who could perhaps be a friend to the fictional Latour played by Lionel Leblanc. The third story was added to the *Marshland Brace* which won the Louisiana Literary Award to create the new *Trinity* there are plenty of werewolf references which like those in *Louisiana Story* come mostly through the prism

and lense of a young boy's imagination . The front cover of the *Marshland Trinity* was published with Segura and his brother armed and headed into the local wilderness as boys. I distributed the book at one time. All of these fused and coiled threads of reality across time join with conversations that I have had with Chris Segura myself about his book and about my own research, collections and reflections on the folklore and history of the Cajun People. All of this creates a sort of nexus of words, events and ideas which do not lend themselves to a fully traditional historical analysis.

What is distinctive about history is the collection of facts verified at a high level of certainty which also allow comparison with other facts compared at a different time and then allow for a study of change over time. That is simplistic perhaps but it is close enough to a working definition to to function in most contexts. This chapter is not perhaps pure history but is a sort of inline addendum. It seeks to allow for a richer sensibility and perception within the relevant historical context. This chapter is the point at which this text leaves behind forever any chance of retaining a safe perspective which is secured by the conventions of even a more liberal and expansive view of an ethnohistorical text.

Here as we move into a literary, folkloric and slightly anthropological mode of analysis we do not abandon history entirely. However, we do become part of the process of the passage of time in a somewhat different way. The text asks new and somewhat different questions, the questions addressed fall into the areas of inquiry that almost any reasonable approach to a text of this type would avoid. Some of the questions a wise scholar would avoid for one set of reasons. Those are: Is there a kind of mythmaking In the work of Flaherty and Stryker?

Did they set out to create a particular myth here?

The second set of questions revolves around whether or not the Cajuns had a symbolic language and set of folkloric values which remained relevant to the Cajun between 1943 and 1953?

Can we learn something about those values and meaning and understand these systems and the documentaries interrelated?

At least these first sentences make the text seem to be asking purely respectable question if not the usual questions historians ask. But in reality this chapter will attempt go into that Cajun system which surrounded the making of the documentary. That is a journey which will make some demands more of the imagination and the sensibility than of the rational and narrative capacities of the mind. The documentarians working for a very unique and uniquely powerful and ambitious corporation had come into a unique cultural and economic milieu. They had done so at a unique moment in the history of America and the world. This chapter seeks to bring to light some of the uniquely obscure but rather interesting parts of the cultural scene.

In order to take that journey it is necessary to make some unconventional connections between events and points of evidence that are not connected by the most perfect chains of evidence. What emerges is a picture more like history than historical fiction but deliberately fictional.

It makes some sense to move forward into this chapter with a quote from Dudley Leblanc's *The Acadian Miracle* (The quote below is from Chapter 28, p. 328) published after our period in 1966 but representing his life's work and much of what was on his mind in the years between 1943 and 1953.

The Duke of Nivernois was deeply affected by their unswerving loyalty to France and to their faith. He sent his secretary, Mr. de la Rochette, with

instructions to assure them that they would be returned to France as soon as England would allow them to leave.

Arriving at Liverpool on December 31, 1762, Mr. de la Rochette went to the Acadian quarter., and after having made himself known to those who had sent the petition, he acquainted them with his mission and the orders which he had received from His Excellency. In Spite of of the precautions which he took to moderate their joy, he could not keep them from crying “Vive Le Roi!” (Long Live the King!) until it reechoed. Then tears of joy welled up in the eyes of all as they gradually grasped the meaning of the royal message. The end of the long years of captivity and painful heartaches of separation, exile, death and misery in all its multitudinous forms had finally come. All the men and women were weeping for joy and sobbed like children. Several became uncontrollable; they clapped their hands together, raised them towards the heavens beat them against the walls and did not cease to weep. they spent the night showering blessing on the King and his ambassador.”

The Cajun story in its fullness is made up of incidents like this and traditional Cajun culture would understand that the meaning and importance this particular incident would be greater for the descendants of those in that Liverpool detainment than would be possible for it to hold for the entire community. Yet it would be important for the entire community as well. While Joseph Broussard was fighting with the MicMac squads and some were dying as more or less slaves on Virginia plantations many other things were happening as well. Longfellow describes the Exile in general terms in this way.

*MANY a weary year had passed since the burning of Grand-Pré,
When on the falling tide the freighted vessels departed,
Bearing a nation, with all its household gods, into exile,*

Exile without an end, and without an example in story.
Far asunder, on separate coasts, the Acadians landed; 670
Scattered were they, like flakes of snow, when the wind from the
northeast
Strikes aslant through the fogs that darken the Banks of Newfoundland.
Friendless, homeless, hopeless, they wandered from city to city,
From the cold lakes of the North to sultry Southern savannas,—
From the bleak shores of the sea to the lands where the Father of Waters
675
Seizes the hills in his hands, and drags them down to the ocean,
Deep in their sands to bury the scattered bones of the mammoth.
Friends they sought and homes; and many, despairing, heart-broken,
Asked of the earth but a grave, and no longer a friend nor a fireside.
Written their history stands on tablets of stone in the churchyards.

Longfellow is obviously impressed by the fact that there is no parallel in history or even fiction for the way the Acadian people would endure and survive the combination of suffering and scattering which would deliver them across numerous countries, three continents and a large number of islands before they secured their central base of operations in yet another place largely wild wet and needing much to develop. One remembers indeed the many tombs they left in that great exile but also that Louisiana Governor Henry Schuyler Thibodaux was born in this scattered exile. Longfellow continues with the heart of the story of a kind of extremely sublime truly human love of a woman who could never be what anyone would hope to be and yet somehow was an example to all Acadians as well.

680

Long among them was seen a maiden who waited and wandered,
 Lowly and meek in spirit, and patiently suffering all things.
 Fair was she and young; but, alas! before her extended,
 Dreary and vast and silent, the desert of life, with its pathway
 Marked by the graves of those who had sorrowed and suffered before her,
 685
 Passions long extinguished, and hopes long dead and abandoned,
 As the emigrant's way o'er the Western desert is marked by
 Camp-fires long consumed, and bones that bleach in the sunshine.
 Something there was in her life incomplete, imperfect, unfinished;
 As if a morning of June, with all its music and sunshine, 690
 Suddenly paused in the sky, and, fading, slowly descended
 Into the east again, from whence it late had arisen.
 Sometimes she lingered in towns, till, urged by the fever within her,
 Urged by a restless longing, the hunger and thirst of the spirit,
 She would commence again her endless search and endeavor;
 695

Sometimes in churchyards strayed, and gazed on the crosses and
 tombstones,
 Sat by some nameless grave, and thought that perhaps in its bosom
 He was already at rest, and she longed to slumber beside him.
 Sometimes a rumor, a hearsay, an inarticulate whisper,
 Came with its airy hand to point and beckon her forward. 700
 Sometimes she spake with those who had seen her beloved and known
 him,
 But it was long ago, in some far-off place or forgotten.
 'Gabriel Lajeunesse!' they said; 'Oh yes! we have seen him.
 He was with Basil the blacksmith, and both have gone to the prairies;
 Coureurs-des-Bois are they, and famous hunters and trappers.'
 705
 'Gabriel Lajeunesse!' said others; 'Oh yes! we have seen him.
 He is a Voyageur in the lowlands of Louisiana.'
 Then would they say, 'Dear child! why dream and wait for him longer?
 Are there not other youths as fair as Gabriel? others
 Who have hearts as tender and true, and spirits as loyal? 710
 Here is Baptiste Leblanc, the notary's son, who has loved thee
 Many a tedious year; come, give him thy hand and be happy!
 Thou art too fair to be left to braid St. Catherine's tresses.' 2
 Then would Evangeline answer, serenely but sadly, 'I cannot!
 Whither my heart has gone, there follows my hand, and not elsewhere.
 715
 For when the heart goes before, like a lamp, and illumines the pathway,
 Many things are made clear, that else lie hidden in darkness.'

There are other more perfectly historical stories too, tales of men who paddled canoes
 over a thousand miles to recover their children from bondage are joined with tales of
 privateer clubs based in Cayenne that boarded and sometimes commanded ships that
 preyed on British shipping in the Caribbean during the Seven Year's War and struck
 dread into many larger and better armed ships. There are stories those who devoted
 themselves to brokering a peace with the British that they never doubted their standing
 and authority to effect just as they never doubted that they were legitimately the French
 Neutrals when nobody else in that era really held a similar status. However that most
 famous story of all in the poem is based in very large part on one or two real couples
 buried in the prairie's soil after long separation whose story was told by the very

Acadians at Harvard when Alexander Mouton was studying at Georgetown and not long before Alfred Mouton would study at West Point. There are discrepancies and problems but a lot of evidence too for those stories and one old relative showed me many yellowing pages I no longer have access to which spelled out all the connections with real evidence.

Merely to call oneself a Cajun is to buy into and express connection to a very complex association. None of all this old turmoil was alien to the Acadiana which the documentarians entered. one of the tasks of this study has been to show that they did have a strong connection with the Cajuns in the region through those employed with the filmmaking operation, through contacts developed by Harnett T. Kane and distilled in his writings, through the work of Kane's illustrator Tilden Landry, probably through Virgil Thomson's exposure to Allen Lomax's ethnomusicology collection of Cajun recordings, through the connections that the McIlhenny family and the Standard Oil people and institutions had already developed with the ethnic community. All of this adds up to quite a bit before one takes into account the people who appeared in their lenses. People with whom they often exchanged at least a brief conversation as well. Yet I and many other Cajuns if pressed would say that they were missing something. This chapter will try to see what they grasped and what they didn't and how those two realities fit together.

That brings us back to the point that movies are compromises. I have written that big films are notoriously disappointing to those who know the cultural groups they portray the best even when the film is generally well received in the portrayed cultural group as a whole. In *Louisiana Story* there is a wrong choice that comes down to a single word which was grossly inappropriate and that undermines the entire sense of authenticity of the film. The word is spoken on more than one occasion by J.C. Boudreaux as the boy at the heart of the film. It is the word "Ou" meaning "yes" in French. The word is spelled the same in Cajun French and has various pronunciations but it is central to the whole of Cajun identity that it is never given the standard French pronunciation Resembling the English sound "Whee!". It either is sounded as a variant of the first two letters of the English word wet or else as a variant of the first three letters of the English word whale. All that is familiar and yet now perhaps the reader can begin to fathom its real

significance. *Oc* and *Oui* were very distinct. *Oui* slightly skewed is a poor substitute for a word that held the whole of a heritage. But like many aspects of modern Cajun culture it is prized for how little and precious and hard to preserve it actually is.

Let me state that there are people who will never speak to me in Cajun French again because they heard me use the standard pronunciation of *Oui* just once. These same people had forgiven all the many other faults both in my overall capacity for French and my mastery of our dialect in particular. Such extreme behavior is not the norm but it is nonetheless significant. But was it deliberately a concealment or was it a gross error driven by the need to be understood?

There are pieces of evidence in both directions. Frances Flaherty has stated that the film is a fantasy and an autobiographical fantasy at that in which the boy relives in a new place the childhood of Robert Flaherty in the wilderness of the Canadian borderlands. That statement delivered to Robert Gardner in the Peabody interview is clearly an overstatement at best. But it is also a very Cajun thing to do. The statement allows for communication at several levels in the film and allows the viewer to decide what kind of truth to try to ferret out. That is what this chapter does as well.

Cajuns as we have slightly reviewed already are people who value genealogies and names. Especially family names are given great significance. The name of the fictional family in *Louisiana Story* is Latour. The Latours were a Huguenot family among the Acadian community on both sides of the Atlantic before the Code Noir also outlawed reformed Christianity in the colonies. In the 1620s one prominent La Tour with strong Acadian practicing a hybrid of reformed and Catholic connections became a Knight of high order and perhaps a baron of low order in the British court and married one of Her Britannic Majesty's Ladies-in-Waiting. The King of England as it were gave Acadie to a Scotsman as Nova Scotia and LaTour was the man to lead the attack to seize the land and give it to the Brits. He fought a long and fierce if not very bloody battle with small forces against his own son by his first Acadian wife. The son La Tour was a tragic and classic Acadian hero and the father honored in Britain was seen as a traitor to the people. This is the kind of tragedy that occurs in Acadian history.

In time the de la Tour and La Tour branches of the family would almost all become Latours like the fictional trappers in the film. After 1685 the Acadian Latours became Catholics but in Acadian fashion there were often a few Latours who were expected to retain a communication with reformed Christianity. The average Latour would not make much of such things and today might not be aware of these realities. But not everything in Cajun culture is about the average member of a class group or family. But Flaherty for all his chaotic and thunderous prowling about being incomprehensible was a uniquely keen observer of the societies he filmed. He of course had a Catholic and a Protestant parent. He came into a society which in 1943 was still more apt to carefully observe the *Fete National des Acadiens* on August 15 as the Roman Catholics Feast of the Assumption. The hard earned efforts of the 1880s had made this day equally and both jointly and separately the National Day of the Acadians or *Le Jour National des Acadiens*. There is little of the Catholicism of the family that one could even conjecture or infer. While Flaherty had his wife Mrs. Flaherty and his editor Helen Van Dongen working at the film he had not much to do for Evelyn Bienvenue's character of the wife and mother. Acadian Catholicism always had something to say to what were seen in the days not so very long ago as more anti-feminist patterns. The same family in a generation today which might find much of American feminism unpalatable today would have found the world of the early twentieth century not feminist enough. A tradition and community as a whole were steeped in connections to the feminine half of things was prized in much of Ancient Greece, Byzantine Christianity, High Medieval France and *Acadie*.

This is not of course how the American people saw their own society. Labor saving devices were designed to help women and while Cajuns adapted and adopted them mostly they came from the mainstream American society. In *Moral Reconstruction* Foster has shown the role of real women and the vision of Christian womanhood in remaking the Old South into the New South. However, whatever the truth may have been there was at minimum at least a sense of as much fear of the roles and dignity of women being undermined on the Cajun side as may have existed in those parts of the larger society that saw a very hardworking Cajun woman more often than not. Few ever saw a panacea of ideal life for women.

One point worth looking at is the writing of Therese of Lisieux who statue Dudley Leblanc had put up so close to the house where Flaherty made his film. The text is relevant in a number of ways. Marie Francoise Therese Martin was a nun in a community of women. Nuns were always relevant to Cajun life. Abbeville had a new community of Dominican sisters and an older community of Carmelite sisters when the film was being made at the Nettles. They added something to the overall role and standing of women in society. this young French nun tells of starting to write her autobiography as demanded by her spiritual director.

Before setting about my task I knelt before the statue of Our Lady which had given my family so many proofs of Our Heavenly Mother's loving care.[2] As I knelt I begged of that dear Mother to guide my hand, and thus ensure that only what was pleasing to her should find place here.

Then opening the Gospels, my eyes fell on these words: "Jesus, going up into a mountain, called unto Him whom He would Himself."[3]

They threw a clear light upon the mystery of my vocation and of my entire life, and above all upon the favours which Our Lord has granted to my soul. He does not call those who are worthy, but those whom He will. As St. Paul says: "God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.[4] So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy."[5]

The spiritual life of this young woman deserved a statue at church and all young women in Acadiana had some kind of spiritual life. The bible at the heart of all Christianity could be authoritatively interpreted by a young woman although only published after her death. The statue of a woman is a holy object that shapes family, tradition and imagination. but this is not what the documentarians are looking for at all. It does not suit their story to tell of an Acadiana with ongoing ties to modern Catholic France. Instead in *Louisiana Story* frogs and magical salt express the spiritual nature of the

Cajun experience. Neither glimpse is a complete one. However, the point to be made here is that perception was shaped extensively on both sides by what both sides of this experience chose to allow to be recorded and to record. It is to be hoped that perhaps this analysis will allow for a more complete understanding of the documentary process and how it contributes to cultural history.