



SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA:

A Treasure Revealed

Photography by Lindsey Janies

Text by Jeanne Owens

*A publication of
The Chamber/Southwest Louisiana*

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Southwest Louisiana: A Treasure Revealed

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SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA: *A Treasure Revealed*



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This Louisiana Diamond Pressed from History

It is sown beneath our primeval marshes,
within the roots of the vast shadowy green forests,
beneath our cool lakes, dreamy bayous,
beneath wide rippling rice fields,
beneath the plow writing the poetry of spring into rich black soil,
breaking ground for peas, beans, corn, yams.

It is sown below inky, glistening oil deposits,
beneath wooden floors thudding with fiddlers and two-steppers,
beneath our churches filled with wonder and praise,
beneath wide, still skies stirred by wings of great white-fronted geese,
green teal, red ibis, ring neck ducks, egrets, hummingbirds, swamp swallows,
sown beneath the cattails, the blackberries, the black-eyed Susans,
the chinaberry trees, the hydrangeas, azaleas, magnolias.

A mighty hand has sown it, planted a diamond large as our land,
and it has fertilized everything with riches—our farms, our rivers and bayous,
our music, our workplaces, our play, our homes, and our families.

A few have caught glimpses of it.

A few of us have chipped into it and it charms our lives.

A few have taken pieces of it away.

Many of us sense it glowing as we end the day on the front porch.

Many of us rise to its warmth in the morning.

It is our treasure, given freely for us to care for.

It is our gift to understand, to pass down, to build upon,
a place for our hope and faith.

It is your treasure to find.

And it is our treasure to reveal, slowly, a piece at a time,
so you too understand this way of life—a life built upon blessings.





FOREWORD

OVERVIEW OF A TREASURE REVEALED

Some say two-hundred-year-old treasure is buried in our corner of Louisiana. However, we found it years ago. Not some rusty chest buried by a pirate, but true treasure buried by a mightier hand. It's yours too for the taking. Dig into Southwest Louisiana and unearth life's silver lining.

This is the story of how Southwest Louisiana became the rich place that it is today. Ironically, we are a gumbo of past outsiders who recognized the inherent wealth of our natural resources—Acadians, northerners, enterprising promoters, laborers, real estate magnates, fishermen, railroad builders, lumber barons, fortune-seekers, farmers, oilmen, artisans, industrialists, problem solvers, leaders and followers.

Five unique parishes make up the “boot heel” of Southwest Louisiana today—Allen, Beauregard, Calcasieu, Cameron, and Jefferson Davis parishes. Our history intertwines with our future, and connecting to our heritage is like connecting to our land. The more we dig, the more we find astounding beauty, usable resources, a paradise of hunting and fishing, fine art and culture, bred-in-the-bone traditions, world-famous cuisine, and—most important—folks who tip their hats to good living, to old customs, and to advanced technology all at the same time.

It is a beautiful cause and effect story—how such a range of unlikely people found so many riches in this corner of Southwest Louisiana. The Attakapas lived easily on the land but did not prevail to see what it could become. The Koasati who migrated here have flourished, maintaining the purity of their language and culture. The phoenix-like Acadians were exiled to this place where they regenerated their culture and made it so compelling the world wants to share in it. The Midwesterners heard of a promised land and came in droves to build kingdoms of rice, cattle, and oil. The Michigan Men—Paul Bunyan's incarnate—mastered centuries-old forests and the technologies to cut, mill, and ship them around the world. They also showcased the beauty of wood in finely crafted mansions—forests miraculously evolved into spindles, turrets, polished floors, hand rubbed railings, stained glass doors and windows, and wide porches for generations of families.

This is a story of creative geniuses who had the wisdom to leave a primeval marsh in its natural state. This is a story of the French, the Germans, the Jewish, the Indians, the new Americans, the Asians, the Creoles, the Africans, the Italians, the Spanish, men, women, and children who turned a few sawmill towns into thriving cities, beautiful neighborhoods, cultural centers, industrial giants, flourishing farms and ranches—all within a breathtaking natural world.

The real-life photographs in this book capture the sensuality of Louisiana. Each image distills generations of ingenuity, hard work, historic preservation, good-natured fun, and artistry into one shot. Our story begins with golden opportunities and it continues with new chapters unfolding every day. Appreciate each photo realizing that we are a Louisiana diamond pressed from history.



ALLEN PARISH

Home to the Coushatta (Koasati) Tribe, Allen Parish sways with rich piney woods. Four rivers intersect the parish, creating a waterway haven for canoeing, hiking, and picnicking. Historically based on timber and outlying oil and gas facilities, Allen Parish boasts a diverse economic base with hospitality (centered on the Coushatta Casino Resort in Kinder) plywood manufacturing, three prison facilities, and a natural gas relay facility. Children learn early how to safely handle guns and fishing poles because the woods offer unique adventures for hunting wild boar, deer, flying squirrels, coons, and wild turkey. It's not unusual for a Sunday dinner to feature squirrel gumbo or a platter of smoked wild boar.

BEAUREGARD PARISH

On one of the largest aquifers in the country, Beauregard Parish flourishes with paper and plastics production facilities and chemical plants. Its numerous lakes and wildlife preserve make for stunning walks through the woods that are dotted with dogwoods and azaleas. The parish seat, DeRidder, is in the midst of a downtown revitalization plan and airport land use expansion. Built like many sawmill towns around Louisiana, DeRidder has the bragging rights to the most unusual jail—an impressive gothic building that seems to have climbed up on itself, stacking windows and towers. It is endearingly dubbed the “hanging jail” since the last two death row inmates were hanged there in the early part of the 1900s.

CAMERON PARISH

Spectacular marshes, cheniers, birding and photography opportunities, alligators, and bird flyways are Cameron's gift to the world. The tender wetlands are natural

brakes for hurricanes, and the marshes and wildlife have not changed in millions of years. Yet the parish provides much needed oil and gas to America without harming the environment. Its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico supports numerous oil and gas related industries. The Port of Cameron is one of the top five ports for fisheries in the nation, placing wild American shrimp and speckled trout on dinner plates across America.

CALCASIEU PARISH

Serving as the financial, medical and entertainment center of the five-parish area, Calcasieu boasts the largest regional population. Major industry and available workforce is located within the Lake Charles area. A vigorous petrochemical industry, the Port of Lake Charles—the closest deep-water port in Louisiana and eleventh largest in the nation—plus a growing aerospace industry makes Lake Charles an economic hub between Houston and New Orleans. A thriving arts and cultural district includes the Lake Charles Symphony, numerous art galleries, shopping areas, and live theater groups. Lake Charles is preservation-minded towards its hundreds of historic homes and public buildings, and trains workforces through McNeese State University and SOWELA Technical Community College.

JEFFERSON DAVIS PARISH

Louisiana's oil industry gushed forth in Jefferson Davis parish and has thrived there since. The parish is also rice country, harvesting and milling rice and using its by-products to produce alternative energy fuels. The parish shimmers with natural waterways and deep elegance of forests and timberlands. It also takes pride in preserving historic homes and buildings and maintaining a hometown downtown shopping district.

INTRODUCTION



A Treasure Revealed



Argh! Make a tough pirate face. The Jean Lafitte legend lives on during the Contraband Days Festival every spring in Lake Charles as a chosen Jean Lafitte and his buccaneers take the city, all in good-natured fun. The festival is a huge tourist attraction when we tip our big, black pirate hat to the riches that lay within our land.

THE LEGEND BEHIND THE TITLE

We know that the notorious pirate Jean Lafitte cunningly slipped along the bayous and rivers of Southwest Louisiana in the 1800s creating allies and building legends. The question is if he actually buried his loot somewhere along our beautiful moss-draped Contraband Bayou—lots of ill-gotten booty filched from schooners laden with gold, jewels, silver, furniture and fine art headed for the new Louisiana wealthy. Many legends hold seeds of truth. However, like seeds, legends often burgeon into dramatic tales with larger-than-life characters.

SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA: *A Treasure Revealed*

Jean Lafitte was a real person who has morphed into a symbolic character. He was allegedly a rascally pirate who operated out of an area known as *No Man's Land*, a neutral strip disputed by Texas and the United States who both eventually agreed in 1806 to leave it unoccupied. This forty-mile wide stretch of marshland and wilderness was bound on the west by the Sabine River and on the east by the Calcasieu River—today, part Cameron Parish, part Calcasieu Parish. Deep, cypress-lined mossy bayous and cheniers—marsh ridges topped with full live oaks—crisscrossed the southern sector. Virgin, centuries-old pine forests and hardwood bottomlands flourished in the northern sector. Only a few white settlers and slaves lived there by 1820, as did a few leftovers of the Attakapas tribe led by Chief Quelquesheu—Crying Eagle—now Americanized into Calcasieu.

It's not hard to imagine who converged onto that lawless neutral strip—social outcasts, criminals, rogues—just the type Lafitte wanted to recruit for his shenanigans. By 1817 Jean Lafitte and his buccaneers had captured numerous Spanish slave boats off the coast of Cuba and huddled stolen slaves into *barracons* or slave pens on Galveston Island. One of his best customers included an intermediary, James Bowie, who bought slaves from Lafitte, then sold them to wealthy plantation owners. An 1853 *Debow's Magazine* documents that the slave trade thrived on Black Bayou which emptied into the Sabine and the Calcasieu which poured into Lake Charles.

It didn't take Lafitte long to learn, however, he could multiply his profits by marketing slaves directly to the Louisiana cotton and sugar cane planters, so he headquartered in the neutral strip that crawled with alligators, deer, bears, black panthers, snakes, and clouds of mosquitoes. Many well-known Lake Charles ancestors actually sailed on Lafitte's ships during his scandalous raids including Captain Arsene Le Bleu who later built his cabin at the point where Calcasieu River intersects the Old Spanish Trail.

In his heyday Lafitte navigated streams and rivers with the skill of a bar pilot. The most beautiful body of water, Lake Charles, was a two-mile wide oval, jade-green tidal





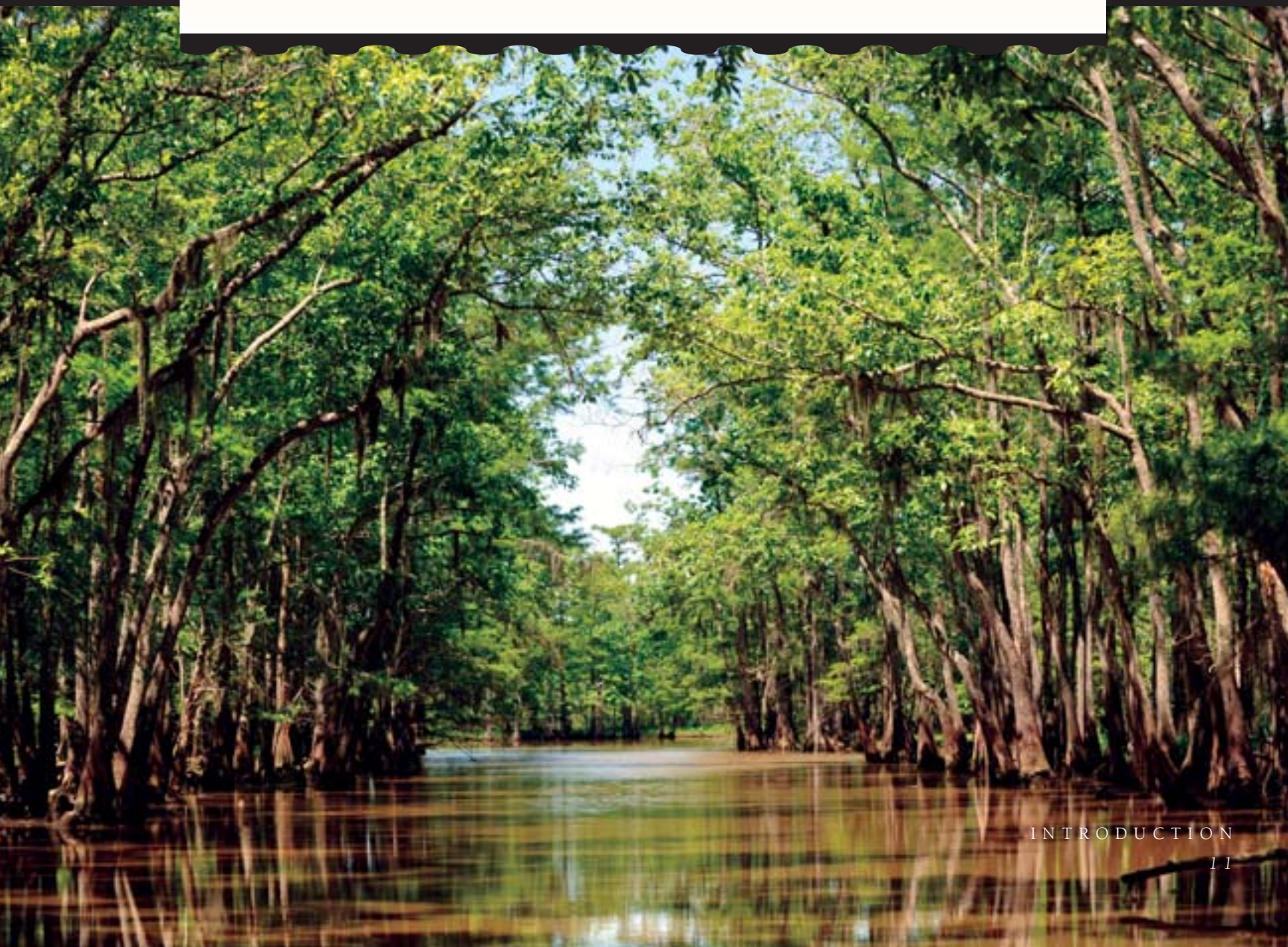
lagoon lined with willows and cypress fluttering with moss. Even after his banishment from Galveston Island, many early local residents knew Lafitte and loaded him up with fresh vegetables, beef, and “supplies” that could have ranged from weaponry to brandy.

So why the legend that Lafitte’s treasure is buried in our parts—Napoleon’s fortune, aristocrats’ jewels, gold and silver bars and coins? Pieces of the story have eked out over the years from various people who befriended him or had some kind of run-in with him or his descendents.

- 1811—Charles Sallier, a minor French aristocrat running from the guillotine, reputedly escaped with others to Spain and

paid Lafitte a huge amount of money to resettle them in Louisiana. Upon sailing into the coast of Louisiana, Attakapa-Ishak—also known as man-eaters—scaled the gunwales, frightening crew and travelers. Lafitte, however, had a rapport with these Native Americans who had buried caches of gold and jewels among the Acadian people for years, so under Lafitte’s wing the crew became comfortable with the so-called maneaters. Sallier hastily borrowed an Attakapa-Ishak’s pony and searched for hidden treasure everywhere, finally settling on Money Hill, the Barb Shellbank, where he would eventually build his home and live there until 1841. Lafitte then disappeared for four years.

- 1814—In the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo, Emperor Napoleon hoped to avoid retribution by escaping to Louisiana. Lafitte loaded into his schooner a score of sea chests holding Napoleon's personal fortune and cast off just as Napoleon missed the boat. Michel Pithon, an old Napoleonic warrior, also escaped on that voyage, settled in Lake Charles, raised a large family, and recounted numerous Lafitte tales, establishing himself as a walking history book of Lafitte's escapades. Did he know where Napoleon's stash is buried?
- 1815—Charles Sallier awoke early one morning to see his old swashbuckler friend—tall, dark, mustached—swaggering with sword in hilt along with other transplanted “aristocrats” at his door. They feasted and drank the day away. Early the next morning Lafitte's schooner slipped away, but not without rumors that it anchored again at a marsh ridge downstream near Trahan's Lake where Lafitte and his henchmen buried Napoleon's sea chest ashore in the marsh.
- 1886—A *Galveston Weekly News* carries a story claiming Hackberry Island in Calcasieu Lake was supposedly Lafitte's naval depot. The river was elevated at a place called Money Hill—also known as Barb's Shellbank where Lafitte met Charles Sallier many times.
- Two slaves who had worked closely with Lafitte knew quite a bit of his thievery, treachery, and killings, but remained tight-lipped out of fear. Catalan, his cook, lived in Calcasieu Parish until about age 94 and witnessed murders over the finds and division of Lafitte's gold. But, he would not utter a word.





- Another, ex-slave named Wash, who lived in Lake Charles, also verified Sallier's and Pithon's accounts of Lafitte's carrying-ons. One tale is that Lafitte's ship laden with booty entered the Calcasieu River while pursued by a large Civil War American frigate. Lafitte put half his crew to work burying treasure near the Barb Shellbank—again! Then they built a clamshell fort, shoved guns ashore, and sank their leaky ship. Time passed, the frigate left, and Lafitte sailed off to Galveston in a brand new schooner. Years later, two old Acadian Frenchmen scavenged Lafitte's sunken vessel and discovered two chests of silver plate and bars evidently overlooked by Lafitte's scallywags. The Acadians quickly moved the chests downriver near Cydony's Shipyard where they buried them on a marsh ridge. Wash stayed tight-lipped too after seeing treasure hunters kill each other over finding and dividing the treasure.

So, treasure hunters still seek Lafitte's fortunes, but usually not alone. Often a *patron*—apparition—or an eerie light, or giant rattlesnake with bared fangs, or even a cutlass-swinging skeleton chases them off the trail. Is Jean Lafitte still protecting his treasure trove?

We believe, however, he overlooked the full wealth of Southwest Louisiana revealed to us through our rich natural resources—abundant pine forests, hardwoods, marshlands, oil, fertile land, temperate climate, waterways, migratory flyways, and wildlife. Lafitte never realized what a rich mix of people would live here, people with staunch survival skills, imagination, and creativity—people who grab onto opportunity, who possess a *joie de vivre*, and who measure life's worth in terms of family and friends rather than treasure chests. One more thing—we know Lafitte would have dumped all his gold and jewels on the beach just to fill his pirate chests with crawfish etouffee, andouille gumbo, fresh fig ice cream, couchon du lait, oyster poorboys, shrimp remoulade, bourbon pecan pies, mayhaw jelly, and a crab cake or two.

Non-Native Americans who listen to these old ways should understand that in Native American culture the listener is as important as the presenter. Good listening is cultivated, somewhat as an art, among Native American people. Silence is respected, and courtesy is expected. People are taught not to talk while others speak, to pay attention and not to look speakers directly in the eyes. One does not eat or drink during traditional storytelling since the listener's mind is on the food and not the lesson being taught. There are also rules about who can pass-on traditions and to whom. Men tell some things, women tell others. Some, children can hear; and others are for adults only. There are some things that are told only at night and others reserved for the daylight hours. Like language itself these rules vary from tribe to tribe. Each Louisiana tribe has its own rules and the listeners should anticipate being told the rules on “how to talk and how to listen” much as they have learned in non-Native American culture.

—Koasati Native American storyteller and toymaker

THE ATTAKAPA - ISHAKS

Early man in Southwest Louisiana followed the rivers and coastlines much as we do today. Four bands of Native Americans thrived on fertile land and abundant resources—wild game, waterfowl, fish, salt domes, shellfish, and pearls. The rich Louisiana soils gave them a variety of hardwoods to build and work with including cedar, hickory, oak, and black walnut.

Two eastern bands called themselves the Sunrise People, two western bands were known as the Sunset People. They lived from Bayou Teche to the Sabine River and from what is today's Alexandria, Louisiana, to the Gulf of Mexico. Very little is known about them. European explorers did not write much about them. The Attakapa-Ishaks called themselves

Earliest Southwest Louisiana Residents— Attakapa-Ishaks and Coushatta

One Tribe Lost, Another Flourishing



Baked Alligator

Serves one band of Attakapas

- Spear one alligator in the eye and disembowel along the belly line where skin is thin.
- Leave carcass whole after gutting due to the thick hide.
- Cut loose the flesh along each side of the spine, leaving the meat in each trench.
- Replace belly skin and tie shut.
- Place entire carcass in a pit of red-hot oyster shells and cover with live charcoal.
- Bake for several hours.
- Serve as a delicacy the oil that wells up in the trenches, reserving some for later use as a body oil to repel gnats and mosquitoes and to cover swimmers' bodies to create buoyancy.
- Eat the alligator flesh, offering more to the men of the tribe.

Ishak (The People). Attakapas is Choctaw for "Eaters of Human Flesh" which is somewhat erroneous because they actually ate only parts of the slain enemies in a victory ceremony.

Southwest Louisiana was truly a sportsman's paradise for the Attakapas; the waters teemed with fish, and all the Indians had to do for dinner was to nab fish right out of the Calcasieu River by hand or net. They did fashion fishhooks from bones and made arrows and spears—one way we have today of tracking their living habits.

It is known that the Attakapa-Ishaks had dealings with Jean Lafitte who more than likely traded baubles with them for special favors—perhaps to avoid having his own parts eaten. Furthermore, they seem to have lived in this area possibly as far back as 15,000 years B.C., which would place them somewhere in the time frame of the "Great Flood". This might explain why the Attakapas viewed themselves coming from the sea, borne upon great oyster shells onto the beach.

They weren't particularly industrious, eating whatever was easy to catch. Oysters were dragged from salt water lagoons then smoked over fires to be eaten and to use as a form of money. If a fish was not too handy to grab, the shaman powdered dry roots or herbs—probably with some stunning ability—and sprinkled the fine powder on the surface of lagoons. In a few hours the fish rising to the surface were stupefied and killed with blows from paddles.

By the time the early French met the Attakapa-Ishaks, their maneating skills had improved as food became more scarce. A disastrous 1810 Gulf storm washed away the Attakapas-Ishaks huts and supplies, but serendipitously washed bodies of shipwrecked sailors ashore. They roasted the bodies in a pit, but the shaman expressed his fear that if the Attakapa-Ishaks were to eat the white men's flesh, it might mottle their dark Attakapas' flesh. Although the Indians admired head deformation, tattooing, and blackened teeth, they were not so keen on albinism.

The Attakapa-Ishaks disappeared either from disease spread by the Europeans or through inter-tribal warfare. However, they did leave behind a recipe that sheds light on an Attakapa-Ishaks feast and their everyday life.

THE COUSHATTA

The Coushatta tribal name means "Lost Tribe"—a double meaning considering their history, near extinction, then proud revival. The tribal legend tells of a wandering band of tribesmen who met up with a group of white men. When asked who they were, the Indians misunderstood the question and answered, *Koashatt* which means lost. And in one sense, they were. Long before recorded history, language analysis indicates the Coushattas were a part of a unified Muskogean stock. After linguistically splitting into seven tribes, much of the culture was lost after repeated migration and hardships over the last 200 years.

However, the Coushatta language has remained intact in its purest form—unique in modern day society when pristine languages are dying around the world. The tribe seeks to revive its proud heritage, developing a strong cultural program to teach traditional ways in a world that is letting go of traditions. Coushatta basketry—considered world-class artistry—native medical practices, and the



tribal language have been preserved and practiced by the tribe's people.

Likewise, making bows and arrows, using blowguns, cooking traditional Native American dishes, performing ancient chants and dances, and recounting tribal legends are part of a major cultural revival that the tribe is undergoing. The family unit remains the most important social tie in the Coushatta community with seven large clans represented today—each symbolized by an animal or element.

The political organization is based on an elected chief chosen for his oratorical abilities. A town chief and warrior chief are appointed by the chief. Basically peace loving town dwellers with an agriculture-based economy, the pre-migration Coushatta focused on planting maize, peas, beans, squash, pumpkins, melons, potatoes, and rice. A portion of each harvest was donated to the public granary to protect the tribe during poor harvests and war emergencies.

Hunting was only supplementary to agriculture. The Coushattas slowly accepted using the white man's gun, favoring a bow made of black locust or hickory with cane arrows. However, the Indians became as skilled at using firearms as they were with blowguns and bows and arrows. Trade, too, became an important factor in the economy.

But as it happens when cultures collide, the tribe eventually settled in Louisiana, their idyllic economic pattern was thrown off course by the coming of the Louisiana rice farmers and the timber barons. The Coushattas turned towards working the fields of the Acadian farmers or logging for the timber industrial giants. Women continued to supplement the family income working with arts and crafts.

The Coushattas are retraining to reach a goal of tribal self-determination. Some wage

earners are now involved in tribal government and others work in the tribe's flourishing aqua-culture industry—seventy acres of land devoted to rice and crawfish farming.

Coushatta men who were once loggers, now are building new tribal housing. Coushatta women who once sold pine needle baskets with no marketing plan are now displaying and selling their artistry in a new gift shop located in the reservation's retail complex, which also includes a convenience store and restaurant owned by the Tribe. Those who once worked menial jobs are finding fulfillment in important tribal job programs.

Effective leadership and a strong tribal government is reviving the almost lost culture. Coushatta Casino Resort offers over 100,000 square feet of gaming, 500 luxury hotel suites, RV parking, six restaurants, a world-class golf course, and headliner concerts and national touring acts. Each year a Coushatta Pow Wow—one of the largest in North America—is presented in Kinder as a once-in-a-lifetime experience with a Grand Entry, a rhythmic march that opens the competitions, and dancers in full regalia claiming the Dancing Ground to the accompaniment of tribal drums and singers. This family-friendly event offers a look at the fascinating culture and heritage of Native Americans.





ONE CHAPTER Treasured Heritage

The Cajuns

THE ACADIANS—TODAY'S TENACIOUS SPIRIT

Before European discovery of America, the Attakapas-Ishaks and Quelqueshue Indians roamed the prairies that are now Southwest Louisiana and lived off the rivers and bayous. In the 1760s French Acadian exiles torn from their Canadian homes settled in Southwest Louisiana, a place that held no interest for others—for a while, that is. The Acadians, popularized today as Cajuns, were phoenixes. After enduring guerrilla warfare, traumatic exile from their homeland, torn families, imprisonment, and after wandering for thousands of miles, they built self-sufficient communities centered on strong family ties. They kept alive their native French language which later mixed with English and other dialects like Creole to become Cajun French, a dialect itself. They fished from the bayous, rivers, and coastal waterways, raised cattle, and farmed to feed themselves. Eventually, Cajun rice crops, once raised purely for farmers' own subsistence, became a world-wide agricultural resource as did the shrimping industry.

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