

Introduction

On January 22, 1768 in Natchitoches, Louisiana a set of twins was born. The birth of Nicolas Augustin Metoyer and his twin sister Marie Suzanne began the Cane River Metoyer Creoles. From the first they were reared to believe that they were different, a clan apart—neither black nor white, but Creole. In Louisiana the Creoles became a part of a group known as the *gens de couleur libre* or free men of color. Our Creole family originated in Louisiana and is part of what is known as the Cane River Colony. We have a proud heritage that combines French, Native American, and African roots ¹.

Other siblings followed making ten in all. Through circumstance they eventually settled on the bayou in an area now known as Cane River ². Cane River is not just a place it is a community of people with a culture unique to America. Cane River, the community, extends from about eight miles below the city of Natchitoches to the town of Cloutierville near the southern boundary of Natchitoches Parish. It is about thirty-five miles north of Alexandria, Rapides Parish. The Louisiana post offices serving the people of the Cane River Community are Natchez, Melrose, Derry, Montrose and Cloutierville.

There are other Creole communities that developed throughout Louisiana as Frenchmen and other Europeans had children with Native American and African slaves or former slaves. A few generations later, with the intermingling of all of these groups, there developed a unique mixture of people; a beautiful people with the Latin-African-Indian mixture, but also evidence of the other ethnic groups. At one point there was a group of men from China, via Cuba, that settled on Cane River and intermarried. Our people may have dark complexion or be fair-haired and blue-eyed, as well as every shade and hair texture in between. Yes, there are Creoles in different parts of Louisiana, but the Cane River Creoles are

unique, having cohesiveness not always evident with other groups. This book contains stories remembered by those Creoles, stories that reach back to the 1800s and into the early to mid twentieth century. The Creoles that make up the colony of Cane River are not only the descendants of that well-known couple Marie Thérèse CoinCoin and Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, but also of Carroll Jones and Catherine Clifton, Athanase Fortune Christophe de Mézières and Marie Jeanne (Marie Jeanne was the sister of Marie Thérèse CoinCoin), Antoine Marinovich and Felice Beaudoin, Antoine Prudhomme and Marie Jacques Lambré, Jean Baptiste Delille Sarpy and Barton Beler, Louis Chevalier and Fanny (pronounced Fan-NEE—unknown last name). Also Louis Mathias LeCourt de Prelle (LaCour) whose son Barthelemy formed an alliance with an Indian named Marie Ursulle. Surnames such as Coutii, Anty, Thompson, Simon, Friedman, and Dupré eventually found their way into the Creole community, as did many others who no doubt found comfort in living amongst others of similar mixed heritage. There were also European men who formed lasting relationships with women of color but whose living arrangements were not recognized. An example was Marco Givanovich, uncle of Antoine Marinovich. He was listed as a bachelor but actually had several children although none were legally acknowledged. Since that name does not survive on Cane River, the children might have carried their mother's name or simply moved away. Through the years, beginning in the 1700s, names such as Llorens, Roque, Balthazar, Delphin, Conant, David (pronounced Dav-EED), Hurst, Poissot, LeComte, Coindet, Cloutier, LaFantasy, Rachal, St. Ville, Labomme, Ives, Tyler, Coton-Mais, Beaudoin/Beaudion, Sers, Hébert, LeGras, Chevalier, Monet/Monette, Robeaux/Roubieu, Neal, Wilson, Bellow/Billeaux/Beaulieu, Mulon/Mullone/Melan, Curry, Severin, Kirkland, LaCaze, Silvie/Sylvie, Brossett, Daniel,

Holloway, Christophe, Kochinsky, Ray, Dubreuil/Dubriel, Rouege/Rueg, Gallien, Bernstein/Bernestine, Bayonne, Terrell, Morin/Moran, Chelette/Chelette, Colson, Morgan, LeMelle, Robert, Airhart, Warburg, Lestage/Listage, Reggio/Raggio, and others joined the colony. Some family names were lost with either no male descendents or perhaps due to migration, or name changes, names such as Forcel, Geary, Brevelle, Routier, and others.

The free men and women of color in Creole society had a unique and separate way of life, whether one is discussing the Creoles of Cane River, New Orleans, or some sleepy little backwater town long forgotten by the mainstream.

What is a Creole? Someone of mixed heritage certainly, but it is more than that. It is a culture, a language, and a pride in our heritage. Our culture includes our language *Patois*, a French dialect (Creole French). Some families spoke this French Creole language exclusively well into the 1800s and even later. My mother remembers hearing the old people speak French when she was growing up during the early part of the twentieth century. I remember many people whose speech was peppered with French. What Creole who has spent any time on the River³ cannot remember an adult call them *chèr(e)*? I can hear Aunt Mary and her mother now (Mary Dupree Balthazar and Mrs. Frances Severin Dupree), as well as Aunt Cora (Cora Marinovich Balthazar also known as Mama Co.), “*Chère*, come on in here and get you a plate.”

Another part of our culture is the food, a wonderful blend of all three major groups that comprise our French, African, and Native American heritage. Some examples of the food include gumbo, jambalaya, *étouffée*, andouille, coush-coush, and a strong, dark, chicory-flavored coffee.

Any visitor in the home of a Cane River Creole is likely to sample a delicious soup known as gumbo⁴. In the south this dish is mostly served during the cold months. There are three

different types of gumbo: *Filé* gumbo, Chicken gumbo, and Okra gumbo. *Filé* gumbo contains the herb *filé* (feel-eh), which comes from the French verb *filer*, meaning to twist. My mother Cassie Balthazar Pimentel insists that if the *filé* cooks for too long in the gumbo it will become stringy like a rope (a rope is twisted). The word is also known among the Choctaw (I am not sure if we took the word from the French or the Choctaw). *Filé* is made following annual traditions, picking the young sassafras leaves on August fifteenth. The leaves are then placed in a dark room of the house and allowed to dry. Once dried, they are pulverized and the stems picked out. The resulting product is then bottled in anything dark such as a whiskey or beer bottle.

My mother tells stories of the family packing a picnic and heading out into the hills to pick the sassafras leaves. The day chosen, August fifteenth, is a holy day of obligation and the picnic plans would get underway following Mass. She remembers going with Aunt Ella (Ella Delphin Marinovich). “We used to go out after Mass on August fifteenth...went out to the piney woods in back of Uncle Walter’s⁵. We packed a lunch, and there was Aunt Ella and her children. Marco was fourteen or fifteen, Hazel was about thirteen, Sadie was about twelve, and Grace was four or five.”

The technique for preparing the *filé* for use in gumbo comes from the local Choctaw people, of which we are part. Native Americans can be seen in old photographs peddling *filé* on the streets of New Orleans and many other Louisiana cities. The word gumbo, on the other hand, has African origins, as does the okra used in okra gumbo. Part of the evolution of gumbo is the French dish bouillabaisse, a fish soup. A foundation ingredient for many preparations is a roux—oil cooked with flour used for making gravies, stews, and gumbo.

Why is the Creole food so unique? It is the combination of herbs and spices and the secrets passed on from one

generation to the next. Food is only one of the developments of the people of Cane River. We also developed a unique and strong identity. Early Creoles emulated the early French settlers in language, religion, family patterns, and styles of life. We lived in isolation and our culture took on its own flavor. This cultural distinctiveness has contributed to our sense of identity. We have a clear concept of ourselves as a distinct group of people. Familiarity with our history and culture has been a strong force uniting the Creole population. Other values include a respect for age and wisdom, a love for education, and a strong religion. For these pious people the church is the center of all activities even today. In earlier days, the six a.m. angelus once marked the beginning of a new day. Our St. Augustine Catholic Church is the oldest church built for and by free people of color. The church has always been the center of community life. It is the center point around which the community developed⁶.

Maybe all these things combined define us as Creole. As people began leaving to find jobs, they always thought of Cane River as their home, as do Creoles born away from Cane River.

1. Creoles are not exclusively these three nationalities. The blend could include these, plus German, Slavic, Spanish, Chinese, and others.
2. Since the damming of Cane River created a lake the official name for that body of water is Cane River Lake. The northern dam is located just north of the city of Natchitoches at Grand Ecore, and the southern dam is located a few miles north of Derry, in an area which Cane River folks call the Point.
3. The "River" refers to the area of Cane River where the Cane River Creole Colony is mainly located.
4. The gumbo information courtesy of my first cousin Alva Jean Balthazar.
5. Francis Walter Delphin.
6. Sister Frances Jerome Woods, *Marginality and Identity: A Colored Creole Family Through Ten Generations*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972).