

## Creole Festivals

The church hall at St. Augustine remains a center for the community. Church-based organizations have always sponsored an annual church fair. That fair has long been an established event on Isle Brevelle. It preceded the current influx of tourists to the plantations of the area and was a fundraiser for the church. In earlier times, during cotton-picking time - usually late October or November - a wagon would pass from house to house, and people would contribute cotton to the load. Those gifts of cotton would be baled and sold, providing money for the church. The wagon would end its trip at the church, and a gumbo and a dance would follow. Eventually, there have evolved four such fairs celebrated by the Creole community: St. Augustine, St. John the Baptist at Cloutierville, St. Anthony in west Natchitoches Parish, and St. James in Alexandria. These fairs are homecoming events today, and the various generations of Creoles come home, bring their children to play games, eat food, attend the dance and visit their extended families. The dates are staggered so the four churches can be visited by the same people. Church fairs are also now Creole events on the West Coast and are advertised regularly in Bayou Talk, the Creole newspaper.

Outsiders are welcome at these events, and at the St. Augustine Fair, large numbers of tourists come to the church hall to purchase meat pies, gumbo, tamales, dirty rice, salad

and cake. These are the standard menu, and many buy "carry-outs," especially meat pies and tamales. This Creole cuisine has replaced the cotton as a source of church support. Tourism has been captured by the traditional meal rather than the reverse. Raffles and cake sales also raise money at the fair. Quilts are made by the ladies of the parish and donated to the raffle. There are also booths and games outside in the churchyard.

Tourists remain scarce at the evening dances at the fair, but most of the people who have cooked, cleaned and served food all day do attend. The church-based organizations coordinate the Fair and provide the workers. The nuns and older ladies sell holy items and cakes. By the end of the day, virtually everyone has participated in one way or another in the fair.

The Cloutierville and Natchitoches churches are not as involved in tourism as St. Augustine since they are not adjacent to Melrose Plantation, now a mecca for Cane River tourism. Both St. John the Baptist and St. Anthony's are tied to local, more parochial, populations though the fairs have very similar structures. The fair at St. James in Alexandria reflects a concentration of Cane River families from the Cane River region and, like the others, stands alone without tourists.

Other celebrations seem to pale in comparison to the Fair. Mardi Gras, the pre-Lenten celebration, was once more important and more closely resembled the *Mardi Gras Coori*, or the "Running Mardi Gras," of southern Louisiana with masked

revelers going from house to house, ending at a communal gumbo and dance at the church. Today St. Augustine has seen the beginnings of a carnival ball, with a King, Court and Krewe - all Creole. This Mardi Gras ball is only a few years old but appears to be well established.

In Cloutierville another such gathering formerly occurred on St. John's Day, but only centenarians might recall it. Similarly, the masked riders up the river are seldom remembered. Even the older people seem to think of that as more like Halloween than Mardi Gras. They experienced it only as small children; still, they recalled the maskers coming from home to home.

Lyle Saxon's novel *Children of Strangers* described a custom, the *papegai*, where men shot at a target for cuts of meat and suggested it was a Christmas or New Year's seasonal event. It apparently disappeared long ago and is not commonly remembered now. It is no longer practiced.

Christmas and Easter are the two most celebrated feast days of the Catholic Church, and both are very important at St. Augustine. The Midnight Mass at St. Augustine attracts many nonresident Catholics and a few tourists as well. The church is decorated, the choir sings and the place is packed, with standing room only. In 1995, the children of the parish presented their version of *Posadas*, the Mexican procession, with small boys and girls going down the aisle, knocking on the pews and asking for a place to stop. They were followed by a small boy and a little girl representing St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary. Other children joined. This *Posadas* celebration

is a new tradition inspired by other parishes. Contact and intermarriage with Hispanic populations in both Texas and California may be a source of this event. There a few Hispanic influences in the region. Tamales, in local cuisine, long a Christmas food, clearly date back to the antebellum period on Cane River (see Lyle Saxon's Old Louisiana). After Midnight Mass, people are invited to breakfast at someone's home. They eat, visit and then go home to rest and entertain children and friends.

Easter Sunday is a solemn day, but in and around the Mass, there are Easter egg hunts. The tradition of "pocking," or "knocking," eggs, tapping the ends together until one breaks [ with the person holding the unbroken egg "winning" the cracked one] was strong on Isle Brevelle. This custom is also very strong along the Mississippi River and at Marksville, Louisiana, is an adult game played at the courthouse. It does not seem to extend much farther up Red River than to the Natchitoches area. Children and adults have always enjoyed the egg "knocking" as much as the hunt. People went to the Mass and then to family gatherings at homes along the river, another excuse for a feast. These secular gatherings, tied to the Holy Days set by the Church again, hold families tightly together.

Also in the spring, there is the May Procession for the Blessed Virgin Mary. A Mass and procession celebrate her day. It often is near Mother's Day. A young girl is chosen to carry a "crown" of flowers to place on the statue of the Virgin, symbolizing her role as queen of heaven. This is a high honor

for the young lady chosen, and she is a special person on that day.

Patron saints are everywhere - St. Jude Thaddeus, St. Peter Claver, St. Isadore (patron saint of fanners), St. Joseph, St. Augustine and others. Everywhere there are symbols of respect for Jesus and Mary: crucifixes, statuaries, rosaries, crosses, prayer cards, etc. Prayer cards, each dedicated to a saint, are commonly tied to personal, private devotions. Many people cherish these little cards, and they are often printed for dispersal at funerals or on other special occasions. In late summer the people go to the hills on St. John's Day (June 10) and/or the Feast of the Assumption (August 15) to gather the leaves of the sassafras tree for drying and pounding into file. The leaves are ready for gathering at that time.<sup>1</sup>

1. We Know Who We Are: . . . by H. F. Gregory and J. Moran  
pp. 55-63