INTRODUCTION

The Americanization of the Cajuns took place after decades of intense, scornful Anglo-Saxonism, the belief that Anglo-Saxon culture is superior and therefore should be imposed on other ethnic groups. Both the Cajuns and the Acadian exiles from whom they descended had been slandered as backward, ignorant, and un-American. In 1856, for instance, a journalist described the Acadians as “lazy vagabonds, doing but little work.” A New Yorker referred to them during the Civil War as a “most ignorant and wretched” people, who to his disgust were “unable to speak the English language, or convey an intelligent idea in the national tongue.” A Protestant minister noted during the same period, “These people seem to be living in the year 1500, such are their limited ideas, singular habits, and unparalleled ignorance.” These negative stereotypes persisted as the Acadians intermarried with other ethnic groups after the Civil War and evolved into Cajuns. In 1873, for example, a journalist described the Cajuns as “the least intelligent” of south Louisiana natives, while the author of an 1887 Harper’s article quoted a local as calling them a “no good” lot who “don’t know more’n a dead alligator.” One postbellum journalist referred to them as “good representatives of the white trash,” reviled even by local blacks as “Acadian niggers.”

It was in this Anglo-Saxonist context that the rapid, widespread Americanization of the Cajun people began with U.S. involvement in World
War II. Indeed, this book maintains that the unifying thread of recent Cajun history is Americanization—the process of becoming like the Anglo-American establishment that has traditionally dominated the nation’s mainstream culture. It meant, for example, embracing the work ethic, materialism, and patriotism of Anglo America, all of which were foreign to the majority of Cajuns. It also meant speaking English, despite the fact that the Cajuns and their forebears had spoken French as their primary (and usually only) language since coming to the New World three centuries earlier. Americanization thus ranks as one of the most important events in the entire Cajun experience, along with the expulsion of their ancestors from Nova Scotia and south Louisiana’s devastation during the Civil War. These events resulted in sea changes that forever altered the nature of the ethnic group. While Acadian and Cajun history during the colonial era and nineteenth century have been examined in detail, the mid- to late twentieth century has been almost wholly ignored by historians. As such, this book constitutes the first detailed examination of recent Cajun history.

Significantly, the concept of Americanization has traditionally borne an undertone of Anglo-Saxonism. This ethnic bias has existed in America since colonial times and persisted into the twentieth century. It expressed itself in numerous ways, but it commonly centered on the issue of language. During and after World War I, for example, Anglo-Americans focused their xenophobia on German-Americans by outlawing the use of German in public places, including churches and schools. Some school libraries removed German-language books from shelves, burning them or selling them as wastepaper. In the Midwest between 1917 and 1921 at least eighteen thousand German-Americans were fined for speaking German in public. Similarly, Anglo-Americans in the Southwest banned the use of Spanish, punishing Hispanic students “like little outlaws” for speaking their native tongue on school grounds. Hispanic educators were also criminalized for using the language in classrooms. As late as 1970 a high school teacher in Texas was indicted for using Spanish during a history course. American Indians also suffered from punitive practices. Government agents removed thousands of Indian children from their families—sometimes by force—and educated them in distant English-only boarding schools. As late as the 1960s Indian students who were caught speaking their ancestral tongues at school
were locked in closets, had their mouths washed out with soap, or had their heads shaved. Despite the coming of multiculturalism during the 1960s, when the struggle for civil rights and various liberation movements sparked feelings of ethnic pride and empowerment, this Anglo-Saxonist bias continued to exert itself sporadically. In the mid-1990s, for example, many Americans embraced a neo-nativist English-only movement aimed at stamping out “foreign” languages, particularly Spanish. The Cajun people, as will be shown, have also endured linguistic discrimination and were treated harshly in the past for expressing their ethnicity through French.²

A distinct ethnic group, the Cajuns can be viewed, ironically, as the product of Anglo-Saxonism, for their eighteenth-century Acadian ancestors were brutally exiled from Nova Scotia by the British government, which viewed the French-Catholic minority as a threat to its North American empire. Of the roughly fifteen thousand Acadians displaced from Nova Scotia, about three thousand sought refuge in south Louisiana, settling in a region eventually called Acadia. There they intermarried with other ethnic groups on the semitropical frontier, including French, Spanish, and German settlers and even a small number of Anglo-Americans and Native Americans. They were also influenced by Afro-Caribbean slaves and their descendants, who, like the Cajuns, shared a French-Catholic heritage. This cross-cultural pollination transformed the region’s white ethnic groups into a single new ethnic group, the Cajuns, whose population now numbers over a half million. It included not only persons with Acadian surnames, like Beaux, Guidry, Hebert, and Theriot, but also those with French surnames, like Begnaud, Fontenot, and Soileau; Spanish surnames, like Castille, Miguez, and Romero; German surnames, like Hymel, Schexnider, and Stelly; and Scotch-Irish and Anglo-American surnames, like McGee, Miller, and Walker. Elements from all these groups contributed to the new ethnic landscape, but Acadian culture remained the predominant influence. This is demonstrated by the persistence of French as south Louisiana’s primary language until the mid-twentieth century. Cajun musician Dennis McGee thus rightly claimed, “McGee, that’s a French name. I don’t know anyone named McGee who doesn’t speak French.”³

Although the developing Cajun people and their ancestors remained largely untouched by Americanization prior to World War II, they were not totally removed from the currents of national history. Major events like the
American Revolution, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and World War I influenced the ethnic group. Of these, the Civil War had the greatest impact, for by destroying south Louisiana’s economy it lowered rival ethnic groups, such as the French, Spanish, and Germans, to the same impoverished social stratum inhabited by most Acadians. As a result, these ethnic groups began to intermarry with the Acadians in sizable numbers. More than any other factor it was this postbellum blending process that created the people called Cajuns. However, the Civil War had only a minor Americanizing influence on the forming ethnic group, which tended to regard the conflict as someone else’s fight. *La guerre des Confédérés*, many south Louisianians called it, the Confederates’ War. A magazine illustration from the period showed a typical Acadian conscript on picket duty, chained to a tree to prevent him from deserting.\(^4\)

Similarly, the superpatriotism of the World War I era failed to exert a strong Americanizing effect on most Cajuns. Few actually fought in the conflict, for most were discharged from the service because they had contracted influenza, a national epidemic, or because the war ended prior to their deployment. Even the practice of punishing Cajun children for speaking French on the school playground or in the classroom, a byproduct of the era’s intense Anglo-Saxonist nationalism, did not result in immediate Americanization. Many south Louisiana children did not attend school and so were spared the humiliation of writing lines or being paddled. Those who did experience punishment still tended to use French at home, but when they became parents around World War II, many declined to teach the dialect to their children, viewing it as a shameful impediment to social and economic advancement.

Thus, most Cajuns remained culturally isolated from the rest of America for nearly the entire first half of the twentieth century, even as radio made its way into south Louisiana during the 1920s and 1930s. Although a folklorist noted in the 1930s that “Radio stations for many years have been broadcasting Acadian music. . . . Not only Acadian music and singing, but also newscasts in Acadian-French, commercials and all,” evidence suggests that less than half of Acadiana dwellings possessed radios. This reflected not only the Cajuns’ isolation but also the poverty in which they had been mired since the collapse of the local economy after the Civil War. By 1940 only about 17 per-
cent of rural farm dwellings in Acadiana had electric lighting, about half the average for the entire country. Similarly, only 22 percent, less than half the national average, had adequate plumbing, defined as an indoor bathtub or shower, an indoor toilet, and running water. Cajuns in more urbanized areas, such as Lafayette, Lake Charles, New Iberia, and Opelousas, also suffered such deprivations. Like other minority groups, including whites in Appalachia, blacks in the South’s cotton belt, Hispanics in the Southwest, and Indians on reservations across America, the Cajuns were so isolated from mainstream culture and so immersed in poverty that, according to some historians, most did not notice the Great Depression.5

On the eve of the Cajuns’ rapid, widespread Americanization that began with U.S. entry into World War II, outsiders still viewed the ethnic group through the lens of Anglo-Saxonism. As late as 1929 a historian dismissed the Cajuns as unworthy of study. Overlooking their contributions to important rural industries, such as hunting, fishing, trapping, logging, and farming, the historian observed, “Such a people were not to be of great influence in hastening the development of Louisiana.” A decade later a WPA writer portrayed the Cajuns as “uncultured . . . impetuous, highly inflammable, ultra-sensitive [and] unrelenting in hatreds.” The same writer noted that Cajun males possessed “dull, rather unimaginative eyes,” while the ethnic group in general led “a life without stability, responsibility or conventionality . . . one in which the sole purpose and solitary desire is the satisfaction of fundamental necessities and emotions.”6

This image of the Cajuns as hedonistic bumpkins would continue to haunt them for decades. Beneath it always lay the specter of Anglo-Saxonism. One journalist betrayed this persistent bias when he derisively penned, “He of Anglo-Saxon stock regards American civilization as the highest in the world, and insists that this [Cajun] native shall square himself to it, but he persistently refuses . . . and to the urgent demands of the Anglo-Saxon neighbor his ‘Non, monsieur,’ comes back as unerringly as the refrain of Poe’s raven.”7

It took a historical event of unprecedented scale to trigger the rapid, widespread Americanization of the Cajun people, and that event was World War II. Unlike previous historical events, this global conflict and its aftermath served
as major Americanizing agents in south Louisiana, resulting, for instance, in the near demise of Cajun French by the end of the century: in 1990 only about 30 percent of Cajuns spoke the dialect as their first language, and most of these were middle aged or elderly. Practically no Cajun youths spoke the dialect, even as a second language. This reality suggests the dramatic changes the Cajuns had undergone during the previous sixty years, a period that remained unexplored in detail despite the rise of new social history, or “history from the bottom up,” as some have described it.8

Appearing in the 1960s, this field made a decisive break with the past by dismissing wars, revolutions, diplomacy, politics, and “great men” as subjects of study. A new generation of historians, influenced by ongoing protest and liberation movements, instead placed stronger emphasis on the roles of immigrants, women, workers, races, and ethnic groups and published a deluge of significant books and articles on these subjects. Historians examined black history from colonial times through the civil rights movement. Women historians studied not only feminism but the role of women and gender throughout American history. Hispanic historians focused on Mexican-Americans from the Spanish colonial period to the advent of the “Brown Power” movement. Historians of the Jewish and American Indian experiences also appeared, as eventually did Cajun historians, but they tended to focus on south Louisiana during the colonial era and nineteenth century.

This book seeks to fill a major gap in Cajun history by using a variety of previously untapped sources, including personal interviews, courthouse records, manuscript collections, newspaper articles, and even poems and songs. One particularly useful source was a database of written responses to questionnaires submitted by the author to newspapers throughout south Louisiana and east Texas. These questionnaires, which so many editors kindly published, asked average, ordinary Cajuns to comment on a variety of subjects from the effects of military service during World War II, to their feelings about the ethnic label coonass, to how they perceived their own ethnicity. The response was tremendous, resulting in more than a hundred often extremely detailed and surprisingly candid letters.

The questionnaire subject that generated the largest number of responses concerned the punishment of Cajun children for speaking French at school. Many victims and eyewitnesses described with evident sorrow the harsh
treatment meted out by some educators until well after World War II. Significantly, a few respondents expressed concern that younger Cajuns, and non-Cajuns in general, have increasingly tended to discount these stories as mere fables, a trend also discerned by the author. Yet such punishments did occur throughout south Louisiana for roughly two generations, instilling many Cajuns with lifelong feelings of shame and humiliation. “Please let it be known how we were treated for speaking French,” implored one respondent. “This is the first time I have had to write a letter to express my bitterness on this subject... I guess after writing this letter I realized that I'm still not completely over my pain and anguish.”

Another invaluable source was the U.S. Census, particularly the 1990 census, which the author accessed in two formats: the standard, multivolume print version, available to the general public through numerous libraries; and a digital version, known as Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS), available mainly to scholars through academic institutions. PUMS offer raw census data extrapolated from 5 percent of households in specific geographic regions and allow researchers to generate customized statistical analyses and tabulations. For example, it can determine for 1990 the number of primarily French-speaking Cajuns in south Louisiana who identified themselves as World War II veterans. The print version of the census does not possess such capabilities.

It is important to note, however, that researchers have discovered a major discrepancy between the 1990 census and preliminary results from the 2000 census. The 1990 census counted more than four hundred thousand Cajuns in Louisiana, while the 2000 census counted only about forty thousand, roughly a 90 percent decline in only ten years. The U.S. Census Bureau clearly miscounted, either in 1990 or 2000 (or both), for the disappearance of almost the entire Cajun population in only a decade is highly improbable.

General opinion in south Louisiana holds that the 1990 census remains the most accurate measure of the Cajun population, while the 2000 preliminary results are considered, to cite one editorial, “a colossal miscalculation.” Louisiana historian Carl A. Brasseaux has estimated the state’s Cajun population at between five and seven hundred thousand, figures that approximate the findings of the 1990 census. Brasseaux thus has discounted the 2000 statistics, noting wryly that there are probably forty thousand Cajuns on the
north side of Lafayette Parish alone. Nonacademics also have scoffed at the 2000 statistics. Lafayette's Daily Advertiser ridiculed the figures as “cockeyed” and observed, “Our government advises [us] that there aren’t as many Cajuns . . . as we saw dancing in the streets during festival time.” “If You’re One of 365,000 Missing Cajuns,” ran one of its headlines, “Please Send up a Flare.” Asked another newspaper, “Where Did All the Cajuns Go?”

The 2000 census results are obviously incorrect to anyone familiar with south Louisiana’s cultural landscape. And because no reason exists to doubt the accuracy of the 1990 results, this study relies on those earlier figures.

A few other matters of interpretation demand attention. For example, the terms south Louisiana and Acadian are used interchangeably when referring to Cajun Louisiana, and sometimes they implicitly include a small part of southeast Texas that boasts a large Cajun population. Furthermore, the labels Cajun and Acadian are used synonymously in quoted material, although the author’s own term of preference is Cajun. In addition, the phrase south Louisianian is often used as a convenient synonym for Cajun, although other ethnic groups also regard south Louisiana as their homeland. For example, a sizable Creole population inhabits the region and has exerted a major influence on the local cultural landscape. The word Creole, however, is a slippery one, meaning in a broad sense “native to Louisiana.” As a result, persons of black, white, and mixed-race heritage have all referred to themselves as Creoles, both in the past and present. Unless otherwise stated, the word Creole is used in this book solely in reference to south Louisianians of Afro-Caribbean heritage, including those of mixed-race ethnicity.

Finally, it should be understood that criticism of “Anglo-Saxonism,” defined in this work as the imposition of Anglo-Saxon ways on other ethnic groups, does not impugn Anglo-Saxon culture and values in general. Similarly, criticism of “Americanism” during World War II and the early Cold War periods, when Anglo-Saxonist biases permeated the concept, should not be misconstrued as disparaging American culture and values.
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ONE

CAJUNS DURING WARTIME

Quand j’ai parti pour aller dans l’armée.                When I left to go in the army,
J’ai quitté tout ça moi, j’aimais.                     I left all that I loved.
Moi, j’ai pris le grand chemin de fer                 I took the train
Avec le coeur aussi cassé.                           With such a broken heart.

—Cajun musician Nathan Abshire, “Les blues du service militaire [Service Blues],” date unknown

It’s my job to convince them that it’s more fun to use a bayonet on a Jap than a knife on a muskrat.

—Captain Robert L. Mouton, on recruiting Cajuns for the U.S. Marines, 1942

Four thousand miles from his hometown of Breaux Bridge, Ralph LeBlanc, or “Frenchie,” as Navy pals called the twenty-year-old sailor, sat reading comics in Kingfish Hangar’s ready room. Usually occupied by pilots receiving orders and briefings, the room this morning, as every Sunday morning, served as a hangout where off-duty sailors drank coffee while glancing through stateside newspapers.

http://site.ebrary.com/id/10340761?ppg=28
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For the past three days LeBlanc and his crew of mechanics had been awaiting aircraft from the carriers Enterprise and Lexington, so the roar of diving planes came as no surprise. Just a few aviators showing off, LeBlanc figured, before swooping down to land. LeBlanc went outside with some of the other sailors to watch the display. “We thought they were going to give us a little show,” he recalled a half century later, “and then one of them drops a bomb right on the PBY hangar.”

The bomb’s spinning nose propeller landed at LeBlanc’s feet. He stooped down and picked up the fragment. “It was so hot,” he recounted, “I burned my fingerprints into it.” LeBlanc could only surmise that a “crazy” American pilot had bombed the hangar—then it dawned on him what really was occurring.

A short distance from LeBlanc’s post, another Cajun, twenty-one-year-old Louis Provost of Lafayette, watched from the heavy cruiser San Francisco as planes swarmed around his vessel, firing machine guns and dropping bombs and torpedoes. “People were being blown up and thrown in the water,” he recalled. “I was like a scared rabbit.” As Provost watched, an explosion ripped through the nearby battleship Arizona, killing a thousand sailors, including three Cajuns—Charles Donald Frederick of Abbeville, Russell Durio of Sunset, and Felix Ducrest of Broussard.1

The day was December 7, 1941, and the place was Pearl Harbor. Cajun GIs had just witnessed the opening salvo of Japan’s sneak attack on American soil, the event that marked the U.S. entry into World War II and the beginning of a chain of events that over coming decades would immerse most Cajuns in mainstream culture.

Cajuns participated in the war effort by the thousands, compelling many to leave their south Louisiana enclave for the first time. In training camps, foxholes, and trenches, Cajun GIs encountered solely English-speaking Americans, and some, like Lovelace Viator of Vermilion Parish—“one of more than a dozen in his original company from the bayou country,” reported his local newspaper in 1945, “who could neither speak nor understand English”—learned the new language in order to serve and survive in the military. They saw new peoples, visited strange places, and were exposed to influences that changed their traditional values. Some Cajun GIs found
wartime service an ordeal, experiencing culture shock and suffering ethnic slurs. Others excelled as soldiers, exhibiting heroism on the battlefield and winning the admiration of their comrades.²

Back on the home front, Cajun civilians united with other Americans to support the war effort. They volunteered as air raid wardens, plane spotters, firefighters, auxiliary policemen, and nursing aides, and they participated in bond, stamp, and scrap drives. Like combat experience, these activities promoted feelings of national unity, drawing Cajuns closer to mainstream America. Emphasis on “the American way of life” strongly affected Cajun children: census data shows that the use of Cajun French as a first language dropped 17 percent for Cajuns born during U.S. involvement in World War II, the single largest decrease since the beginning of the century. This trend resulted not only from intense Americanism but also from the practice of punishing Cajun students for speaking French at school.³

The war also brought south Louisiana civilians into contact and sometimes conflict with different peoples and cultures. Anglo-American GIs, oil field workers, their families, and Axis prisoners of war all moved into the formerly insular region. Other Cajuns left Acadiana to take jobs in New Orleans and east Texas, where despite their frequent trouble with English they worked in shipyards, refineries, and defense factories. Wartime movies, newsreels, newspapers, books, magazines, and radio programs introduced home front Cajuns to the outside world, influencing both positively and negatively their feelings about themselves and other Americans.

World War II unified Americans more than any other event of the twentieth century, and no other event spawned so many profound and lingering aftereffects. Between 1941 and 1945 more than fifteen million men and women entered the U.S. military, and millions more left home to work in defense-related industries. Never had so many Americans picked up roots and moved so far, so frequently, so quickly. Soldiers who as civilians had stayed no more than a few miles from their birthplaces were whisked halfway around the globe, where alongside Americans from other sections of the country they fought common enemies and encountered “foreign” peoples and locales previously unknown. One ethnic historian has aptly asserted that “it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the war as the central event in shap-
ing Americans’ understanding of their national identity. World War II shaped this identity primarily by hastening the Americanization of minorities, including blacks, Germans, Italians, Hispanics, Jews, and Native Americans.

Like these and other ethnic groups, Cajuns were caught up in the turmoil of wartime. Census data indicates that about 24,500 Cajuns served in the military during World War II. As might be expected, they made up the majority of inductees in the heart of Acadiana. Of 69 white St. Martin Parish men inducted between January and April 1942, for example, 68 percent had Cajun surnames, nearly the same percentage as for the 95 Lafayette Parish whites inducted in November 1942. For 26 Vermilion Parish whites inducted in November 1943, the figure was 77 percent, about the same as for the 41 whites inducted in Iberia Parish in February 1942. The percentage was smaller but still significant outside central Acadiana. In Terrebonne Parish, 42 percent of the 160 men inducted in May 1942 were Cajuns.

Cajuns not only were drafted into the military but, shocked into newfound patriotism by the attack on Pearl Harbor, volunteered with enthusiasm. On the morning after the disaster, a recruiting officer arrived at work in Opelousas to find three teenagers waiting to enlist. “We three had been thinking for some time of enlisting,” explained one, “and this Jap bombing decided us.” A few weeks later Captain Robert L. Mouton of the U.S. Marine Corps traveled across southeast and central Acadiana, sometimes using motorboats or piroguettes (shallow-draft boats), to recruit fellow Cajuns for the “Bayou Battalion,” sometimes called the Bayou Brigade. His rationale was simple: “They can shoot straight, they can handle a knife, they’re good physical specimens and they love a scrape. . . . If that doesn’t make good Marine material then moi, je suis fou [I’m crazy].” According to Allen J. Lasseigne, a Bayou Battalion veteran, the force eventually consisted of about 150 to 200 men who trained together in San Diego, California. In spring 1942 the group went to Hawaii, where its members were split up and scattered throughout the Pacific, serving alongside other Americans in the fight against Japan.
was still the region’s unrivaled tongue. Of those older GIs, more than 80 percent used French as their first language.⁷

Because of their ethnic peculiarities, Cajun GIs attracted attention when they settled into training camps across the country. The arrival of a group of Cajun inductees in South Carolina, for example, stirred the interest of the local News and Courier: “A ‘Foreign Legion’ has come to Charleston in the French-speaking soldiers from the Louisiana bayous,” the paper observed. An officer explained that most of his inductees grew up on rice, sugarcane, and cotton plantations and had spent most of their days outdoors, farming, fishing, or hunting. As a result, they made excellent soldiers and marksmen. Another officer, himself a Cajun, boasted, “The men in this outfit are noted as the best fighters, the best cooks, and the best lovers in the army!”

The News and Courier praised the Cajun GIs as “absolutely American” but hinted at the Americanization they were experiencing. Officers first instructed the soldiers in French, but English soon dominated training exercises. “Now, several speak English only,” the paper reported, “and sometimes find it necessary to find a bilingual fellow officer to help translate the gesticulations and machine-gun rattle of the patois when some emergency arrives.”

These soldiers adapted to their new environment, but they also made their surroundings more familiar. They spoke French among themselves and prepared traditional dishes, including crawfish bisque and chicken-oyster gumbo, which made their mess hall the most popular in camp. They also sang folk songs, as demonstrated when a cook broke into a mournful ballad in front of the News and Courier’s reporter:

`Je passai devant la porte. [I passed before the door.
Je criaï bye-bye la belle. I cried bye-bye, sweetheart.
Il n’y a personne que me reponde. There is no one that answers me.
Oh, yé vaille! Mon coeur fait mal. Oh it hurts! My heart hurts.]`

In these ways, Cajun GIs battled homesickness and eased the strain of Americanization, for many found their sudden immersion in Anglo-American society a bewildering experience.⁸

Despite the message of national unity proclaimed during World War II, Anglo-Saxonist bigotry led to discrimination and outbreaks of ethnic violence. For example, blacks were initially denied entry into some branches of
the military, such as the Marines, and those who did join other branches were usually given menial positions, such as laborers in the army or stewards in the navy. As more blacks attempted to get jobs in the military and in defense industries, tensions flared over inequalities, leading to riots in New York City, Detroit, Mobile, and other places, including Beaumont-Port Arthur, Texas, and Alexandria, Louisiana, both just outside Acadiana. Similarly, wartime discrimination against Hispanics caused a race riot in Los Angeles, whose Mexican-American residents had been denied the right to work in defense industries. At the same time, the U.S. government regarded Japanese-Americans on the West Coast as potential traitors, even though they had committed no acts of sabotage, and relocated them to inland concentration camps. German-and Italian-Americans were encouraged to mimic Anglo-Americans. As one historian has observed, “‘Blend in,’ was the wartime imperative: ‘Hush, speak English.’ We are not German, or Italian, or Japanese, or Jewish: ‘We are AMERICAN.’”

It was amid this oppressive Anglo-Saxonist environment that Cajuns joined the military during World War II. Although treated better than non-white ethnic groups, they nonetheless were perceived as different because of their ancestry. As a result, they often became victims of ethnic discrimination. Comrades nicknamed Cajuns “Frenchie” or “Frog” or subjected them to slurs like “coonie” or “coonass,” both denoting ignorance. Delton Joseph Menard, who trained at Little Rock, Arkansas, recalled, “There was one soldier in particular that laughed and made fun of me because I was Cajun. One day we were practicing throwing hand grenades and he kept calling me a coonass and making fun of my English. I finally got fed up and took a dummy hand grenade and hit him on the back of the head with it.” In some cases, more worldly GIs preyed on unwary Cajuns. L. Harvey Adams, who grew up in the countryside between Crowley and Kaplan, recalled being “very naive. I trusted everyone. Everyone knew better than I. I had never been allowed to express myself, or make decisions. That’s the Cajun upbringing. I was duped many times by the city-wise kids. Guys would borrow money from me and never repay me, yet I said nothing. It seemed to be my duty.” Some lone Cajun GIs felt alienated amid so many English-speaking comrades. “I couldn’t express my thoughts and feelings well in English,” noted Réaux Meaux, “so I couldn’t really talk to anyone. No one else in my outfit...
spoke French.” Culture shock overwhelmed a few inductees. “I felt I had come from a foreign country,” recounted Gerald B. Champagne of Breaux Bridge, “and everybody else seemed to think I did.”

Although the U.S. military needed French-speaking GIs to act as interpreters in France, Belgium, North Africa, and Southeast Asia, officials often disregarded the linguistic skills of Cajun servicemen. Some recruiters, often Gulf Coast Anglo-Americans with preconceived notions about their French-Catholic countrymen, saw Cajun French as a bastardized dialect, understood only by south Louisiana hayseeds. Thus, when a Cajun informed an induction officer at Fort Shelby, Mississippi, that he spoke two languages, the officer brushed off the information, stating that Cajun French “would be of no benefit to the U.S. Army.”

Yet the military sometimes used the linguistic abilities of Cajun GIs. Elvin Thibodeaux translated while serving in France and was once called on to question captured Nazi soldiers. Speaking no German, he was perplexed until he found that the soldiers were French-speaking Alsatians and Lorrainers who claimed they had been threatened with death if they did not fight for Hitler. Dudley J. Theriot also served as a translator in Europe: “I would ask the French people where some of the Germans were dug in the ground, or the building they were hiding in. . . . They spoke very fast, but after asking them to speak slower I could understand them easily.” An infantryman from Vermilion Parish used his linguistic skills in North Africa, where Free French troops were stationed. On one occasion, he was introduced to a French officer, recalling, “I spoke to him in his native tongue. . . . He said for an American I had an unusual accent. I told him we all spoke French at home, and he then told me that the French I spoke was seventeenth-century French that had been forgotten in France.”

The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) recruited a few Cajuns to act as secret agents, sending Robert J. LeBlanc of Abbeville deep into Nazi territory to liaison with the French resistance, known as the Maquis. According to LeBlanc, he made these forays across enemy lines only after months of linguistic training in which he learned to suppress his Cajun colloquialisms. “Many times my radio operators and driver would wonder if I was coming back,” he noted. “My ability to speak French was crucial.” The OSS also recruited Sam Broussard of New Iberia. Serving as an intelligence officer,
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Broussard sat in on D-Day planning sessions with Eisenhower and participated in the Omaha Beach landing. Once in France, he slipped through German lines to aid the resistance. “I was assigned to infiltrate Brittany to contact the Maquis,” he recalled. “We had ammunition, guns, etc., dropped and prepared for an attack on the Germans. We put that enemy company out of action.” When the German army retreated, Broussard moved on to Belgium and assisted its resistance movement.11

Like most American soldiers, the majority of Cajun GIs took enormous pride in their wartime service. As one wrote from an army camp in Texas, “It’s an honor to be an American and able to help his country. I left home nothing but a poor working boy, now here I am an American soldier serving my good Uncle Sam.” Another enjoyed his life in the navy, where, “No man is better than you, and you’re better than no one.” Cajun women also served their nation, among them four Castille sisters from Sunset, who signed up in the Women’s Army Corps (WACs). One sister, Mercedes, worked near the front lines in western Europe, setting up hospital units and evacuating wounded soldiers during the Battle of the Bulge.12

Indeed, some Cajuns, such as Wallace J. Moulis of St. Martinville, excelled as soldiers. He attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and served with distinction in western Europe, seeking out German troops as an intelligence and reconnaissance platoon leader and as a battle patrol commander. “A lot of us owe our lives to the risks you took,” wrote one of his privates, “You didn’t have to go out on those patrols—not did you have to brief us as thoroughly as you did before each mission—not did you have to sleep in a pup tent back in the Ardennes—or eat last, or see that we were well-bedded down—but you did—without exception.” Similarly, Joe Thibodeaux of Lafayette displayed heroism as a member of Darby’s Rangers, a special forces unit that participated in the invasions of Sicily, Italy, and North Africa. “We got annihilated at Anzio,” he recounted. “About 700 went in and about six of us came out.” Among aviators who performed remarkably was Wiltz P. Segura of New Iberia. Piloting a P-40 fighter in China with the squadron known popularly as the Flying Tigers (officially the Twenty-third Fighter Group), Segura fought about twenty-five dogfights and shot down six Japanese aircraft, qualifying him as an ace pilot. He also was shot down, bailing out of his flaming aircraft after being struck by ground fire. Jefferson J. DeBlanc of St. Martinville flew F4U Corsairs in the
Pacific and was shot down while defending U.S. dive bombers and torpedo planes. Parachuting out of his aircraft, he swam for hours to reach a tropical island, where headhunters captured him and then traded him to allied coastal watchers for a bag of rice. "Being in the war made a man out of you in a short time," he recalled. "It was kill or be killed. That will certainly make one grow up fast." For his heroism, DeBlanc received the Congressional Medal of Honor.\textsuperscript{13}

The war exerted a profound influence on Cajun GIs, giving them a new sense of national identity and beginning the process of rapid, widespread Americanization. Proud of their wartime contributions, they came home staunch patriots, defenders of the American way of life. They had at long last become part of the national melting pot. "I wanted to be an American," asserted Robert J. LeBlanc, explaining why even Cajun GIs who had served as translators did not teach their children French after the conflict. Many south Louisiana servicemen returned home mispronouncing their own surnames in the Anglo-American manner. "I was always called HE-BERT," complained former B-24 crew member Isidor L. Hebert, because other GIs "could not understand A-BEAR." Prejean became FREE-GENE, LeBlanc became LEE-BLANK, DeRouen became DEE-RUIN. This trend was so common that it prompted one south Louisiana civic leader to plead, "Those of you with pretty French names like Roger, Mouton, Broussard, and the like should be the last ones to allow your names to be changed to the more prosaic English or hill-billy ones."\textsuperscript{14}

Just as ethnic GIs experienced Americanization during World War II, millions of ethnic civilians also underwent changes on the home front, pushing them toward a common national identity. "Americans All!" ran a popular slogan, as wartime anxieties and heightened patriotism created an atmosphere that demanded consensus and conformity for victory's sake. Influenced by this trend, Cajun civilians reacted to the coming of war much like Americans anywhere in the country. "The dastardly attack by Japan," reported the \textit{St. Martinville Weekly Messenger}, "was taken calmly, but with suppressed anger, by citizens of St. Martinville and St. Martin Parish. The subsequent declaration of war . . . received patriotic approval." The \textit{Abbeville Meridional} noted that citizens of Vermilion Parish responded to the declaration of war by making "plans to cooperate with the national defense organizations to meet the crisis well prepared."\textsuperscript{15}
Yet the idea of a “world war” at first perplexed some on the home front, who knew little about events beyond their parish borders. According to storyteller Allen Simon, when an elderly Kaplan resident heard that the Germans had bombed Abbeville, France, he thought the target was actually Abbeville, Louisiana, less than ten miles away. “They’re already here?” he asked. When informed that the attack had occurred in Europe, he replied, “I’m sorry for these French people way over there, but that’ll teach them a lesson. If they’d stayed here where they belong and not gone over there, we could have helped them.” Simon’s account may be of the “urban myth” variety, for a Louisiana State University educator recorded in his memoirs the story of Cajun named Alcide who responded in a similar manner to the German invasion of France. “Well,” said Alcide, “What all those Frenchmen doing in France? Me, I don’t have any sympathy for dem. Dey never should have left Louisiana in the first place.” Regardless of authenticity, both stories reflect much of south Louisiana’s isolation at the dawn of World War II.16

Most south Louisiana civilians, however, grasped the nature of the conflict and organized to defend the home front. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, local sheriffs followed directives from the FBI to collect the names of all Japanese residents, the beginning of the nation’s internment of about 120,000 U.S. citizens and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry for the duration of the conflict. The sheriff of St. Landry Parish duly turned over the name of his only Japanese constituent, a Mr. Nagada who for years had operated a fruit stand and market in Eunice. In Jefferson Davis Parish the sheriff reassured citizens by informing them, “there are no Japs in this parish.”

Local police also went on the lookout for spies and saboteurs, sometimes with a vengeance. Only one day before Germany declared war on the U.S., the Daily World announced that alert Opelousas city police had arrested two men “suspected of being a different nationality than American.” One of the men spoke German, the paper observed with suspicion, while the other was of German descent. Eventually, it was determined that they were not Nazi saboteurs but hoboes from Pennsylvania. Around the same time, Opelousas police arrested another foreigner suspected of being a Nazi spy, but he turned out to be Canadian.

Acadiana officials heeded the FBI’s advice to protect local industrial, utility, transportation, and communication facilities. Announcing that the coastal industries under his jurisdiction were “safe game for saboteurs,” the
sheriff of Iberia Parish vowed that his department would deputize locals "to combat menace," including "activities of fifth columnists." He placed public buildings under twenty-four-hour watch, erected fences and floodlights, put guards at the massive saltworks on Avery, Weeks, and Jefferson Islands, and assigned patrols to the parish’s oil fields.17

Across the nation, wartime anxiety infected the civilian population, giving rise to fears of enemy attack, infiltration, and subversion. Acadiana was caught up in this national trend, aided in part by Louisiana Governor Sam Jones, who toured the region in 1942 to stir interest in civil defense. Noting that the Japanese had swiftly carved out an empire by “marching through Malayan jungles as impenetrable as the Atchafalaya swamps,” he warned that the region’s oil fields could become targets for aerial attacks. “An airplane can fly from the Pacific Coast to Abbeville in four hours,” the governor warned a Vermilion Parish audience. “You had better give up the idea that it can’t happen in Louisiana.”18

Spurred by such warnings, Acadiana citizens mobilized for home front defense. In Iberia Parish more than 5,500 residents signed up as volunteers; in St. Martin Parish the number reached 6,500, a quarter of its population. Towns as small as Parks (population 460) conducted blackouts, which were also observed in the countryside miles from the nearest town. “You’d hear the siren in Kaplan,” recalled farm dweller Allen Simon, “and they’d blow this thing long, so many blasts, and you had to either turn your lights off, or it was kerosene lamps, or put a black paper around it and close your shades.”19

As occurred elsewhere in the nation, wartime anxiety sometimes escalated into wartime hysteria. When a highly contagious disease wiped out hundreds of muskrats in the coastal marshlands and spread to nineteen south Louisianians, killing eight, rumor circulated that the outbreak had been caused by Japanese germ warfare. Fearing widespread panic, the federal government moved in, quarantined all possible disease carriers, and asked the media to refrain from reporting the incident. The disease was eventually identified as psittacosis, or “parrot fever,” a viral infection transmitted by birds.20

More than Japanese germ warfare, coastal residents of south Louisiana feared German U-boats in the Gulf of Mexico. From December 1941 to August 1942 the Germans conducted a vigorous U-boat campaign in U.S. waters, sinking 609 ships weighing 3.1 million tons—an average of about 70
ships per month. Some of these attacks occurred in the Gulf of Mexico, resulting in the destruction of several tankers and freighters off the mouth of the Mississippi River, along the Acadiana coastline, and near Sabine Pass at the Louisiana-Texas border. “Trawlers Bring up Wreckage in Gulf,” reported the Houma Daily Courier after an attack off the Terrebonne coast, where fishermen discovered adrift three empty life rafts and a lifeboat, all apparently machine-gunned and one stained with blood. When survivors of a U-boat attack arrived in Houma for treatment, their presence, according to the local paper, “shocked residents . . . into the full realization of the grim reality of Axis submarine warfare.” One coastal resident mirrored the concerns of her community when she wrote, “Goodness! How we hope those subs will get caught.” The lurking U-boats “brought the war closer to Louisiana,” observed the Abbeville Meridional, “and made Vermilion Parish residents aware of the impending shore attacks.”

Indeed, when a Vermilion Parish man found mysterious footprints on an isolated beach, the U.S. Coast Guard suggested that they may have been left by Nazi submariners looking for sources of fresh water. As a result of this report and others, the War Department authorized the formation of the Swamp Angels, also known as the Cajun Coast Guard. Ranging in age from seventeen to sixty-five, the unit’s roughly one hundred volunteers searched south Louisiana’s marshes and chênières (coastal sand ridges) for signs of U-boat activity and saboteur infiltration. Patrolling on horseback or in pirogues, they guarded a thirty-mile stretch of coastline from Southwest Pass in Vermilion Parish to Grand Chenier in neighboring Cameron Parish. The Swamp Angels never encountered any German submariners, but the unit played an important role by rescuing pilots-in-training who crashed in the region’s salt marshes, whose voracious mosquitoes, razor-sharp reeds, and impenetrable muck could make survival for the uninitiated nearly impossible.21

While most south Louisianians prepared to defend their homeland, thousands moved away to work in defense-related industries. A large south Louisiana landowner fretted over the resulting lack of field hands, most of whom, he wrote, had “gone into higher paying jobs—especially the shipyards in New Orleans, Orange, and Beaumont.” In New Orleans these transplants worked for such firms as the Delta Shipyards and the Higgins Boat Company, the latter of which made landing craft for amphibious assaults, most notably
the D-Day invasion of Europe. Cajuns employed by Higgins were described as “hard workers” and “proficient,” and the company eventually opened a facility in southeastern Acadiana to produce rocket-launching support boats and more landing craft. Meanwhile, transplants in the Beaumont–Port Arthur–Orange area of east Texas worked for firms such as the Pennsylvania Shipyards or the Consolidated Steel Corporation. So many Vermilion Parish residents moved to Port Neches, Texas, located between Beaumont and Port Arthur, that they called their neighborhood “Little Abbeville.” Others referred to east Texas as “Cajun Lapland,” because south Louisiana seemed to lap over into the Lone Star State.

The move to Texas was so common that the experience became the subject of several Cajun songs, including “Les blues de Texas,” “Valse de Port Arthur,” “Port Arthur Blues,” “Austin Special,” and “Grand Texas.” Most of these compositions portrayed the migration negatively, for many transplants suffered abuse from the local Anglo majority and for the first time felt like members of an ethnic minority. “Kids used to laugh at our Cajun brogue,” noted Rita Dartez Reed, one of those transplants, while another, Eola Miller Wright, recalled, “Sometime they would call me ‘cooney.’” Transplants had to contend with frequent coonass jokes but retaliated by making Texans the butt of jokes, as demonstrated by this perennial favorite:

Q: What’s the difference between a coonass and a horse’s ass?
A: The Sabine River.22

Meanwhile, the war shattered Acadiana’s isolation, exposing Cajuns who had remained at home to Anglo-American culture. Outsiders poured into local military bases; others, mainly from Texas and Oklahoma, found work in the region’s oil fields. As these newcomers took up residence in the bayou country, tensions flared between them and the native population. In 1942, for example, state social workers observed “friction between culture groups” and identified Ascension, Avoyelles, Jefferson Davis, Lafourche, and St. Landry Parishes as those having the largest newcomer populations. Relations were most strained in Lafourche, where a sizable group of Anglo-Americans worked in oil fields around Golden Meadow. This prompted social workers to observe a cultural rift between upper and lower Lafourche, “caused by the
influx of . . . a population different in its mode of living.” As a result, Cajuns became targets of ridicule in their own homeland when they strayed into areas dominated by newcomers. In turn, the Cajuns called the newcomers “les maudits texiens” (damned Texans) regardless of their place of origin and derided them for bringing honky-tonks, bad credit, drunkenness, fighting, prostitution, and polygamy to the parishes.23

Anglo-Americans were not the only outsiders encountered by home front Cajuns during World War II. Between 1943 and 1946 some 450,000 German and Italian prisoners of war were detained in the United States, and more than 50,000 of them passed through Louisiana. Many ended up in Acadiana’s rice-and sugar-growing coastal parishes, where they partially replaced native field hands who were serving in the military or working in factories. At one time at least 8,500 German and Italian POWs were imprisoned in twenty-six Acadiana towns spread throughout seventeen of the region’s twenty-two parishes. These POWs made a lasting impression on the residents of Cajun Louisiana: even today the town of Broussard boasts in tourism literature that its dismantled Billeaud Sugar Factory was the “largest employer of German POWs in World War II.”

South Louisianians often came into direct contact with these POWs. Rumors even circulated about fraternization between locals and captured enemy soldiers, rumors that have been attributed to the persistent negative stereotype of the hedonistic Cajun. “In context with Cajun,” one historian has observed, “the word fraternization . . . conveyed pictures of unpatriotic debauchery associated peculiarly with the mythical degeneracy of the Deep South, moss shrouded bayous, and the Gothic of Latin Francophones, a spicy brew long favored by romantically inclined novelists and playwrights.” The most common rumor concerned POWs dallying with south Louisiana females. Stories circulated that POWs at Port Allen flirted openly with high school girls on the sidelines of the prison’s soccer field, engaged in “midnight sex” with local women through the barbed-wire fences at Franklin, and had wild sex parties with Cajun females in St. Martinville and Lake Arthur.

News commentator Walter Winchell twice “exposed” these scandals on his national radio program, alleging that “Nazi orgies” had taken place in Cajun barrooms, where German POWs cavorted with local prostitutes and indulged in banquets of spicy seafood and free-flowing beer. In response to these reports, American Legion Post 29 in Vermilion Parish petitioned President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress to halt these embarrassing
incidents. Louisiana State Police rushed to the scene to investigate the Lake Arthur incident, only to determine that no orgy had occurred. Citing the police report, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported that a Jefferson Davis rice farmer had merely treated his POW field hands to a seafood dinner at a local restaurant. Ridiculing Winchell’s accusation and the hysteria it generated, the paper summed up the episode in a December 1943 headline: “Great Nazi Orgy Was Only Dinner.” These rumors obscured an important fact: home front Cajuns encountered POWs and in doing so felt closer to the war raging overseas, and these encounters, to a degree, helped to erode Acadiana’s former insularity.24

Across the nation, children were influenced by the war through popular culture, through their participation in activities such as scrap drives, and especially through the classroom, which more than ever became a medium for disseminating Americanism, the idea that the American way of life was superior to others and should be emulated by everyone. Louisiana followed this national trend: alarmed by growing Axis belligerency, the state’s superintendent of education declared more than a year before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, “Ordinarily, we are urged to teach children how to think and not what to think. Thus we avoid indoctrination; however, it seems to me that in America we have about reached the point at which we should do some definite indoctrination in favor of democracy.”

To facilitate this indoctrination, the Louisiana Department of Education issued dozens of circulars about the role of schools in civil defense. One, for example, appealed to social studies teachers to organize classroom programs for instilling Americanism. Another urged teachers to have their students celebrate “I Am an American Day.” The department also recommended that students read books that promoted American values, such as James Frances Dwyer’s *The Citizen*, Edward A. Steiner’s *From Alien to Citizen*, and Edward Bok’s *The Americanization of Edward Bok*. The Department of Education urged that a variety of instructional and propagandistic wartime literature, some published by the military, be made available to students, such as *He’s in Submarines Now, Your Job and American Victory, What the Citizen Should Know about Our Arms and Weapons*, and *Jump into the Fight with Parachute Troops!* Students were encouraged to join the Victory Corps, a coed paramilitary organization that existed to provide students with a curriculum “basic to citizenship training for American life.”25
CAJUNS DURING WARTIME

A major consequence of this indoctrination was a sharp decline in the number of Cajun children who spoke French as their first language. The figure nose-dived from 63 percent for those born during the five-year period before America's entry into World War II to 38 percent for those born during the five-year period after the conflict. As one observer noted during wartime, “The children are, these days, more and more inclined to lay aside the French of their forefathers for the English that is taught them in the schools. All their enthusiasm is for modern things and manners.”

Some educators helped to bring about this change by punishing Cajun children who were caught speaking French at school, a practice that began prior to the 1940s. Caught up in the Americanism of World War I and the following Red Scare sparked by the Russian Revolution, numerous states had designated English as the sole language of classroom instruction. Louisiana was among those states: in 1916 the state’s Board of Education banned French from classrooms, a move sanctioned by lawmakers in the state constitution of 1921. The policy of punishing students for speaking French, however, does not appear to have been condoned by the state, even after the outbreak of World War II. Literature issued by Louisiana’s Department of Education made no mention of punishment, and some former students and teachers recalled that punishment was rare or nonexistent in their schools, even as the practice occurred commonly in other schools during the same period. This lack of uniformity implies that individual teachers, principals, and school boards seized on punishment as a means of dealing with French-speaking students, acting locally without the endorsement of high-ranking state administrators.

Nevertheless, by using the classroom as a pulpit for teaching Americanism tainted by Anglo-Saxonism, the Department of Education created an environment that encouraged punishment. It also did little to discourage the practice. As a result, some educators subjected French-speaking students to harsh, humiliating penalties. They called them names like “swamp rat” and “bougalie” (a Louisiana term meaning “lower-class Cajun”), forced them to write lines (“I must not speak French at school”), made them kneel in corners on kernels of corn, or slapped them with rulers. “I started school at the time of World War II,” recalled Arlyn Berthier of Avoyelles Parish. Although knowing little or no English, “We were not allowed to speak or ask the...
teacher in French to let us go to the rest room or be excused for personal reasons. . . . If French words were spoken, we were turned over to the principal’s office, where this big old man had a set of rubber tubes tied together and we were whipped. The girls caught were punished different, as they were forced to walk around the flagpole with bricks in their hands.”

Forced by Anglo-American teachers—or by misguided Cajun teachers trained by Anglo-Americans—to act like mainstream children, south Louisiana youths put aside their ethnicity, learned to speak English, and joined in the war effort like good Americans. Prompted by schools, churches, and scouting groups, they bought and sold war bonds and stamps, grew victory gardens, canned fruits and vegetables, rolled bandages, made hospital beds, and collected scrap items. In Lafayette, Girl Scouts adopted the slogan “All Out for Defense.” A boy in Eunice saved pennies to buy a one-dollar membership in the American Red Cross. “The spirit of America will never be downed as long as its citizenship is composed of youths like Frank Fruge,” observed his local newspaper, “AMERICA MARCHES ON.” In Port Barre students in the Future Farmers of America and 4-H encouraged residents to grow more vegetables, raise more hogs and cattle, and buy more war bonds and stamps. Students in New Iberia won first prize in a statewide salvaging contest, collecting more than forty-eight thousand pounds of waste paper. In Broussard students grew vegetables for their cafeteria, raised fifteen hundred dollars at a war bond rally, and pledged fifty thousand dollars toward the purchase of a warplane. A seventh grader from Arnaudville promoted salvage drives by writing a short story for his local newspaper. It told of an automobile dredged from Bayou Teche to make “beautiful bullets . . . for the heads of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito.”

For Americans of all ages, newspapers and other media played an important wartime role, informing them about the conflict, stirring patriotic feelings, and furthering the Americanization of minorities. Despite a high illiteracy rate, increasing numbers of Cajuns were learning to read by the 1940s, albeit in English. Literacy was encouraged by the Louisiana Library Commission, which sent out bookmobiles to service rural Cajuns. Books and magazines opened south Louisiana to outside influences and helped to ingrain the belief that to succeed, one had to read, write, and speak English. This perception was reinforced by Acadiana’s several English-language daily
and weekly newspapers, which the U.S. Treasury Department used to reach Cajun readers by tailoring advertisements to them. “American boys fight, suffer, and die today to perpetuate freedom,” a war bond advertisement read below a drawing of Evangeline, an ethnic icon to more educated Cajuns, who viewed the fictional milkmaid as the personification of their culture. If the poet Longfellow “had not enjoyed liberty,” the advertisement continued, “he could not have written Evangeline.”

Like millions of Americans each week, Cajuns flocked to theaters during wartime to see motion pictures and newsreels. These were powerful Americanizing agents, especially since many contained patriotic themes, some imposed by the U.S. Office of War Information. In addition, movies did not require literacy, only a grasp of spoken English. By the 1940s many Acadiana towns had at least one theater, such as the Evangeline in New Iberia, the Jefferson in Lafayette, the Rose in Opelousas, and the Liberty in Eunice. In their wartime compendium, Gumbo Ya-Ya, a team of folklorists noted,

Movies are popular all over the Cajun country, cowboy and other types of action pictures being first choice. “Quiet, please!” signs are wasted in Cajun cinemas, for no Cajun ever stops talking except when he’s asleep, much less when Gene Autry is chasing rustlers across the screen. At such tense moments, leaning forward in their seats, Cajuns will yell: “Come on, Gene! Get him, you! I would not let him get away with that, no, Not me!” And with anxious sighs, “Sacre bleu! That Gene Autry is sure dead now. There ain’t never gon’ be no more pictures from him. That’s for true!”

Of all wartime media, however, radio exerted the strongest impact on Cajun culture, for, like television in coming decades, its broadcasts reached isolated residents who might not subscribe to newspapers or view motion pictures. In 1942, researchers found that 41 percent of rural Lafayette Parish homes possessed a radio, concluding, “It is probable that it is through this medium that most of the rural people of this parish obtain their entertainment, news, and such agricultural information as is available.” Like Americans elsewhere, Cajuns tuned in to hear news programs, jazz and big band music, and popular serials like The Shadow, Tom Mix, and Jack Armstrong—The All American Boy.
A few Cajuns, however, partly co-opted wartime radio by featuring their own dialect and music through local programming. State senator Dudley J. LeBlanc of Vermilion Parish used radio to reach out to his French-speaking constituency. The response was phenomenal: so many south Louisianians skipped Mass to hear his weekly Sunday program, according to one source, that priests begged LeBlanc to reschedule it. “That was a ritual, man, that was like the way of the cross,” recalled Allen Simon. But even LeBlanc sensed a change in south Louisiana’s cultural landscape, for although he delivered the first half-hour of his program in French, he aired its second half-hour in English.

Similarly, the Hackberry Ramblers, a popular Cajun string band from Cameron Parish, hosted their own live music program on KPLC radio in Lake Charles. The Ramblers received letters and postcards from fans throughout south Louisiana and east Texas requesting traditional Cajun songs like “Jolie blonde” and “Dans le gran’s bois.” Ultimately, however, the Ramblers mirrored the ongoing Americanization process, for despite their Cajun roots, the band had embraced Anglo-American western swing music, a genre popular in neighboring Texas. Furthermore, a survey of the Ramblers’ fan mail shows that requests for Anglo-American tunes like “The Soldier’s Last Letter,” “There’s a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere,” and “I’ll Be True While You’re Gone” greatly outnumbered requests for French songs, even though Cajuns composed most of the Ramblers’ audience.31

When the war ended, Cajuns celebrated victory like other Americans across the United States. In Opelousas the usually tranquil streets “broke out in bedlam,” observed a journalist, “as horns squeaked and people shouted.” Some townsfolk flocked to churches to offer thanks for victory and to pray for the safe return of loved ones. Others ran to liquor stores, “coming out with little round packages under their arms, bent on a little more ‘out of this world’ celebration to last far into the night.” The scene was much the same elsewhere in Acadiana. “An automobile horn sounded somewhere up the street,” noted a reporter in Houma. “There was another and another until it seemed that every automobile in town had suddenly awakened in a spontaneous burst of enthusiasm. Boat whistles and horns joined in—bells began to ring—sirens and whistles.” St. Martinville went “completely wild with joy,” and Kaplan citizens held a parade, which in
addition to furloughed servicemen, boy scouts, and the local fire brigade included a horseman pulling two lassoed revelers dressed like Hitler and Tojo.32

As the home front celebrated, Cajuns Gls around the world eagerly awaited orders sending them back to south Louisiana. Never in their ethnic group's history had so many Cajuns been so far from home. Even the dispersal of their Acadian ancestors from Nova Scotia paled in comparison, as thousands of Cajun GIs found themselves scattered across Europe, Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and North America. Cajuns were there in 1945, from Germany to Japan. “Berlin used to be a big city,” wrote L. J. Broussard of Vermilion Parish from the former capital of the Third Reich. “Now it is nothing but a big pile of bricks and sand.” A kinsman, Ray Broussard of Iberia Parish, witnessed Japan’s formal surrender in Tokyo Bay aboard the battleship Missouri. “I almost broke my neck,” he informed his parents, “but I saw most of the ceremony from a gun mount.” He added, “Now that I’ve seen it and it’s all over, I want to go home.”33

Some never came home. Census data suggests that more than six hundred Cajun GIs died during the war, many falling in the conflict’s major battles: Anzio, Iwo Jima, Leyte, Luzon, Okinawa, Saipan, and the D-Day invasion of Normandy, where twenty-one-year-old Private Houston D. Duhon of New Iberia met his death. The thousands who did come home, however, were not the same Cajuns who had left Acadiana; those who stayed on the home front also had changed. Separated by thousands of miles, all underwent similarly profound transformations during the four years of wartime. United with others against common foes, Cajuns in foxholes and at home emerged from the conflict a more Americanized people. The process was far from complete, for World War II had set into motion a series of trends and events that in the postwar era would hasten the ethnic group’s assimilation into mainstream society. It was the end of World War II, yet the Americanization of the Cajuns had only started.