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Head: The country Mardi Gras In small-town Louisiana, Fat
Tuesday revelers dress up and go begging for the makings of gumbo
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Art: MAP(S): (DEAN HOLLINGSWORTH/Staff Artist) Iota; PHOTO(S):
(Photos by RANDY ELI GROTHE/Staff Photographer) 1. A chicken is
surrounded by participants in the LeJeune Cove courir during
their run through the countryside near Iota, La. The chicken
chase is mostly symbolic now, but in the old days, the birds
were gathered to cook in a community gumbo held later in the
day. 2. Success: A courir participant holds aloft his prize - a
chicken. 3. A colorful crowd of participants in the LeJeune Cove
courir approaches a house where they plan to sing and dance, and
hopefully walk away with a few donations. 4. Gary "Chicken"
LeJeune (holding lid) oversees the making of the gumbo at the
LeJeune Cove courir, with the help of his son Joseph "Miguel"
(right), his brother David (second from left) and local cook
Jimmy Newman. 5. Bill LeJeune, who rode in the LeJeune Cove
courir before it disbanded in the 1950s, gives coins to a new
generation of revelers. 6. The chicken and sausage gumbo served
after the courir. 7. Tradition dictates that courir members
travel by horseback to beg for ingredients for their gumbo.
Others ride along in trailers. At the end of the day, there's
Gumbo and dancing at the American Legion hall.

Correction:

Notes:

Text: IOTA, La. - Calvin Andrepont dips his spoon into the thick brown
chicken gumbo and begins to eat. Others are lining up for their
share of the communal dish that marks the beginning of the
night's festivities.

In a short while, costumed men will make their entrance into the
hall and kick off LeJeune Cove's Mardi Gras evening party in true
Louisiana prairie country style. This evening marks the last part
of a celebration that began shortly after sunrise this morning.

Mardi Gras translates literally to "Fat Tuesday." In Catholic

tradition it is the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent, a time of fasting and repentance before Easter.

The country Mardi Gras celebration is called a courir, French for "run." Like urban Mardi Gras parties, it involves beer, costumes and lots of revelry.

Courir participants don colorful suits resembling everything from clowns to monsters and ride through the countryside from house to house on horseback or in trucks. At each stop, they beg for ingredients to make a big meal in anticipation of the Lenten fasting to come. There is singing, dancing and joking. The evening ends with the communal meal and a dance.

But unlike the giant celebrations in New Orleans that draw strangers from all over the country and the world, a courir is a more intimate event involving mostly family and friends.

A courir is the most "basic affirmation of community" in Cajun country, says Barry Jean Ancelet, a French professor and folklorist at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

"The people who participate in this event are the ones who show up to help fix each other's fences and raise each other's barns," Dr. Ancelet wrote in a paper for the American Folklore Society several years ago.

LeJeune Cove is a small community of several hundred people just outside of Iota, in south Louisiana. And those at the party tonight can look around and say that they either grew up with or are related to just about everyone they see.

Tori LeJeune Johnson, whose ancestors settled the cove, ticks the names off on her fingers. "Calvin is a great-uncle," says Tori, 23. "Mr. Bill is a cousin. Ed is an uncle. Charlie is a great-uncle. Janice Miller is Dad's first cousin."

And the list goes on.

A tradition revived

After World War II, the country Mardi Gras tradition - which had been around since the French settled in Louisiana - began to disappear. Some towns managed to keep the tradition alive by drawing participants from the defunct celebrations. But these festivities were bigger and less intimate, and increasingly like the urban Mardi Gras.

"I thought that was the end of it," Mr. Andrepont, 78, reminisced. "There was a big demographical change in the 20th century," says Ray Brassieur, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. "Everybody left the countryside," he says, and we became a

"country of nuclear families. When that happened, we lost our roots."

But in recent years, the country Mardi Gras has undergone a rebirth in Louisiana.

People are returning to their roots, and the re-emergence of the country Mardi Gras is just a small sign of that trend, says Dr. Brassieur.

Four years ago, with the help of friends, and professors such as Drs. Brassieur and Ancelet, Gus Gravot spearheaded the revival of the courir in LeJeune Cove.

Since 2002, when the LeJeune Cove run started up again after about five decades, the event has become a sort of homecoming. It's a time for the elders to reminisce about the Mardi Gras of their youth, and for the young to reflect on their heritage. And for the whole community, it's a time to bond.

"We live pretty fast lives," says Mr. Gravot, an ex-Marine with a boyish face. "People don't get together and just visit each other - their neighbors and distant relatives - as often as they used to. This celebration provides an opportunity for that."

Costumed men on horseback

Like the courirs of old, today's begins with costumed, masked men - about 70 of them - gathering around sunrise. They meet at a field along the Iota-Eunice Highway. They range from about 12 to 60 years old. They are farmers, biologists, oil workers and Ph.D.s.

And all are clad in hats, suits and masks of every conceivable color and pattern. There are suits with orange flames, brown and red feathers, and even green John Deere tractors. Masks are fashioned from screen frames covered with burlap and adorned with everything from fake teeth to belt buckles and buttons to okra.

The men call themselves, simply, the Mardi Gras. And despite the hour and temperatures in the 30s, most already have a beer in hand.

Dale Trahan stands with feet spread and touches the ground. "When you're 52 years old, you got to stretch something," he says. Before he can finish his warm-up, another man sneaks behind him and crawls between his legs: The pranks have begun.

After a blessing from a local priest, the men take off behind a police escort. The courir is led by captain Chris LeJeune and three co-captains. They will make sure the drinking and practical jokes don't get out of hand.

There are 15 Mardi Gras on horseback, a wagon carrying musicians and a trailer with the rest of the suited men aboard. A line of 30

cars follows carrying family, friends and a few tourists. People have come from Arkansas, New York, California and even Canada to see today's run.

The procession will make a loop roughly 10 miles long. The riders have about 10 stops, most of which mark the oldest homesteads of LeJeune Cove.

At Uncle Calvin's

It's almost 8:30 when Calvin Andrepont and his wife stand in their carport and watch Chris trot his horse up to the house.

"How you doing, Uncle Calvin?" asks Chris. Like most of the folks along the route, Mr. Andrepont is distantly related to him.

"What they waiting for?" Mr. Andrepont points at the entourage along the gravel road leading to the house.

"Waitin' for this," says Chris. He waves a white flag. And the Mardi Gras race to the house with the loud clop of horses' hooves.

In the past, farmers along the route would donate onions, sausage - perhaps even a live chicken - for the big meal. Revelers would then have to chase and catch the chicken they had been given.

The chicken chase now is symbolic; the hens and roosters along the route today were loaned for the run. The Mardi Gras will chase them at every stop, and most will be returned to the donors after today.

The most common donation to riders now is money. Whatever funds are left after expenses for the ride and tonight's party will be funneled back into the community. Last year, the LeJeune Cove riders donated \$100 to a Knights of Columbus chapter.

Mr. Gravot says this year, the group will donate between \$700 and \$800 to St. Francis Catholic School.

The Mardi Gras approach Mr. Andrepont with mock malice, crouched low and making whooping sounds. Two men, their faces smeared with black greasepaint in their roles as a black couple, hold the other Mardi Gras at bay. Tim Miller, the female half of the couple, wears a long purple dress. He brandishes a cane in front of the unruly Mardi Gras.

If Mardi Gras doesn't adhere to convention, neither does it adhere to political correctness, something often misunderstood by outsiders, says Dr. Ancelet, the folklorist.

Parody and role reversal are a big part of the Mardi Gras tradition, he says. It's the reason that in some communities

participants wear miters, poking fun at the Catholic Church. It's the reason for the tall pointy hats that parody medieval royalty. And it's why some celebrations feature men dressed as women.

In Cajun communities some revelers wear black face, while in some Creole communities, blacks disguise themselves in white face, he explains.

Even so, Roxanne Miller is uncomfortable seeing her husband in black paint. "I don't know if you offend anybody," she says.

Mr. Miller leads the men in the group's traditional song that precedes the begging and the roughhousing at each stop.

"Oh Mardi Gras, where are you from all around the midst of winter," the men sing in French. "I come from England, oh my dear, oh my dear. I come from England, all around the midst of winter. ..."

After the men finish their song, they hit up the visitors. People place coins in their outstretched hands, and Mr. Andrepont places a bill in the captain's hand, as is customary.

Before they leave, the musicians play a few songs, and the Mardi Gras grab the nearest women and dance with them in the morning sun.

Back at the

American Legion

As the riders make their way to the fourth stop, Gary "Chicken" LeJeune is adding 40 pounds of sausage to the 30-gallon pot of gumbo at the American Legion hall in Iota. This is where the revelers will meet later tonight for the dinner and dance.

Later this afternoon, Gary will add about 80 pounds of chicken quarters to the gumbo. He's a self-taught cook with deep roots in LeJeune.

"My grandpa and papa was raised around here," says Gary, who this morning wears jeans, a camouflage jacket and camouflage hat. So when the group asked him three years ago to help out by cooking for the courir, he obliged.

But his civic-mindedness goes beyond Mardi Gras.

A welder by trade, he and his wife participate in the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life fund-raiser every year. They take part in fund-raising biker rallies and cook-offs for other charities.

It's the same unquestioning loyalty and can-do attitude that made people in LeJeune organize fund-raisers for Mrs. Miller's brother almost five years ago when his leukemia was diagnosed.

And it's this sense of being an integral part of a community that inspired Mr. Gravot to revive the LeJeune courir.

"When I was a teenager, I started running with the group of Tee-Mamou," says Gus, a criminal justice student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

He served in the Marines from 1995 to 1999, and when he returned to Louisiana he began running with some of the big courirs in the area.

But the celebrations lacked something, he says. "It was at that point that I started talking to my friends about reviving this run."

That first year, there were only about 15 Mardi Gras, he recalls, and "it's grown a little bit every year."

"Some people look at it like it's just a big party," he says. "I've tried to educate this group as much as I could...about the tradition. The more and more that they learn, the more they become interested in their heritage."

Even the women who follow the run today feel a sense of belonging that was missing for them in other celebrations.

"To me, Mardi Gras growing up was a reason to drink," says Brandi Smith, 28, whose husband rides in the courir.

It took the people on this run to remind her of the French who were expelled from Canada for failing to pledge allegiance to the British crown, and who ended up settling in South Louisiana. "I learned so much about my heritage, about the people that sacrificed to come here," she says.

And although she's wistful about the rule prohibiting women riders, she says, "I'm still going to come....It's tradition."

A veteran

Later in the afternoon, Bill LeJeune, 78, greets the Mardi Gras from his perch on the tailgate of his truck.

As the men sing the Mardi Gras song, Mr. LeJeune mouths the words quietly to himself. He ran the LeJeune courir from 1943 until 1950. He's one of a handful of the old riders left.

He remembers pranks that got him in trouble back then: He tried to scare a couple of dogs while in his costume - lucky for him they were chained. He banged up a knee while stealing a soft drink from a truck in town - it ached for days.

When the run was revived, "It made him want to be back in the crowd," says his wife, Ann. "But he was just too old."

"I got three grandsons right here, and two of them are going to run," says Mr. LeJeune.

After the song, he pulls out a roll of nickels and begins to place them, one by one, in the Mardi Gras' outstretched hands.

Then someone shouts "La poule!" - the chicken! With shouts and laughter, the Mardi Gras are off to catch the frightened bird.

Time to eat

By 5:30 that evening, the gumbo is ready. The riders begin to trickle into the American Legion hall.

Early arrivals such as the Andrepons partake of the meal early.

It's 7:30 when the Mardi Gras, back in full costume, enter the hall's front doors two by two with more singing and roughhousing. Spectators hoot and laugh and clap as the captains whip the men into submission with the help of burlap whips. After all the Mardi Gras are under control, a band starts playing. Mardi Gras grab wives, girlfriends and any other willing women and begin to dance.

Out on the back porch, in the area lit by two bare bulbs, partiers are still eating gumbo. They'll finish all 30 gallons before the night is over, says Chicken. And if not, he says, "It be close."

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