

Cheesehead in Acadiana
(Love letter to the people of Lafayette)

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2003

I like movies with atmosphere, like “The Year of Living Dangerously.” I like books that put me *right there* in another place and time, like Jack Kerouac’s *Dr. Sax*. And I love towns like Lafayette, dripping with flavor....

.... Oh no, that was *me* dripping, at Lafayette’s Festivals Acadiens September 19-21.

My husband and I, avid dancers, left clear 72-degree Wisconsin weather to hop on a plane for Cajun country. Little did we know what we were in for.... Imagine yourself in a sauna with your clothes on. Wait until you sweat. Now stay there and dance. Fast. Oh, and keep holding your partner’s hands until thoroughly sticky.

We’re northerners hooked on Cajun music and dancing, so dance we did, sticky sweat and all. And oh, the atmosphere. The announcer and the musicians spoke French from the stage.

Live oaks festooned with Spanish moss spread a gnarled canopy over Girard Park, where we danced. Maddeningly delicious food smells wafted. We discovered boudin and my stomach is still happy, days later.

The line-up of bands was superb, from Kevin Naquin and the Ossun Playboys Saturday morning to Wayne Toups and Zydecajun Sunday evening. On Saturday, my husband and I could hardly breathe in the heat and dust, yet we looked around and saw plenty of folks wearing long pants.

“Oh,” they told us, “that’s because this is a COOL WAVE.”

After all, it was only 88 degrees, with humidity off the chart.

After a while, though, we didn’t care how sweaty and dust-grungy we were. We two-stepped and waltzed, jigged and zydecoed, round and round the grass dance floor. It was mesmerizing. The only time I’ve felt “one” with a dancing crowd like that was at a Menomonee Indian Pow Wow back at Indian Summer festival in Milwaukee.

On Sunday, we were soaked again, but with rain instead of sweat. I was sure I was danced out, after dancing at Mulate’s Thursday evening, listening to Dwayne Dopsie and the Zydeco Hellraisers at Parc International Friday evening and then dancing at Grant Street during Steve Riley’s CD party, yet again all day Saturday at Girard Park. I thought I’d take a day of rest, just sitting and watching the dancers, enjoying the cooling rain....

.... Then Steve Riley started singing “Vini, Jilie,” a haunting rendition of a beautiful poem written before the Civil War by a slave named Pierre. I looked at my husband and he grabbed my hand. That waltz led to a two-step and soon again, we became like one body with the other dancers, going round and round, getting muddier and muddier. And smiling.

The dancers were young and old, wearing hats and togs in every color and style except a tuxedo, and some like us had come from far away: Alabama, North Carolina, Missouri, Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan, Australia, New Zealand, England. We talked to folks from the Krewe de Walleye (Minnesota) and the local Krewe de Canaille. We decided we’re initiating the fledgling Krewe des Tetes de Fromages (Cheeseheads).

I loved the mini-United Nations, but I have a suggestion. Organizers could charge for the wonderful festival posters. That might cover the cost of hiring city workers to stay on top of the bathroom and trash “situations.” As Cajun dancing grows in popularity, you can only expect these festivals to grow. People won’t stay and tour the super crafts fair and taste the marvelous ethnic foods if they don’t feel comfortable about the grounds and la toilette. As I read on someone’s t-shirt, “The way you preserve a culture is one generation at a time. (Dewey Balfa)” Cleaner grounds and facilities might help the effort.

We came for the Festival de Musique Acadienne, but we enjoyed so much more in Lafayette and Breaux Bridge. We saw thousands of birds during our boat tour of the Atchafalaya swamp. (We never saw any alligators there, but a six-footer wandered onto a runway and made our flight late leaving Lafayette Monday, much to our delight.) We were thrilled to catch the Rodin exhibit at the Natural History Museum and Planetarium. We wandered at the antique mall downtown. We were discovered what a “plate lunch” is, with down-home cooking piled high, at Dwyer’s. The downtown streets were hopping Friday night. What a lively walk-able *centre-ville*! We got a kick out of the French street signs, even when they had boo-boos (“Quest” for “Ouest”). We loved the crab bisque at Prejean’s and we danced in front of the most giant fan I’ve ever seen at Randol’s, along with tourists from France.

Everywhere we went, we encountered the friendliest local folks we’ve ever met. They acted like they had nothing better to do than to chat with us, even though they said we “talked funny.”

At Grant Street I danced with a man named Joseph Paris, who said he was from Crowley. I told him I studied French long ago. He asked, “Do you know what this means: *‘Je t’aimerais toujours?’*”

Finally I got it. It means “I’ll love you always.”

There’s so much more I want to see... the Zydeco breakfast at Cafe des Amis, Saturday morning dancing at Fred’s Lounge in Mamou, a fais-do-do at Whiskey River Landing, the Acadian/Creole folklife museum at Vermilionville....

I'll be back.

Lafayette, *je t'aimerais toujours.*

The End