Handout 2 - Historical Accounts of Dances in Cajun Country

Document 1 - Moses Delesdernier, Observations of the Situation, Customs and Manners of the Ancient Acadians, *Nova Scotia, 1790*

"The men worked hard in planting and at harvest time and the season when the dykes were to be made or repaired, and on any occasion when work was pressing. They thus secured for half the year, at least, leisure which they spent in parties and merrymakings, of which they were very fond. But the women were more assiduous workers then the men, though they took a considerable part in the amusements. Although they were almost all entirely illiterate, it was rare to see any one remain silent long when in company, they never seemed at a loss for a subject of conversation. To conclude, they seemed always cheerful and light-hearted, and on every occasion were unanimous."

Document 2 - Saltoris, Letter to the Intendant, *Saint-Domingue, 1764*

"I was already convinced of [the Acadian's] kindness, but the ceremony we recently had for them reinforced my conviction. This ceremony was for the 23 marriages which were to be blessed or which were contracted among themselves.

I had an arbor built, long and spacious in order that it could contain them all. Beneath this we set up some sawhorses upon which we nailed planks to serve as tables. The hunt began on Saturday before the banquet, but we killed only one wild boar and some wood pigeons. Happily, we got a calf from Plateforme, and having fifty pigs in our barnyard, we had no trouble stocking our table.

Everyone was at the table - men, women, and children - all mixed together. 'To your health, officer! To your health, commissary! To the health of the intendant! To the health of the king! Hooray!' We had every reason to frequently repeat these salutes. They did not eat until each and everyone had given his toast. They danced, the old and the young alike, all dancing to a fast step.

The next day the ceremony continued. We had about 400 at a table, even mothers with children at the breast were there."

Document 3 - C.C. Robin, Voyage to Louisiana by C.C. Robin, 1803-1805, *Louisiana, 1803*

"They love to dance most of all; more than any other people in the colony. . .everyone dances, even Grand-Mère and Grand-Père no matter what the difficulties they must bear. There may be only a couple of fiddles to play for the crowd, there may be only four candles for light, placed on wooden arms attached to the wall; nothing but long wooden benches to sit on, and only exceptionally a few bottles of Tafia diluted with water for refreshment."

Document 4 - W.W. Pugh, Bayou LaFourche from 1820 to 1825, *Louisiana, 1835*

“The balls were well conducted, and the contrast in manner and deference towards the fair sex [women] was marked when compared with a similar assemblage among Americans of the same class. . .All attended with a view of enjoying themselves and carried out their intentions with a will. The waltz and old-fashioned contre dance, with which all were familiar from childhood, was the fashion of the country, and they desired nothing better.”

Document 5 - R.L. Daniels, *The Acadians of Louisiana*, Louisiana, 1880s

“Flirting became impracticable, it is always understood that the wooer means marriage. The ball-room is generally the place; when the pleasurable excitement of the waltz has reached its climax, while her slender waist is encircled by his arm, and her head almost leans upon his shoulder, then comes the opportunity. If the coy maid favors his suit, he instantly seeks the approval of her parents.”

Document 6 - Daniel Dennett, Louisiana as It Is, *Louisiana, 1876:*

[The Acadians] keep up the old Creole custom of having neighborhood balls every Saturday night. The balls are generally attended by sons and daughters of small Creole farmers who work all day and dance at night. There are not less than sixty fiddles and fiddlers in this settlement. They are a merry people; and those who think that the young ladies don’t know how to arrange their hair and primp for the ballroom, so as to make themselves look attractive to the beaux [suitors], are simply mistaken.

Document 7 - Russell Lee, Fais-do-do Dance, *Louisiana, 1938*

Document 8 - Lauren C. Post, Cajun Sketches, *Louisiana, 1962*

“The grandparents and the grandchildren alike attended many of the old dances, the former to watch and gossip, the latter to sleep and cry. The old folks always managed to keep busy with the local news and gossip, while the babies soon became occupied in an entirely different way. As soon as they dropped off to sleep, they were put in big beds in a room in the back. There they either slept or cried, usually with less attention than they were accustomed to at home.”

Document 9 - Alan Lomax, Cajun Country*, Louisiana, 1991*

“Cajuns, like their French Ancestors, are dance mad. It’s a place where girls come to meet their boyfriends, and the men like to lean up against the bars and tell lies about their endless adventures in their beloved, game-rich swampland. The mood is macho, and the ball rolls on. . .”