

Ortego, Adner



Fiddle Maker

Adner Ortego was born in Washington, Louisiana in 1919 and grew up speaking French. A retired farmer, he remembers Cajun life on the prairies as it was earlier this century. He tells stories of *bals de maisons* (house dances) where the enthusiastic dancing threatened the houses' foundations. Musical instrument making in south Louisiana came about primarily because store bought instruments were unavailable. Many of Acadian settlers were farmers, like Mr. Ortego. Rather than do without music, they learned to make their own instruments which depended on their own ingenuity. The main instrument in early Cajun music was the violin. Louisiana fiddle makers often substituted local woods for traditional woods like spruce and ebony. Mr. Ortego has been making fiddles and playing since he was a boy of fourteen. "I learned the hard way: self-taught. I wanted to play violin, but during the Depression, you couldn't buy one, so I made one. I heard my Dad play on someone else's fiddle."

Since 1976, he has been making fiddles as a hobby. He uses Louisiana woods that he often salvages: magnolia, black gum, cherry, and walnut. These woods give his fiddles a variety of colors, grains, and sounds. He can demonstrate the differences in sound that these woods produce by playing the various fiddles he has made. He says, "I just love to learn what makes them play such beautiful music; I love to learn what mother-nature provided for our use." He also makes Cajun triangles.

Since 1985, one of his fiddles has been on display as part of the Creole State Exhibit in the State Capitol building in Baton Rouge. His work has also been included in the 1982 craft exhibit at the Lafayette Natural History Museum titled Fine/Function. Mr. Ortego is a member of the Louisiana Crafts program. He has demonstrated his skills as an instrument maker, fiddler, and storyteller for many years. He has participated at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Louisiana Native Crafts Festival, the Zigler Museum in Jennings, the Opelousas Farmer's Market, the Louisiana Folklife Festival, Plantation Days at Magnolia Mound, and Family Days in St. Martinville. Although he cannot travel as easily as he once could, he continues to perform for school programs in Lafayette Parish and at private parties with a band. He also enjoys teaching young Cajun musicians like Mitchell Reed about Cajun fiddling and fiddle making.