NEWS

Bourré all-nighters endangered

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LAFAYETTE — The people of southwestern Louisiana have a lifestyle unique to most of the nation, from the way they eat crawfish to the vigor with which they two-step that can turn a Yankee pale.

However, more than a few natives and visitors alike have turned pallid from a game that'll make a man's wallet empty faster than he can say, "I-yeeee!"

The game is bourré.

"He cheats when he deals!"

"He steals when he deals!"

Players ranging in age from 60 to 91 are already gathered and alert at 8 a.m. every Sunday in a back room of Nelson Menard's home. There are two round tables set up with eight chairs standing around each.

Only one of the tables is in use by the five players who make a weekly ritual of banter and bourré.

But Louis "Teeboy" Gilbert, a "young" player of 60, confidently predicted the other seats would be filled by the afternoon and would stay warm well into the evening.

Most players have Styrofoam cups of coffee close at hand, and dollar bills are thrown into the center of the card table like a poorly raked pile of leaves.

On Thursday nights, the really "young" players (mid-40s up to 60ish) fill the makeshift game room for tournaments.

Menard chattered with the speed of an auctioneer while dealing the cards and others made their plays.

The round was in his favor and he scooped up his spoils.

"He's a talker," said Gilbert of Menard, dealer pro tempore.
"He'll bluff to distract them."

In this game, players' tools are not only the hands they're dealt, but also their means of distraction.

"I used to smoke big cigars in tournaments. The smoke would get in the other players' faces," disclosed Gilbert. "I can't do that anymore because I have asthma and a lot of places are no-smoking. Now I dip."

Every time he spits, he said, he puts the other players off their guard.

Barry Ancelet, Cajun folklorist and University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor, confessed he utilized this technique as a college student working an offshore summer job. Ancelet said he avoided playing bourré with the crew until he was asked to hold a spot at the table for another player.

"He told them to take it easy on me. He was gone 30 to 40 minutes and by the time he got back, I was $30 ahead," Ancelet recalled.

"I had hair to (my shoulders). I was a hippie. They couldn't comprehend how someone who looked the way I did would be able to play like that."

Whatever tricks the players might conceal beneath their five-card hands, Gilbert disclosed that skill can carry someone only so far.

"I'd rather be lucky than good. I have a lot of skill because I watch and read people, but if luck isn't with you, it doesn't pay to be good," he said.

The game has been Gilbert's "job" ever since he retired from law enforcement in 1993.

He plays up to seven days a week in old bars and homes around the area.

“People ask me if I win money and I point to that new motorcycle,” he said, brandishing a cell phone with a picture of a Harley Davidson on the screen. “I say, ‘You see that? You bought that.’ ”

Gilbert said he learned the game watching his parents play for nickels and dimes, which is likely the same way they learned to play.

“It’s passed on from generation to generation,” he explained. “The only way to learn is to play.”

Like the folklore and language of the region, the oral tradition of bourré lends itself to variation by parish, town and card table and makes the origin of the venerable card game somewhat of a mystery.

In his 1964 book, “Rules and Techniques of Bourré,” Henry J. Engler Jr. wrote that bourré is an “authentic Acadian card game, which developed in the bayou regions of Louisiana and spread intensively through the southern half.”

The game’s relatives, according to Ancelet, are euchre, then bridge, then rook.

“It’s an imperfect, volatile version of bridge,” he explained.

As Acadiana’s premier card game, bourré facilitated more than just nights in the doghouse for defeated spouses.

“It involves a gathering of people on a regular basis and community,” said Ancelet. “Within these mini-communities, one often finds story-telling, social cooperation and solidarity.”

The tradition, he said, bears a similar significance to the gatherings and practices of boucheries (hog slaughtering) and house dances.

“We didn’t have much money,” said Eunice native Pris Ashford, 68. “Other than suppers, that’s what we did — played bourré. It was good inexpensive entertainment.”

Gilbert said he believes the game was born in France; however, its death certificate is being penned as playing cells shrink. With the changing culture of southwest Louisiana, the game’s livelihood rests with the older generation.

“The players are dying,” Gilbert lamented. “Probably within the next 10 years it’ll be really scarce. The younger generation is just not playing.”

He added that what makes him most dangerous at the card table is what many young people lack for the game: Patience.

Ancelet echoed Gilbert’s perspective.

“We’re losing the game for the same reasons we’re losing everything else: video games, Internet, television. Bourré requires repeated physical presence,” he conceded.

However, Ancelet admitted that even he couldn’t make the weekly commitment the game demands.

“We’re all hauled in more directions than (we were) back then,” Ancelet said. “Then, there were remarkably fewer things to do outside of work.”

Ashford, who has played with the same group for 30 years, said although they went with her to games, her progeny did not see its value.

“They never wanted to learn. It’s slow and everything else is so fast,” she explained.

Gilbert never had children and so does not have the opportunity to pass on the tradition, but he remembers the part the game played when he was young.

“Family would meet at my uncle’s, and they’d play ’til morning. Go drink coffee and eat breakfast then go home,” he chuckled.

Playing cards from afternoon until the next morning?

“I’ve seen ’em play from Friday evening ’til Sunday morning,” he insisted.

With the place bourré played in Acadian culture, Louisiana won’t just lose a card game when bourré finally folds, according to Gilbert.

“It’s a dying art form,” he reflected.