

CHAPTER 7
The Bernis Brothers

“People don’t believe some of these stories, but they’re true.”
—Tee Red Bernis

Down by the levee on the Bayou Teche is where it all began. Jack Bernis got started in the horse business by catching wild mustangs there with his friends, not far from his home in St. Martinville. Then he’d keep them in a pen made of wooden stakes, break them, and sell them to be used as pleasure horses. His sons, Cecil, Kenward, and Glynn, wanted to be just like their daddy. Tiny riders were prized in the “catch-weight” match races on the Cajun bush tracks, and one day a prominent Quarter Horse trainer asked Jack if his third boy wanted to be a jockey. That sounded fine, so Jack told Pierre LeBlanc to ask little Glynn, who of course said yes. A few days later, the 5-year-old was in the fast lane to the races.

The redhead with all the freckles was called Tee Red because he was so tiny—*petit* in French, which was shortened to *'tit*, then to Tee. He weighed 32 pounds that September day in 1953, when he launched a brilliant career as a jockey two months shy of his sixth birthday. To get a jump on the competition, start young, and that’s how it always was done on Louisiana’s bush tracks.

“That weekend was my first race, at Ville Platte,” said Tee Red Bernis, who trains Thoroughbreds at Prairie Meadows in Altoona, Iowa. “The horse’s name was Chilo, and he was real big, about 17 hands high. My daddy tied my feet with twine under that horse’s belly and I just hung on.”

Tee Red got Chilo out of the gate and won the all-out sprint. After the finish line was when the problems started. The featherweight had no chance of pulling up the huge Chilo, who took him for a much longer ride. “He ran around the field for about an hour until he got tired and came back,” Bernis said. “Guys had bet \$5,000 and \$10,000 on him, and they were getting worried they wouldn’t be able to collect their money.”

Finally, they did, but anyone who has had to sweat out a long inquiry knows what they went through. Betting the farm on a 5-year-old making his debut didn’t worry them. Tee Red said fear never entered his mind, either, even when horses ran over him or fell on him.

“I was never scared of nothing, and I raced horses against motorcycles, cars, you name it,” he said. “I got knocked out a lot, sometimes for hours at a time, but I was blessed because I never had a broken bone. Then the first week I started running Timber Creek [Farm] in Iowa, I slipped in the office and broke my hip.”

Rita Bernis didn’t want her little boys risking their necks but she was outvoted by Jack. “Oh my God, I had to lock myself up. I was a nervous person. When they were riding, I had to close all my curtains,” said Rita, 80, who still lives in St. Martinville, where she plays lots of bingo and spends time with an extended family that includes 12 grandchildren.

“They were my babies, and I worried. When Cecil fell from a horse and got a concussion, it shook me up so much. But the doctor told me, ‘Well, if he rides his bike across the street, he could get killed doing that, too.’”

Maybe the doc had cashed a few bets on the lad and didn't want to see Cecil retire early.

"So I learned to live with it," Rita said, "and I was very lucky none of them ever got hurt really bad."

* * *

Rita grew up "very poor" in New Iberia during the Depression and left school in sixth grade to help her family pay the bills. "I cried, but you had to work then," she said. "Times were hard and that was just the way it was." She held jobs in a canning factory and as a soda jerk before meeting Jack Bernis at a dance hall in nearby Parks. She was just sweet 16 when they got married the next year.

"And that's when the work started," she said, laughing, referring to raising eight children—four boys and four girls—born from 1944 (Cecil) to 1963 (Timmy). The daughters—Wanda, Jackie, Rachel, and Tammy—were born in that order after Cecil, Kenward, and Tee Red.

Jack's mother and father died when he was very young, and he was adopted in New Orleans as a toddler. Rita said his parents' identities and the circumstances of their deaths were unknown, although Jack's children tried for years to find the answers.

Jack was a man's man who trained his roosters to battle in the cockpit, where they won many bets and trophies. Dale Barras, who grew up down the street from Kentucky Derby-winning jockey Calvin Borel, regarded Jack as a grandfather and a role model. Barras said he always stayed close to Jack, visiting him often in the years before he died in 2001 at 80.

Bernis trained horses for Barras's grandfather, and Dale got into cockfighting and runs the Atchafalaya Game Club in Cecilia, Louisiana. "Jack was a hell of a horse trainer, and real good with the roosters, too," Barras said. "He was slick. You had to watch him, because he liked to cash bets."

Jack, a slim six-footer, worked in the oil fields for a year before becoming a full-time horse trainer. "Jack was a hellcat on wheels," Rita said. "He was a tough guy, but I handled it pretty good."

He trained his little boys hard, too. They picked cotton, slashed sugar cane, and cut, baled, loaded, and unloaded hay. "That stuff was heavy, and you'd have to throw it up in the pile," Cecil said. "Sometimes I was so tired after dinner I'd fall asleep sitting up."

"Sometimes I wonder if my father ever had a real childhood," said Cecil's son, Joe.

One time little Cecil got bucked off a mustang in the front yard and landed in his grandmother's rose bushes. "I had stickers all over me, and they hurt like hell," he said. "I didn't want to get on that horse again. Then my daddy said, 'If you want to be a jockey, you better get back on right away.' So I did.

"Our mama didn't want us to ride, but Daddy said, 'If you want to ride, then that's what you're going to do.'"

"I'd go to the bush tracks," Rita said, "but I would close my eyes."

Tee Red didn't inherit Rita's nervous gene. He said he didn't get stressed out in the saddle, not even the time he had to endure an endless delay on a particularly wired

Quarter Horse. Shorty usually raced without a rider and resented having even teeny Tee Red on his back. Each trainer stood in the gate holding his horse, and neither beast would stand still and look forward at the same time. At last, after hearing hundreds of “Whoas,” both were ready, so they let them loose. The wait: 35 minutes. The distance: 36 feet, or two jumps out of the gate. Sometimes it takes forever to get off to a flying start.

It felt that way to Kenward, who was about two years older and 20 pounds heavier than his *petit frere*. Unlike older brother Cecil and Tee Red, Kenward had to wear down Jack before finally getting permission to become a junior jockey at the comparatively advanced age of 7.

“Daddy didn’t want me to start riding until I was older, but I kept bugging him,” said Kenward, who trains at Evangeline Downs and Delta Downs. “So one day Daddy said, ‘Okay, let’s go.’ A few miles away, there was a little gate in the woods in a town called Coteau Holmes. So my daddy threw me up on a horse and I broke him out of the gate. That’s when I learned to ride.”

It didn’t take long for the Bernis boys to become hot items on the local circuit. “Carencro, Lafayette, Ville Platte, Abbeville, you name it, we rode there,” Kenward said. “We rode against each other all the time. We went to a bunch of different schools because we were always following the horses.”

The local horsemen kept close tabs on the progress of their interrupted education. Kenward and Tee Red were the envy of the other kids because they never needed a doctor’s note or a hall pass to escape early.

“When they had big match races, they came for us, rain, sleet, or snow, no matter when it was,” Kenward said. “Sometimes those coonasses would get to drinkin’ in the middle of the day, and they’d start arguin’ about whose horse was faster. So they’d tie a match race and come get us out of school right then. They didn’t give a damn.”

Endangering the welfare of minors? The educational and legal systems looked the other way, and the policy of benign neglect extended to safety issues. To carry as little weight as possible, “We rode naked, in our drawers, no helmet, no vest, no nothing,” Kenward said. In fast-and-loose Cajun land, the attitude was “No child left behind if he can ride.”

Pierre LeBlanc took Jack and his boys on the road along with bush-track legends such as Miss Pine, I’ll Be There, and Palomino Joe. Depending on the stakes, the jockey would get \$100, which was a lot of money then, especially for a little kid. Sometimes there’d even be some lagniappe, maybe as much as 50 bucks, from a giddy bettor flush with cash.

“We never got to go to school much, which was okay with me,” Tee Red said. “But you learn a lot of common sense on the racetrack. I learned a lot about arithmetic cashing tickets.”

Their travels took them as far as Mississippi, Texas, St. Louis, and Florida. “I missed my children, always being away from home,” Rita said. “But they called a lot from wherever they were, and you should have seen the phone bills. When they were close enough and needed something, my mother-in-law would take care of the babies and I’d go see the boys. I’d bring them fresh corn or anything else they wanted to eat. Those little reunions were fun.”

* * *

“I was so young and rode in so many places, I can’t remember them all,” Kenward said. One he could never forget became the family home for six years. Louisiana’s age-old battle cry is “Let the good times roll,” and joie de vivre never felt better than it did at a hot spot on “the old Breaux Bridge highway” in Lafayette. There were two nightclubs, the Boundary Club and the Forest Club, which sometimes lured rising star Fats Domino from New Orleans. Between the clubs was a barn for horses, with a cockfight pit behind it and a racetrack in back of that. Another diversion was arm-wrestling until the wee hours. Bets of \$2,000 or \$3,000 might ride on a skinny jockey who could take anybody or a huge French-Canadian who boasted that the only one who ever beat him was his mother.

“They had drinking, women dancing, a dance hall, and all kinds of gambling,” Kenward said. “You think we didn’t have it all going on there?”

The place even had a pet monkey that young Wanda named Cynthia before they discovered he was a male. Cynthia joined the clan because trainer Pola Benoit, a notorious gambler, was short of cash. Cecil had just ridden a winner for him, so instead of money, he got a monkey. “People don’t believe some of these stories,” Tee Red said, “but they’re true.”

Cynthia was a character and loved to race across the tables in the bar and jump on the women, who would scream and run away. “Yeah, Cynthia was a bad monkey,” Tee Red said. Cynthia wouldn’t drink beer or whiskey, but trainer Pete LeBlanc, Pierre’s older son, used to get him drunk on creme de menthe. “Cynthia had a sweet tooth, and he really liked that green stuff,” Pete said. “He’d empty a bottle, stagger around, and fall over.”

From 1954 until 1960, the entire Bernis family, which included seven kids by then, lived behind the Forest Club in a place affectionately known as Coonville. Rita tended bar, and her duties were a welcome distraction when the boys were riding out back. “That’s when I would close my curtains,” she said. “It was exciting, but it was hard on me.”

Domino’s biggest hit was “Blueberry Hill,” with the first line “I found my thrill on Blueberry Hill.” He and the patrons found plenty of them at the Forest Club, which Tee Red called “a wild place.” Pierre LeBlanc, a big-time player, owned it, and the action was the major attraction. Besides betting on horses, roosters, and arm wrestlers, you could play craps, poker, and blackjack at this little Vegas by the bayou. If Satan had visited Louisiana back in the repressive fifties, he would have been tempted to make a side trip from New Orleans, his kind of town.

“On Saturdays and Sundays they’d barbecue all day and run match races,” Cecil said. “Then at night they’d fight the roosters, and people could win back the money they lost during the day. Or lose more.”

Jack was king of that cockpit, with separate cages for his hundreds of roosters stacked in a barn behind the house. One afternoon Pierre LeBlanc, Jack, and the boys took five horses to nearby Loreauville and won three races. Everybody was feeling pretty good until they got home.

“The monkey had gone in and let all the roosters out, and of course they started killing each other,” Pete LeBlanc said. “There were about 300 of them on the ground

dead, and Cynthia was on top of the empty cages, making noise and jumping up and down with his hands under his arms.”

Cynthia probably had more fun at his private gladiatorial games than any Roman emperor did while watching lions eat Christians. The carcasses of the prized birds and the sight of Cynthia celebrating the slaughter put Jack over the edge, and he bolted to the house for his shotgun. Before he got back, Cynthia escaped to the woods and avoided joining the cocks that would never crow again.

A few days later, on a night rabbit hunt, someone flashed a light in the woods and detected movement. Just as the sniper was ready to blast away, Tee Red made out a familiar face. “Don’t shoot,” he yelled. “It’s Cynthia!”

* * *

The layout of the track at the Forest Club added danger to the scene, and Cecil almost paid the ultimate price on a horse with defective brakes. “There was a fence at the back, and you’d go through it if you couldn’t get the horse to stop,” Kenward said. “One day, before Cecil rode, he ate a bunch of peanuts and drank a lot of Coke. We told him that was no good, but he wouldn’t listen. His horse went through the fence, Cecil hit a tree, and he started choking so bad he almost smothered himself.”

The horse suffered, too. “They found him three days later in the woods, with the saddle still on,” Cecil said. “They had to take me to the hospital, and all that stuff came up.” The spill had no lasting effects, except on his snacking habits. “I still only eat a peanut or two every once in a while.”

Tee Red recalled a predawn accident at the Forest Club that could have sent him to an early grave. He was working out Palomino Joe, who was as ornery as he was fast.

“It was about four in the morning, because back then they always wanted to work their horses in the dark so nobody else could see how they were doing,” Tee Red said. “Palomino Joe jumped a fence, and I was hanging by the stirrups. I bounced off the pavement and was lying in a ditch after he took off.

“He just headed back to the barn, about a mile away. He was smart. He knew where he lived. It wasn’t till they found him there that they came back to check on me. I guess they figured he was worth more than I was.”

Almost half a century later, Kenward marvels that he and his brothers managed to survive a childhood spent in the saddle. “It was dangerous,” he said. “They’d hop those horses up and we were so small we couldn’t stop them. Sometimes they’d go crashing through fences, run through cane fields or soybean fields, and end up on a gravel road or some highway.

“We’re lucky we’re living, but we hardly ever got hurt bad.”

* * *

In 1960, Kenward left the bush tracks for the big time in New Orleans. He wasn’t of age to get a license at a parimutuel track, but Jack convinced a local priest to change the year on Kenward’s birth certificate. Maybe the padre had profited from the boy’s rides and felt obligated. It is better to give than to receive, as the Good Book says. So thanks to a forged document sanctified by Holy Mother Church, the little matter slipped

through the cracks in the Big Easy. (Such trickery was not uncommon. Charlotte Clavier, a daughter of trainer Don Stemmans, said her late mother, Janet, was exceptionally good at altering legal documents for underage riders. Another tactic was to use the papers of an older sibling who wasn't a jockey.)

"I was making \$1,400 a week riding at Jefferson Downs when I was 14," Kenward said. "Nobody knew that, because the law was you were supposed to be 16. I guess I shouldn't be saying that, but they can't do nothing about that now."

The boy from the back country won 288 races from 1960-63, according to statistics in *The American Racing Manual*. Kenward led the standings at Jefferson Downs and Kentucky's Miles Park and also rode at Oaklawn Park in Arkansas. Late in 1963, he and Tee Red would resume their sibling rivalry in the saddle, but before that, Tee Red would spend time out west.

In 1962, the Bernis brothers and their dad were in the mountains of southern New Mexico at Ruidoso Downs, the mother ship of the short tracks. Every Labor Day Ruidoso stages the All American Futurity, and the yearling sales there showcase the best-bred horses to the richest buyers.

At Ruidoso, Jack Bernis met the actor Dale Robertson, whose television series, *Tales of Wells Fargo*, was a hit on NBC from 1957-62. The Bernis boys watched an episode being shot on top of a mountain. Robertson raced his string of Quarter Horses with trainer Gene Chandler, and Robertson wanted to hire Tee Red to break his babies. So Jack agreed to let him move to southern California, where he would live with Robertson's family and work on his ranch. There were two drawbacks for Tee Red: He wouldn't be able to ride competitively in California because he wasn't 16, and he'd have to become a full-time student. Gone were the days of match races and early exits from school. How he would have loved to see a Cajun trainer coming to his classroom to liberate him from boredom.

"I was too young to ride at Los Alamitos, and I missed the racetrack," he said. "Plus I had to go to school all the time. I didn't like that, but I learned how to read and do math."

* * *

After 13 months that seemed a lot longer, Tee Red returned to Louisiana and reconnected with his family and the track. At 16 he was more than ready for the New Orleans circuit, and on October 18, 1963, at Jefferson Downs, he broke his maiden at a parimutuel venue. He would ride only seven more winners that year, which offered no hint of the spectacular splash he would make as an apprentice in 1964.

That year was good for Kenward, too, with 125 victories, but he took a backseat to Tee Red, whose 275 wins were second nationally only to the 325 by future Hall of Famer Walter Blum.

As an apprentice, Tee Red rode first call for the late Marion Van Berg, father of Jack Van Berg, who has trained more than 7,000 winners, second to Dale Baird on the all-time list.

"Tee Red was hot when he came out of Louisiana with the bug," Van Berg said. "He was a good little rider, and horses ran for him. He won a lot of stakes for us in

Detroit, Chicago, and New Orleans. He was an aggressive little guy. He tried so hard to win, and that's how he got himself in trouble.”

If Tee Red hadn't been handed suspensions totaling three months for rough riding in 1964, he probably would have beaten Blum easily. “Yeah, Tee Red was a champ,” Pete LeBlanc said. Even with all those enforced vacations, Tee Red finished far ahead of five marquee names and future Hall of Famers—Bill Shoemaker, Ron Turcotte, Manuel Ycaza, Braulio Baeza, and Bobby Ussery.

“The stewards gave me 90 days that year,” Tee Red said. “They were kind of hard on me, but I was kind of hard on the other jockeys. That's how we learned to ride on the bush tracks.”

As they had done out in the countryside, Tee Red and Kenward often battled down the stretch at Jefferson Downs. In April 1964 they dead-heated at Jefferson Downs for second at 1½ miles and for third at 1¾ miles 10 days apart, and riding the same horses, with Tee Red on Hard Sea and Kenward on Tygrette. As New Orleans *Times-Picayune* columnist Buddy Diliberto wrote, “Never before in racing had two horses dead-heated in consecutive races.”

On those days, no brothers could possibly have been closer. But if one thought he'd been wronged by the other, that's where the ties that bind were cut temporarily. “One time I beat Tee Red, but he claimed against me because I wouldn't let him pass me,” Kenward said. “The stewards gave me 10 days.”

Diliberto compared that incident with the famous “Fighting Finish” between the jockeys of Brokers Tip (Don Meade) and Head Play (Herb Fisher) in the 1933 Kentucky Derby. Unlike Meade and Fisher, the Bernis boys weren't trying to pull each other out of the saddle, but Kenward, on Peter O., and Tee Red, on Willie Bill, were just as intense about coming out on top.

It was business, not personal. As they told Diliberto, “We're the best of friends, except when we're riding in the same race.”

“We tried to beat each other however we could,” Cecil said. “You name it and we'd try to do it. We'd hold our ground.”

* * *

In 1965, Tee Red kept rolling even after losing the five-pound apprentice allowance. He had 150 winners and Kenward brought in 69, but the glory days were soon to end. Weight problems were taking a brutal toll on both.

“I was six feet tall when I quit riding in 1969,” Kenward said. “Doing the weight was tough.”

In 1966, Kenward had a career highlight at the recently opened Evangeline Downs. He rode Dial Three Bar to victory in the Evangeline Quarter Horse Futurity, whose \$100,000 purse was the biggest in Louisiana history to that point. The winner's-circle picture shows a handsome, dark-haired rider who could have been nicknamed Daddy Long Legs. “Yeah, I was Hollywood material,” he joked.

As a sire, he did produce Hollywood material. His son Kenward Jr., born in 1972 and nicknamed Boo, looks like a movie star and was on the wildly popular TV show *Survivor*. The handsome construction worker left the bar he runs in Port Barre, Louisiana, to shoot episodes in Fiji during the winter of 2006-07.

Although he wouldn't "flip," jockey lingo for sticking a finger down your throat to induce vomiting, Kenward used every other masochistic trick to reduce. "I'd hit the hot box, then wear a rubber suit, turn on the heat in the car and drive around for a few hours, and go hit the hot box again," he said. "I was so thin if I turned sideways, you'd miss me."

It was even worse for Tee Red, who had started as the ultimate lightweight. Growing pains couldn't have hurt much worse. Van Berg said Tee Red "wasn't that tall at 16"—he's about five feet nine—"but he had big hands and big feet," danger signals for any teenage jock. Tee Red tried everything to reduce—water pills, diet pills, sleeping in hot Epsom salt water, wearing rubber suits, and hitting the sweatbox.

"I'd fill up to 140 pounds over the weekends," Tee Red said. "A lot of it was fluids, so I'd get down to about 117 to ride. I started heaving so much my stomach started bleeding, so I had to stop riding."

Weight problems got to the five-foot-nine Cecil first, and he quit riding at "18 or 19."

"I got hurt and got to eating good," Cecil said, "and after that, doing the weight got too tough."

Trying to beat the scale started for him in childhood. "There was a little sweatbox in LeBlanc's barn, with a board that went over you," Cecil said. "I'd want to get out, so I'd lift it. They'd hear it and say 'Put it down.'"

Like his brothers, Cecil became a racetrack lifer, training on the Kentucky circuit at Churchill Downs, Ellis Park, Keeneland, and Latonia (now Turfway Park). He also served as an assistant starter and an exercise rider at various tracks. Since 1986 Cecil has done track maintenance at Churchill, and once went into its burning veterinary barn to rescue two horses. "You put one of those masks on me and I'll go in," he told firefighters. He did, and two minutes later, onlookers applauded as he led out an uninjured horse.

On Derby Day, Cecil stood with winners Canonero II (1971), Riva Ridge (1972), Secretariat (1973), Cannonade (1974), and Seattle Slew (1977) before the gates opened. After Slew veered slightly to the right and got off to a slow start, fingers pointed at Bernis, who was not at fault. A columnist began the controversy by writing "a member of the gate crew was holding the colt just when the bell sounded."

Not so. Rider Jean Cruguet, starter J. T. Wagoner, and the *Daily Racing Form's* chart caller agreed that Cecil had done nothing wrong. A few weeks later, the late Jim Bolus, a distinguished Derby historian, quoted Bernis as saying, ". . . I put my right hand on [Seattle Slew's] bridle, and when the doors opened, I raised my hand. He was looking straight down the racetrack when [Wagoner] pushed the button."

Wagoner agreed, saying, "Whatever problems the horse had were problems [Seattle Slew] created when he hit the ground in his first stride."

"I call my dad the Forrest Gump of horse racing," Joe Bernis said. "It seems like whenever something big happened, he was there."

* * *

After 60 victories in 1966, Tee Red went 2 for 62 in 1967 before admitting he couldn't go on. After a meteoric 3½-year career that took him from Louisiana to New

York, Atlantic City, Maryland, Chicago, Detroit, and Kentucky, the dream was over. He retired with 495 wins and a lifetime of memories, and he wasn't even 20.

For another two years, Kenward fought the wasting war against the scale before giving it up at 23 in 1969. Of his 526 wins in a 10-year career, only 44 came in the last four seasons. Weight continued to be a problem, later rising to 240 before he got back down to 185. Over the years, Tee Red became Big Red, with a conservative estimate of 300 pounds.

Since hanging up his tack, Tee Red has been almost everywhere and done just about everything in the sport. One highlight was saddling a horse in the 1980 Kentucky Derby (58-1 shot Tonka Wakhan ran 10th behind the filly Genuine Risk). Owner Glenn Bromagen let Tee Red name the colt, and he got creative.

"I remembered a horse I'd seen in a Sal Mineo movie," said Tee Red, who wore a cowboy hat and an A. J. Foyt Racing jacket around the backstretch that week. "He was always coming to the rescue of the kid. I didn't know how to spell it, so I just tried the way it sounded."

The "pretty, fragile-looking gray" brought three generations of Bernises to that Derby. Besides Jack, whom Associated Press columnist Will Grimsley described as a "thin, leathery trainer," Tee Red's 5-year-old son, Frank, tagged along. Frank also took the career path to the racetrack, and in 2007 was the foreman and assistant trainer for Tom Amoss's perennially successful stable. Like his father, he also passed the 300-pound plateau. As Amoss said, "Oh, you can't miss him."

Tee Red trained winners in Kentucky, California, Florida, Arkansas, Louisiana, Illinois, and Oklahoma before marrying his second wife, Barbara, an Iowa native, and making Prairie Meadows their base in 1999. He estimates he spent 25 years training and 10 or so as a jockey's agent for Tracy Hebert, Terry Thompson, and Randy Romero. He also had to take a few years off because of problems with diabetes.

Looking back, Tee Red said he never agonizes over "what ifs."

"If I had finished school, it would have been better for me in business, but I have no regrets, never," he said. "I've been around a long time and done it all. The good Lord has always blessed me."

Kenward feels the same way. He's doing well as a trainer, averaging about two winners a month in 2006 and 2007. On his 60th birthday, December 8, 2005, he enjoyed a career highlight at Delta Downs. He sent out three horses on that wet night, and Crafty Rhonda, Adieu and Farewell, and Straight In all splashed to victory. "I tell people it took me 60 years to set that up," he said.

"I don't want to brag, but we did all right," Kenward said. "And if I could ride again today, I'd do it."

So would Cecil. "I'd still like to go back and ride the rails again," he said.

On her many scary trips to the racetrack, Rita kept her eyes open long enough to rate her second and third sons as riders. "I thought Red was the best on the Thoroughbreds," she said, "and Kenward was the best with the Quarter Horses.

"I'm proud of all my kids. I think I did a pretty good job raising them. I tell them they better be good, because I still can slap them. Oh, I wish I could see them more often, because only three of them live near me."

In a few years, there might be four. Like so many Cajuns who moved away, Cecil yearns to return.

“There wasn’t much where we were from, and when we started making money riding, we were willing to leave,” Cecil said. “But I miss those days, eating crawfish and shrimp, going fishing on the bayou and hunting raccoons in the woods.

“When I retire, my wife and I are going back to Louisiana. I love it there.”

Up in Iowa, Tee Red echoed his older brother’s feelings.

“I miss those days, too,” he said. “Everybody does.”