Thirty years ago, several thousand educators—and a few students—spoke French, gradually at a time when most of them could hardly have described themselves as “French.” Yet, in spite of this sparse trend, the Louisiana Constitution forbade the use of any language other than English as the official—and only—language of the state. The French language was stifled at every level of public, governmental or educational. It was practiced in a small community, in a single parish, and by a few students studying foreign languages at the university.

Yet, as if to contradict the “Cajun” stereotype, the French language was still being practiced in Louisiana. Although the majority of Louisiana residents who speak French are Cajuns, CODOFIL was established to preserve the French language as well and to have a governmental body to communicate with nations where French is spoken, and to preserve the presentational Festival of French in Louisiana.

The state's official language is English, and the French language was cut off from the common people by the French government in 1974 to promote Cajun and Creole culture. However, the state has continued to support the preservation of the French language. It passed a law in 1968 that made French the official language of the state.

The Festival of French in Louisiana was established in 1977 to promote Cajun and Creole culture, and has continued to attract thousands of visitors each year. The festival features music, dance, food, and language workshops to celebrate the French heritage of Louisiana.

In 2020, the 30th anniversary of CODOFIL was celebrated with a gala at the Old State Capitol. Many legislators who are of French descent were honored at the event. The anniversary comes at a critical time, when many schools have been forced to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these challenges, the French language is still being taught in Louisiana schools, and the festival continues to draw visitors from around the world.

The work of preserving the French language and culture has not been easy, but the supporters of CODOFIL believe that it is essential for the future of Louisiana and the world. The French language is a valuable resource that can help to promote understanding and cooperation between different cultures.

As the 30th anniversary of CODOFIL continues, the organization is working to ensure that the French language is preserved and promoted for generations to come. The organization is working with schools, museums, and cultural centers to spread the French language and culture to a new generation of students.

"Our first objective of CODOFIL was to bring back pride in our people to speak French," said former Governor John McKeithen at the 30th anniversary gala. "The goal for the future is to make sure that the French language is taught in all schools in Louisiana."
studying French in Louisiana than ever before, said Perrin. The 20 French immersion schools have waiting lists, he added.

One of CODOFIL’s first programs, Perrin explained, was to recruit French teachers for Louisiana schools. Most of the teachers came from France, bringing with them a modern French that clashed with locals.

“They taught Parisian French and the parents couldn’t understand their children,” Perrin said. “Plus, Louisiana French is an oral language, not a written language.”

Now, more than 200 teachers are in Louisiana from Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia, Canada, plus Africa, the West Indies, France and Belgium.

“We’ve diversified and by doing that, it helps all Francophones in Louisiana,” Perrin said.

Recently, the University of Southwestern Louisiana instituted a doctoral degree in Francophone Studies, the first of its kind in the United States and the third of its kind in the world, Perrin said. The first man scheduled to receive this degree, David Cheramie, has just taken over the reins as CODOFIL’s executive director. A Bayou Lafourche native, Cheramie was raised speaking French.

“He brings an educated French and a Cajun French so it’s a nice complement of the two,” Perrin said, adding that Cheramie’s wife, Marianne, is a native of France and a first-grade French immersion teacher at Prairie Elementary in Lafayette.

Earlene Broussard, CODOFIL director for the past five years, stepped down in December.

“She did an excellent job,” Perrin said. “We went through a difficult funding period. She not only kept it alive, but CODOFIL prospered.”

The biggest news to date for CODOFIL is the upcoming FrancoFête, and the complementary Congres Mondial Acadien-Louisiane, or World Acadian Congress, to be held in August of 1999. Both events are being promoted heavily by the Louisiana Office of Tourism, which hopes to make 1999 a record year for tourism.

“FrancoFête is trying to take French out of the classroom and put it in the streets,” Perrin explained. “It will create jobs, attract tourists by offering more people in Louisiana speaking French. We’re trying to make it (Louisiana’s French influence) real.”

FrancoFête is scheduled to open with either a half-time or pre-game show at the 1999 Sugar Bowl, then continue throughout the year, Perrin said. Major dates will be March 3, the anniversary of Iberville establishing the French colony of Louisiana, and American and French independence days, July 4 and 14. The Acadian Congress will be Aug. 1-15, 1999.

“Every weekend in the state we’re going to have a festival celebrating FrancoFête,” Perrin insisted.

An added plus has been the scheduling of the 1999 World Francophone Summit in New Brunswick, Canada, the home of many Canadian Acadians. The summit may persuade Chirac, who will probably attend, to visit Louisiana while in North America, Perrin said.

“It’s like too good to be true,” Perrin said.

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The Old State Capitol, above, will be the site of the 30th Anniversary Gala for CODOFIL on Saturday, Jan. 31. For information or tickets to the event call 389-9885.

30th Anniversary Gala
When CODOFIL was born in 1968, thirty legislators and former Gov. John McKeithen signed the law that created it. McKeithen and surviving legislators, plus the descendants of legislators who have passed away, will be honored at CODOFIL’s 30th Anniversary Gala on Saturday, Jan. 31, in the Old State Capitol.

Gus Weill, political analyst and television personality, will serve as master of ceremonies.

“It’s fitting that he should do this for us,” said William Arceneaux, chairman of CODOFIL’s Board of Trustees and president of the Independent Colleges and Universities of Louisiana. “Gus Weill was Gov. McKeithen’s executive secretary in 1968.”

The event will be in three parts, Arceneaux said. A 6 p.m. reception with Cajun musician Ann Vidrine will be on the Main Floor Rotunda. A 7 p.m. program in the second floor House chamber with Weill will include honoring the legislators and a film produced by Louisiana Public Broadcasting.

“Edgar ‘Sonny’ Mouton will speak for the legislators,” Arceneaux said. “The highlight of the program is the 20-minute program made by LPB that highlights CODOFIL over the last few years.”

At 8 p.m., a host of Louisiana chefs will serve dinner in the Senate chambers.

“We have eight or 10 of the greatest chefs in Louisiana donating their dishes,” Arceneaux said. “They’re all preparing fabulous things — crawfish etouffee, shrimp etouffee, talapia — wonderful dishes.”

Participating chefs and restaurants include Ralph and Kacoo’s, Piccadilly, Restaurant Manchac, among others.

The cost is $125. For more information or tickets, call Chris Donnier, 389-9885.