Cajun heritage detailed

By Liz Herbert
Staff Writer

Lafayette's Cajun heritage not only to the Acadians, but also to three other groups of immigrants who came to Louisiana in the 18th and 19th centuries, Dr. Carl Brashear, assistant director of the Center for Louisiana Studies at LSU, said Thursday.

"There were four major groups — the Acadians, the Creoles, the native Acadians and the so-called foreign French," Brashear said to members of the Innsmouth Rotary Club. "We know the most about the Acadians, but they were the smallest group that came here. The foreign French were the largest group, but we know the least about them."

Brashear said that though the other three groups were widely represented in South Louisiana by the late 19th century, the foreign French did not begin arriving in large numbers until after an 1835 volcanic eruption caused widespread famine in France, spurring waves of migration to North America from 1838 to 1843.

"The famine was over by the 1840s, but the economic situation became increasingly bad for many of these in France," the LSU professor said. "The craftsmen and cottage industries could no longer compete with the growing industry here, so they were forced to leave."

"Overpopulation, particularly in the Allier region, was also a key reason for the French migration. There was a massive migration from Allier in this period not only to America, but also to Russia. Many came over as indentured servants."

According to Brashear, most of the French immigrants who came to America were farmers, but the vast majority of those who settled in Louisiana (928), according to port reports, were servants or professional people such as teachers, lawyers and priests.

"Louisians really got the good end of the deal," he said. "These people were urbanites. They first settled in New Orleans, but many left and settled in small towns in southern Louisiana. The influence they provided was immense."

Brashear said that because the four groups intermarried extensively, it is now difficult to determine exactly what percentage of these currently residing in Acadiana whose so-called Cajun names are truly of Acadian descent.

In addition to the Acadians, other French Canadians contributed to the area's current culture. These non-Acadian French Canadians, Brashear said, formed the nucleus of the entire Creole and Cajun population.

"You really have a differentiation between the true Acadian and Cajun today, because the term Cajun has come to encompass a large group of people who are not really Acadians (those who migrated from Nova Scotia to Canada from 1804-1806)," Brashear said. "What we consider Cajun now has its basis to the Acadians, Creoles and foreign French."