Acadians Were Active In High Levels Of Government

NEW IBERIA — Although most Acadians maintained a lifestyle distinct from that of the rest of the South, there were many Acadians who participated politically, socially and culturally in Louisiana in the nineteenth century, Mrs. Larry Baker said here last week in the second lecture in a series on the Acadians.

Enduring Vitality

"The enduring vitality of the Cajun culture in Southwestern Louisiana is generally well known," Mrs. Baker said. "The Cajun music, cuisine, handicrafts and joy of life attracted a lot of attention," she said. "But, contrary to popular opinion not all Cajuns rejected the cultural mode."

"There was active Acadian participation in the highest areas of government from its colonial beginnings," Mrs. Baker said. The Acadians fought the British in the War of Independence and supported Jackson's forces in Louisiana during the War of 1812, she said.

Also, two Cajuns served as governors and one as lieutenant governor of Louisiana between 1840 and 1869, Mrs. Baker said.

Acculturation

"It is difficult to reconcile this military and political contribution with the Cajun stereotype," Mrs. Baker said. "Yet the popular view of the fierce rejection of acculturation by the Acadians is not entirely untrue," she added.

Mrs. Baker is a Ph. D. candidate at USL and a member of the American Historical Association, the Southern Historical Association, the Louisiana Historical Association and the president of the Atakapas Historical Association.

Her lecture last night was the second in a series of five lectures that trace the history of the Acadians from the expulsion from Canada to modern times. The third lecture, "Twentieth-Century Acadiana," will be held March 19.

It was the less prestigious majority of the Cajuns that gave rise to the popular Cajun stereotype, Mrs. Baker said — that of an ignorant people living in a pastoral paradise.

Described Cajuns

A traveler through Southwestern Louisiana in the early nineteenth-century described the Cajuns as simple but independent people living in crude homes with religion, the land and the family of primary importance, Mrs. Baker said. They were a vigorous, happy and fundamentally democratic people with an indifference toward politics that was a source of frustration to those who sought to help them, Mrs. Baker said.

Geographical realities contributed as much or more to the Cajun isolation as much as their own resistance to acculturation, Mrs. Baker said. The huge Atchafalaya swamp and the isolated life style of the subsistence farmers and fishermen in what was then largely a frontier state helped to maintain their own version of the life they brought from Nova Scotia and developed no higher loyalties in them beyond their own community, Mrs. Baker said.

But the more prosperous Acadians were another story, Mrs. Baker said. After the 1830's, when an expanding economy and rapid population growth in Louisiana created the more prosperous Acadians, Mrs. Baker said, the successful Acadians assumed an aristocratic demeanor and became indistinguishable from the Creole French.

Southern Aristocracy

"Surprisingly many Acadians became large slave owners and developed into the southern planter aristocracy," Mrs. Baker said.

Census records in 1850 showed that 68 per cent of the slaveholders in Lafayette were Acadian, she added. And Creole French, American sugar planters and prosperous Cajuns created an upper class in southern Louisiana.

"Politically the upper class Acadians were very inconsistent," Mrs. Baker said. "They were Whig sympathizers but were affiliated with the Democrats," Mrs. Baker said.

"The Acadian traditions modified but did not erase class consciousness among those Cajuns who were successful," Mrs. Baker said. She added that a startling incidence of genetic disease in St. Martin Parish gives evidence of much inbreeding among successful Acadians hoping to "keep it in the family."

An example of the dichotomy within the Acadian culture of the nineteenth-century was the Acadian response to the Civil War, Mrs. Baker said.

Elite Acadian

While the elite Acadian population provided the South with General Alfred Mouton, who was among the top-ranked generals in the Confederacy, the rank and file Acadian draftee in the Confederate served very reluctantly and there were mass desertions of the army by the Acadian soldiers.