"We love the language, we're going to lose a huge part of who we are..."
Lost generation of French speakers intent on saving the language

FRENCH, Page 15

Inspecting a nature scene drawn by a group of students, the teacher asked one lad to count how many pelicans had too many legs. "Two, two, four, quatro... uh, uh," he answered, and he and his young collaborators burst into giggles.

This is French immersion. It is an intensive program of teaching the language to small groups of students in a handful of Louisiana public schools by using French across almost their entire curriculum — math, social studies, science, even physical education and gym class.

It also is one of the last hopes for saving the French language in the state.

A tangible tie to the past

In many who hold the Cajun culture dear, there is no more critical issue than reviving their version of French in south Louisiana and maintaining it for future generations, because it represents such a tangible tie not only to family members past but also to the overall heritage of this hearty people. It's a tall order for so much was done over the course of the 20th century to eradicate the Cajuns' native tongue from the Louisiana cultural landscape — some of it done solely, some of it freely. The result was a net loss of almost two generations of Cajuns who, for the most part, abandoned French while other aspects of their traditional lifestyle also were being subjugated by the relentless push of modern American culture.

The U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization says a language needs at least 300,000 speakers to ensure continuity from generation to generation. The number of Louisiana who spoke French at home dropped by more than half from 1970 to 1990, from 372,264 to 285,609, according to the U.S. census, which does not distinguish between Cajun French and other forms of the language.

The tally held steady at 285,678 in the 1990 census, but a survey conducted that year by the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, also known as COOFL, and what is now the University of Louisiana-Lafayette found ominous indicators for the future: While 70 percent of French speakers older than 40 were fluent in the language, only 37 percent of those younger than 40 were fluent. Worse was foretelling: Of French speakers younger than 20, less than 10 percent were fluent.

Desperate measures

Language information from the 2000 census won't be released for another year or two, Optimists vary widely as to whether they'll show any significant change over the past decade, but the folks at COOFL expect an upswing.

They think the previous trends were less bleak because students were required to admit speaking French, because of past-bias against doing so in public and because many residents did not believe the Cajun or Creole variety qualified them as French speakers.

Those days, promising pride and status in the language is the mission of teachers at Prairie Elementary and similar schools across south Louisiana. Their French immersion program is one of many current efforts to keep alive the language and, by extension, the Cajun way of life. But if Louisiana's fading culture of French speakers isn't already past the point of no return, it could be battering on the edge.

"If we lose the language, we're going to lose a huge part of who we are," said Cajun artist and songwriter Christine Ball. "I pray to God that that doesn't happen. I know that we've lost a lot already."

An oral tradition

Cajun-French developed in Louisiana from the language system used by Acadian and French settlers who arrived in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although most words and sentence structures in Cajun-French can be understood by people fluent in other forms of the language, the Cajun strain is distinguished by regional variations that evolved during the past three centuries. It has been primarily an oral tradition, rather than a written language. It has the time of the first Cajuns' arrival in the 1700s until well into the 1900s, the French speakers gravitated across the south Louisiana countryside were predominantly an illiterate people who had little or no formal education. But the language began to fade away in the 1930s, to the point of being a living, breathing, spoken tongue across the southern part of the state, where it was spoken in homes, schools and churches.

"We lost almost all intact until the time of the Second World War. After that, the Glens came home, television came about, times changed," said Ball.

Today, through a cooperative effort between Lafayette Parish and the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, a language immersion program has been established at Prairie Elementary, a Cajun-French school in south Louisiana.

The experience left the Cajun people with a collective negative self-image. Many parents in the 1930s and 1940s refused to teach their children French, hoping those children would not be made to suffer the indignities foisted on their parents.

When it was the rule

Retired Judge Allen Ballou of Lafayette is well- known across Acadia Parish, west and south of Lafayette, and to many as well as one of the first prominent advocates for the Cajun culture, going back to the 1960s. He was born in New Po- lenta, but his family moved to Lafayette when he was 6, after his father was transferred to work during the Great Depres- sion. He still remembers the day when French was the rule, not the exception.

"When we moved here I couldn't speak a word of French," said Ballou. "As a boy, I learned French quickly, because everything within miles around was all in French at that time. That was an immediate immers- ion course!"

"We kept almost all intact until the time of the Second World War. After that, the Glens came home, television came about, times changed.""
CULTURE at a CROSSROADS

Cajuns strive to preserve their way of life

The world may have changed around him, but time might as well be standing still for 97-year-old Dwayne Potvin, who spends nearly every day fishing or hunting. In 2001, his routine isn't much different than it was in 1921. That suits him fine.

At the dawn of a new century, Cajun culture is at a turning point.

In the past 100 years it has stubbornly survived the rush of modernization and the ham-handed efforts of bureaucrats who have tried alternately to suppress and encourage the Cajun dialect of French—perhaps the most unifying characteristic of the people who settled in Louisiana in the mid-1700s. Cajun cooking is widely popular. Cajun music continues to pack dance halls. And the latest effort at nurturing the language seems to be taking hold. But amid the vibrant burst of cultural pride there are worries about just how long the distinctive old ways can survive the pressures of the modern world.

ACADIANA CALLING (p. 11)
Marketing the Cajun experience has become big business, giving hope that Cajun culture may be here to stay after the devastating loss of the '93. (See page 11.)

VIVE LE FRANÇAIS (p. 12)
French language, traditionally the single most important unifying characteristic of Cajuns, is also his one in imminent danger of being lost. See page 15.

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