Chapter of CODOFIL
Formed in Avoyelles

By Steve Morgan
(Town Talk Staff Writer)
MARKSVILLE, La. — It was as if a small corner of France had been transplanted here Thursday night.
The occasion was an organizational meeting of the Avoyelles Parish chapter of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL).

Little children danced and sang old French songs and adults sang La Marseillaise (France’s national anthem) and Alouette.

Virtually all of the talking was in French. Guest speakers included CODOFIL director James Domengeaux of Lafayette, Editor Adras Laborde of The Town Talk, and French Consul Jean Pettinelli.

Dist. Judge Earl Edwards emcees the affair — in French, of course.

The Avoyelles organization is the 14th CODOFIL chapter in the state. A predominately French-speaking crowd of about 200 elected Wayne Laborde, French teacher at Marksville High school, president of the chapter. Other officers are Mrs. Mae Cappel of Marksville, vice president; Mrs. Blanche A. Swann of Marksville, secretary, and Steve Ducote of Hessmer, treasurer.

CODOFIL is a state agency formed by the legislature to preserve, develop and expand the French language in Louisiana.

Domengeaux told the crowd in an address delivered mostly in French that the people of Louisiana have to change their attitudes and develop pride in their French heritage and actively cultivate the speaking of the French language on a statewide basis.

“Our French attachments have been severed by years of isolation from our French ancestors and by social change,” he said. “But if through the efforts of an organization like CODOFIL and through the determination of all the people of the state, we can be successful in making Louisiana a bilingual state, then it will be a great cultural and educational accomplishment.”

He stressed that because the world is growing ever smaller the people of this country have to give up the “melting pot philosophy which has robbed us of our ability to think and communicate on an international scale.”

Domengeaux said that unless a concerted effort is made to institute the French language into the state’s educational system on the same status as physical education or any other subject, then Louisiana’s special status as a bilingual state will be lost within 10 years. “French has been the step-child of education in the United States for too long,” he said.

Seeking More Teachers
CODOFIL has been partially responsible for the importation of a number of young French instructors from France who are teaching the language in many parishes, including Avoyelles, and Domengeaux said the organization is working to see that 150 more of these teachers are brought to Louisiana.

“What more can you do for a young person in this complicated world than give him an opportunity to be able to communicate in more than one language?” the CODOFIL chairman concluded.

Laborde, a native of Avoyelles Parish, said that despite the opportunities he has had to travel extensively, the two things he has always taken special pride in are his Acadian heritage and his retention of the “beautiful French language.”

“We must consider ourselves fortunate that here in Avoyelles not only the heritage of our Acadian forefathers has been retained but also the French language,” he said. “It is unfortunate that among us there are large numbers of parents who seem to regret that they are Acadians, and that their first tongue is the French of their ancestors — and, therefore, who try to make their children forget the language, if, indeed, they learned it in the first place.”

“But we must not hold these parents totally responsible. The fault rests on all of us who have neglected an advantage which our neighbors would pay dearly to acquire,” Laborde said. “Learn, my friends, the truths about your heritage and be assured that you will keep your head high, your eyes bright and your spirit proud. We should begin this very night to turn back the clock and the calendar and change our attitudes.”

Praise for Several
Laborde had praise for CODOFIL, the legislators who nurtured the organization, for Gov. Edwards and former Gov. McKeithen and “our fellow countrymen in France and Canada” who have worked to preserve French in Louisiana.

“We have received the inspiration to make vows that from this moment on the preservation of the French language and our Acadian heritage will be Project No. 1,” he said.

Among the special guests was Leo LeBlanc, a representative of the government of the Province of Quebec, Canada.

Avoyelles residents joined in singing the French national anthem, “La Marseillaise.” Mrs. Mae Cappel and her son, Edward, performed a song they called the anthem of South Louisiana, “Awaken Louisiana” (translation).

The first-grade class of Marksville Elementary school even got into the act with the presentation of French dances and songs under the direction of their French teachers, Michel and Denise Barbier, who are French citizens teaching in Avoyelles under sponsorship of CODOFIL, the State Department of Education, the Avoyelles Parish School Board, and the U. S. State Department.