CODOFIL nurtures ‘French Renaissance’

By MELINDA SHELTON
 Advocate state writer

LAFAYETTE — As long ago as 1940, James Domengeaux — then a rising Louisiana political figure — began making public appeals for preservation of the French language in a state known for its strong French heritage.

But it wasn’t until 1968 that Domengeaux saw his decades of work take a firm hold in Louisiana when the Legislature adopted a law aimed at promoting bilingualism in the state. The purpose of that law and subsequent acts in recent years was to preserve the state’s French heritage and language, and to have the teaching of French — as well as other foreign languages — mandated in the educational system from elementary to high-school levels.

Paving the way toward the promotion of bilingualism was the establishment of the Conseil pour le développement du Français en Louisiane — the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana — CODOFIL.

And for Domengeaux, the founding father of the program and continued staunch supporter, CODOFIL is a baby nurtured from birth to maturity. In its maturity, Domengeaux said, CODOFIL is a successful program that has blossomed throughout what he calls the “French Renaissance” in Louisiana.

The council specifically was established in 1968 to promote the speaking and teaching of French in Louisiana. In its early stages, CODOFIL was instrumental in establishing a close relationship between the Canadian province of Quebec and Louisiana, and foreign ties quickly formed between France and Belgium and the state, said Philippe Gustin, current CODOFIL director.

A series of exchanges began between the countries and involved students and teachers here in Louisiana and those in the foreign countries, Gustin said. In the past 15 years, he said, some 3,000 students and teachers have participated in summer exchange programs and other cultural and educational exchanges coordinated through CODOFIL.

Gustin, a native of Belgium who has worked with CODOFIL since 1974, said study scholarships for Louisiana students and teachers have been provided over the years, and dozens of foreign teachers have taught French in schools throughout the state as part of the CODOFIL program.

“We weren’t teaching French only as a second language, but as a revival of the mother tongue of half a million people in Louisiana,” Gustin said. “On the elementary level, since 1974 we have been teaching French slowly, much too slowly.

“We first had to train Louisiana teachers and have them certified to teach French, and that is continuing to take place. We now are working to get more Louisiana teachers certified and teaching, and are trying to change having French only as an elective.”

Working with the state Department of Education has been essential to the continued growth of CODOFIL, Gustin said. In the early days of the program, SEE CODOFIL, 10B
James Domengeaux

wherever you are. By teaching French in schools, we are not going to destroy Cajun French.

Cajun French. Gustin said CODOFIL currently has an annual budget of $350,000, and operates out of Lafayette with a staff of nine persons. He said 29 parishes now are teaching French through affiliation with CODOFIL. In addition to three independent school systems, and an estimated 50,000 students statewide have a daily education in French.

Cajun French. "We feel to improve the education system, much attention should be paid to the BESE recommendations and foreign-language involvement should be funded," Gustin said. He added that an estimated $1 million would be needed for the first year of implementation, and a total of $18 million over a five-year period for the state.

The teaching of other foreign languages is not excluded, Gustin said, but French particularly is important because of Louisiana's French heritage and large number of people who speak and understand French, including Cajun and Creole French.

Gustin and Domengeaux both stressed that formal French must be taught to form a concrete base for the knowledge and use of the language. Cajun French, they said, lacks definite structure for teaching proper grammatical use of French because it is a conglomerate of French and local subdialects such as Creole, Spanish and other languages.

"You first teach a language that is well-structured with correct grammar," Gustin said, "and then you can adapt it to the spoken language."

Philippe Gustin

been, probably, the most effective weapon in the development of tourism in this state." Our first objective was to bring back pride in our people in speaking French," Domengeaux said. "I think we've accomplished that and people aren't ashamed and afraid to speak French anymore like they were years ago when they were told they couldn't speak French because it made them look ignorant, uneducated.

"And the antagonism felt in the schools generally has disappeared, and we've changed the minds of many educators about the need for and the benefits from teaching French and other foreign languages.

"I think we've accomplished many small miracles and haven't created anything but good will. That's because we've kept politics separate from CODOFIL, and that's the way it'll stay. We've made people realize in this country, in Louisiana, that the speaking of a second language is essential to the welfare of our future."