Cajun census sought

Debate stirs on how forms to be marked

By BRETT MARTEL
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NEW ORLEANS — When she left her home in Lafayette, Chantal Soulier was surprised by how many Louisianans didn’t speak French but seemed to understand it.

So as the U.S. Census Bureau steps up its mail solicitations on how Cajuns should identify themselves in the 2000 population count...

"If you see of French descent or if you consider yourself Cajun, you have to say it," said Soulier, 29, co-founder of the Lafayette-based, bilingual monthly newspaper L'Acadian.

"It's also important for people who understand French to recognize they speak the language even if they never really tried."

The Census Bureau wants forms postmarked no later than Wednesday, although offices in some areas have set earlier deadlines. Census workers will call or visit households shortly afterward, in addition to counting the number of people, the census attempts to compile ethnic, racial and economic data about the population. That includes languages they speak.

Federal policies and funding often are based on such data.

Since the "race" heading on the census includes options such as Caucasian, Vietnamese, Native American, and Asian Indian, some argue Cajun could qualify as well.

Dominique, who has written in review articles on the 1980 Census case between Calvin Roach and Dresser Industries, says he and his wife marked themselves down as Cajun on their census forms.

"I don't advocate or know of any case law that says Cajuns deserve special treatment," Dimonique says. "But we have been recognized for our cultural and ethnic differences."

On the Internet, the Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture is maintained by Shonn Bernard, a New Iberia resident and doctoral candidate in history at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. Bernard says Cajuns could identify themselves as such under "race" in the census short form, which most people received. But he says that the long form, sent to one in six homes, provides the option of writing Acadian or Cajun in a different section on ancestry.

"The Census Bureau has a formula from which it can determine about how many people are of Acadian ancestry, and I think it's reliable," Bernard says. "So it really isn't necessary to put Cajun down as one's race."

According to the Census Bureau, people who put Cajuns under race in the short form will be recorded as such, instead of white, but may only show up as "other" statistical- ly. The bureau intended to count ethnic groups such as Cajuns based on the ancestry question on the long form.

Louisiana government began to discourage speaking French in the early part of the century. In 1923, a constitutional amendment that remained in effect until 1974 banned use of any language other than English in public schools.

But shows like "The Cajun Cook" combined with Louisiana's need to boost tourism after the oil bust of the 1980s, sparked a Cajun renaissance of sorts. Meanwhile, the state has begun again to promote French-language publications, music and educational programs.

Such changes have left Cajun New Orleanians as well as the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana curious about whether the 2000 census will indicate a resurgence in the number of Cajuns and French speakers in the state.

The 1990 census indicated there were about 400,000 Cajuns living in Louisiana and 300,000 nationally. It also indicated that only 3 percent of Louisiana's 4.4 million residents speak French, although Census Bureau estimates residents with a working knowledge of the language at more than double that number.

"It's going to be interesting when the data is released to see how much impact French immersion programs have had," Bernard said.

On the Net:
http://www.cajonculture.com