Cajun image, culture sacred to council

CODOFIL works to get rural America some respect.

Dee Davis has a global vision for improving the image and conditions of rural America.

When CBS announced plans last year for a reality television show based on "The Beverly Hillbillies," Davis spearheaded a nationwide protest of the proposed series in which an Appalachian family would be uprooted to Hollywood and showered with money and luxury as the cameras rolled.

"It was going to present rural people as a foil for cheap laughs," Davis said.

As network producers were dispatched to Eastern Kentucky and other places in search of a family to move into a Beverly Hills mansion, Davis and his staff at the Center for Rural Strategies waged a $1 million ad campaign against the show, gaining the support of major trade unions and 43 members of Congress.

Chris Ender, a CBS spokesman, declined to say whether the campaign derailed the show. But he added, "When that much noise is made, you certainly take notice."

The battle marked an early national test for the 2 1/2-year-old center, whose goal is to influence public policy on behalf of Appalachia and rural America, Davis said. About 56 million Americans — about one-fifth of the population — live in rural areas.

Stereotypes aren't new to Cajuns living in Acadiana but one local group has been working for years to change that.

Instead of toothless hillbillies who can't speak the Queen's English,
Cajuns were often depicted as "toothless swamp monsters who couldn't speak English or French correctly," said David Cheramie, director of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana.

"We get confused with 'Deliverance,' " the movie, Cheramie said.

The council was created in 1968 to preserve the French language in the state, but the organization is also a watchdog of the language and culture, often correcting the media for wrong portrayals of Cajuns.

One of the group's initial objectives "was to show that if you spoke French in Louisiana, you're not ignorant," Cheramie said.

With the cancellation of the reality show based on the Beverly Hillbillies, rural America took a stand against Hollywood's depiction of Americans that movie makers know nothing about.

Cheramie said he was impressed that CBS backed off in the case of the hillbilly reality show.

"I think being of French descent in America and being poor in America are the two last bastions in America where you can be politically incorrect," he said. "People feel it's all right to attack us as stereotype and feel that they have the right to believe that everybody adheres to that stereotype in south Louisiana."

For some, the label Cajun may still conjure up images of people navigating through the swamps in pirogues to trade furs at the general store.

"Stereotypes by their very nature don't change," Cheramie said. "They're static. What has changed in the past 15 years is there's a lesser acceptance of the stereotype. We see more of an outrage when we see things that show Cajun people in that light."

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But the negative stereotypes appear to be waning, said Jacques Henry, an assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at UL Lafayette. Henry has studied cultural stereotypes and how they may affect the identity of a culture.

"When I look at the popularity of Cajuns in the world from restaurants and the tourism industry, if Cajuns are still in some way stereotyped, they are no longer shown as the ignorant brute of the bayou as it was in the '60s, '70s and the beginning of the '80s," Henry said.

"If 'Cajun' was a negatively charged term, it would not be used by the commercial establishments to sell their wares," he said.

That image of dancing couples, endless platters of crawfish tails and old men playing fiddle under an oak tree may be the new stereotype for Acadiana, Henry said.

Villages such as Vermilionville and Acadian Village, and festivals that celebrate Cajun and Creole heritage, attract tourists from around the world.

Museums help to dispel the cultural myths and inaccuracies, said Cynthia Trahan, director of Vermilionville. She said that many tourists come to Acadiana with their own ideas of what they may see. Some people even question if they'll be able to understand the guides.

"Sometimes people ask, 'Can I just look at a person and tell that they're Cajun? '" Trahan said. "The guide usually tells them, 'When I look at tourists, I can't tell what state they're from. '"

The park is located along the Vermilion River, and people often ask about swamp life, Trahan said.

"People want to make sure that there won't be any snakes coming out of the swamp," she said, laughing.

But the image that's out there now isn't necessarily unflattering, one that outsiders see as come here and pass a good time. What other time is there?

"It may be an image that would encourage others, especially outsiders, to think that in Louisiana everyone has their doors open and we party all the time and we love like Epicureans," Henry said. "It is an image cast over all south Louisiana and New Orleans in particular. A permanent vacation."

Cheramie thinks of it as a marketing ploy.

"They're coming to enjoy our culture, which is rooted in Cajun and Creole culture."

Henry and Carl L. Bankston III, an assistant professor of sociology at Tulane University, found the earliest defense of negative stereotyping of Cajuns in the 1880s.

Even then there were writers who were attempting to correct the one-sided portrayal of Cajuns.

"(They) were trying to balance it and humanize Cajuns, who, according to the negative images, were portrayed as more like animals than humans in some ways," Henry said.