Cajun Movement Seeking to Keep French Language

Area Legislators Campaigning for Classes

LAFAYETTE, La. (AP) — In this Cajun country some citizens remain as fluent in French as they are in English. But nowadays when a radio or television commercial shifts into elegant old French, the main pitch is at maman or grandpere. The young don't dig it.

The younger generation is so lacking in French, that the unique bilingual character of south Louisiana may soon die out.

Things have come to such a pass that legislators from this area are campaigning for something which would have been thought ridiculous a few years ago: they want French taught in schools.

This comes as a jolt in a land where English used to be the "second language," public signs had to be printed in both French and English, and where French remains an official state language.

"What we are trying to do is to prevent a near tragedy—the loss of our French language," said attorney James Domengeaux, a former congressman.

Part of the change is attributed to the pervasive influence of television, part to the influx of "outlanders" who swarmed into the area after the discovery of oil.

But most of it apparently stems from a feeling among many Cajun parents that it is best for their children to blend into the stronger English-speaking society.

"We did not properly understand that bilingual literacy is possible, desirable and attainable," said 22 state legislators who recently signed a resolution asking that the Legislature allot money for French classes in Acadian schools.

"Until recently French was spoken extensively in the homes of south Louisiana," they said. "Under the impact of television and for other reasons this practice has largely ceased.

"Another substantial cause of the decline of the French language is due to the belief of many French-Acadian parents that the economic welfare of their children would be best served by concentration on the English language, and abandonment of the French language."

French-speaking Louisiana-Acadia — stretches southward from New Orleans to the Texas line.

It is the area settled by the French families driven out of eastern Canada in 1755 during the French and Indian war. The term Cajun is a corruption of Acadian.

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