Cajuns Seek French Culture Out of Mixed Past

BY DOUGLAS E. KNEELAND

LAFAYETTE, La., May 1—The Swinging Machine, a dancehall on the edge of town, throbbed in the heavy night air to the psychedelic guitar of the Elysonian Fields. Colored lights flashed, staggered, whirled and swirled. Mancerts switched tantalizingly. Shaggy heads, rocking to the beat, lived again as great grotesque shadows.

The Swinging Machine. Its electric lights flashed, stirring air to the psychedelic towel, throbbed in the heavy dancehall on the edge of Lafayette. But whether it can survive the onslaught of the second half of the 20th century, with its Swinging Machine, its English-language television and radio and its demanding technology, is a matter of deep concern among those who would preserve the language and the culture of the Acadians.

Dr. Raymond S. Rodgers, political science teacher at Southwestern Louisiana, advocates French-Canadian ties.

Not unusual—in Bangor, Me., or Boulder, Colo. But Lafayette, a city of 60,000, is the hub of southwestern Louisiana—French Louisiana.

The Land of Evangeline, it is called by some. Acadiana is Acadia, by others. A land settled largely in sorrow two centuries ago by French exiles from Acadia, fishermen, farmers and fur trappers from the shores of eastern Canada, who refused to swear allegiance to the British Crown. Expelled in 1755, they were scattered among the British Colonies. Families, friends and lovers were separated. Ten years later, with the permission of Spain, to whom France had ceded Louisiana, the first Acadians made their way to the tiny French settlement in the bayou country.

Here among those odd-looking, sluggish streams that lazily thread the gnarled trees of the Acadiana plains, the Acadians thrived and proliferated, making the land their own.

And while Acadian was soon shortened to Cajun, the French language they brought to the New World when they settled Port Royal in 1605 has lived on.

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Twenty-two state legislators from the area recently petitioned Gov. John J. McKeithen to provide a program and funds for the teaching of French from the first grade on in all public schools. They also plan to introduce a bill at the legislative session beginning next Monday in Baton Rouge to attain their goal.

James Domengeaux, a 59-year-old lawyer, who is a former United States Representative, has thrown his political power behind the movement.

"We feel if something isn't done and done immediately,"

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Supplies are detailed in French as stationery, typewriters and adding machines, school and office furniture.