Cajuns Speak Latin?

by Marc Untel

The Cajun language began somewhere in the murky past. But Rome is as good a place to start as any. People often say that French comes from Latin. It would be more exact to say that French is Latin. Oh, it is certainly not the Latin of Caesar or Cicero. Rather it is the popular Latin which was spoken by the Roman soldiers, businessmen, farmers, sailors, and colonists who were to settle in Gaul, the land which was to become France.

Of course this popular Latin was much transformed over the centuries. Thus the word cheval, which means horse in modern French, comes not from the literary word equestrian, but rather from the vulgar (non literary) Latin word caballus.

The word tête, head in modern French, comes not from the literary Latin word caput, the basis of the words capital and capitain, but from the vulgar Latin word testa which meant a jug with two handles.

This popular Latin supplanted the celtic which had been spoken in Gaul until the time of the Roman invasion. Gradually, with the centuries, popular Latin became broken up into many dialects which were to become Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, and French.

Since the Cajun language has retained many old French words which are no longer used in France, such as espérer with the meaning to wait, it is often closer to Latin than modern French is. So we can truly say our Cajun French has a fine pedigree.