‘Coonass’ carries baggage some prefer to leave behind

By Ron Thibodeaux

LAFAYETTE — Some have used it all their lives as a mild-mannered term of endearment for their heritage. Others consider it the ultimate ethnic slur.

In the Cajun lexicon, nothing stirs as much debate as the C-word: coonass.

Its origin as a description, or epithet, for natives of Louisiana’s Cajun country is unclear. One view is that it originated in wartime France and was brought back to the United States by soldiers. Another theory attributes it to the Caribbee Indian word cunaso, meaning someone who lives simply, off the land. Yet another suggests that the term originated in south Louisiana, possibly as a reference to the belief that Cajuns frequently ate raccoons, or as a negative racial reference.

Whatever the etymology, those involved in efforts to sustain the French language in Louisiana and restore pride in the Acadian heritage long have tried to convince Louisianians that the term is derogatory and should have no place in their vocabulary.

The backside

It has been an uphill battle. After more than three decades of such efforts, the term remains in common use. Many north Louisianians, from the Protestant, Anglo part of the state that more closely resembles the rest of the South, use the term to refer derisively to south Louisiana’s predominantly Catholic Cajun population. And even throughout Acadiana there can still be found plenty of those round decals on the back windows of pickup trucks, showing a raccoon’s backside, with its tail in the air, proclaiming “RCA — Registered Coon Ass.”

The Legislature formally condemned the word’s use in 1981. Yet the Louisiana Air National Guard’s acclaimed 159th Tactical Fighter Group in Belle Chasse called itself the Coonass Militia until 1992. A recent incident in Lafayette has rekindled the controversy.

When a conservative radio talk show host from Monroe spoke to a Republican women’s club in March, he told a story in which he not only used the term but also referred to Cajun speech as “coonories.” His audience yukked it up, but the incident was criticized afterward by many in the Cajun revival movement.

In the days that followed, letters to Lafayette’s daily newspaper became the focal point for the debate, as some argued that the word should be considered an insult and others defended its use and scoffed at the high-and-mighty attitude of those who object to it. A handful of writers said that they don’t mean offense when they use the term, and that officials of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana and others who are offended should “lighten up,” “get a grip” or “thicken your pompous skins.”

In response, the most eloquent argument against the word was made by Barry Jean Cheramie, a historian and folklorist from the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette.

“I wonder... if they would be so willing and quick to tell African-Americans, Jews, Hispanics or other racial and ethnic groups, who have learned to mobilize their reactions in the face of such careless speech, not to be offended by racist terms and ethnic slurs?” Cheramie wrote.

“Frankly, I am offended, and I am not alone. Many Cajuns who once were not bothered by the in-group use of the term now seem to have discovered that you simply cannot take the ‘ass’ out of ‘coonass.’ Despite efforts to neutralize the term, it remains vulgar at best, and vulgar and insulting at worst.”

Weeks later, once the debate simmered down, CODOFIL executive director David Cheramie said he was not surprised to learn that so many people — “supposedly Cajuns, but have no way of verifying that” — were not offended by the term.

“Within every ethnic group, there are those members of the group who are lazy and ignorant,” Cheramie said. “No one group has the monopoly on ignorance and sloth.”

The flip side

Many south Louisiana natives would dispute that characterization. J. Conrad Miller, for one, speaks fluent Cajun French, uses the word without reservation and resents the condescending attitude of those who are railing against it.

“It’s something so overblown,” said Miller, 33, of Carenerio. “No one ever took it as being offensive before. It’s always been used as an affectionate term.”

In the face of such attitudes, Cheramie said he nonetheless welcomed the opportunity to expand on the issue.

“How important is it to the Cajun people?” Cheramie asked. “How important is the N-word to the African-American community? I see a strict parallel between the two epithets.

“In the Cajuns, the term coonass is used pejoratively as a metonymy, that is, speaking of a small part to designate the whole. In that sense, I fully agree with Chris Rock whom I paraphrase, ‘There are Cajuns and there are coonasses, and the coonasses have got to go!’”