Spanish moss swayed above Hilda Frank on Sunday as she wiped sweat beads from her forehead, a common sight among the dozens of revelers outside the performance center at Vermilionville taking a break from zydeco dancing.

“This is real, real nice,” said Frank of Creole Culture Day, a celebration of the heritage featuring storytelling, exhibits, cooking demonstrations and other activities...

The theme of the free annual event was women in Creole, one of whom received the 2014 Richard J. Catalon Sr. Creole Heritage Award. Rebecca Henry, honored for her work in preserving Creole culture with history and folk medical traditions lessons, was at Vermilionville only briefly before leaving for New Orleans to give a lecture on Creole heritage....
on the streets," Cheramie said of Louisiana under French rule in the 1700s. "It was widely spoken, but not always recognized or respected. What is considered proper French was official and used by those in power."

Stretched across Vermilionville's 23 acres, upwards of 1,000 people explored how Creoles maintain their heritage, which first came to Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution in 1800.

"Haitians slaves fled here," said Cheramie, who was once the director of the Council of the Development of French in Louisiana for 13 years. "The population of New Orleans went from 5,000 to 10,000 overnight. Literally."

Although free people in Louisiana, Haitian Creoles were still considered unequal, Cheramie explained. Out of that oppression, art expression flourished, and the origins of early jazz can be traced to this time.

Lectures were given in Schoolhouse L'Ecole—which houses a blackboard that reads "I will not speak French in school," a powerful reminder of early 20th-century Louisiana when speaking the language was outlawed—but 14-year-old Ethan Airhart opted for a more hands-on approach to understand the culture.

"I've been doing this for 3½ years now," said Airhart, idly playing a triple-row accordion.

"This is my first Creole Culture Day," he said, still playing. "I'm loving it."

The nonprofit Vermilionville Living History Museum supports Vermilionville mostly by acquiring grants, which are essential to produce educational events, said Friends of Vermilionville President Patricia Foster. Volunteers can wear authentic Acadian and Creole costumes while entertaining visitors in one of the iconic seven homes restored from 1765-1890.

Under towering oak trees, Marine Capt. Steven Ritter, his wife Elizabeth Ritter and their three young children strolled the serpentine trail.

"I want my kids to embrace my heritage and learn the area I grew up in," said Steven Ritter. "We want to expose them to who we are, and for me, this is who I am."

Under towerin...