Creoles find way out of Cajuns' shadow

Lafayette-based group mourns loss of culture, celebrates preservation

By C. RICHARD COTTON
Special to The Advocate

LAFAYETTE — Creoles in the past century once performed the Jure. Today, all that's left of the dance is the name.

Without a written record, there are no steps, no music, and no knowledge of how the Creoles used to dance it.

So Creoles like Herbert Wiltz and other people are working to make sure the rest of their culture doesn't disappear like Jure dancing.

Wiltz is a charter member of C.R.E.O.L.E. Inc., formed in 1987 and now a Lafayette-based group of about 30 members seeking "to identify, preserve and promote the numerous aspects of the Creole culture of southwest Louisiana," says the group's mission statement.

"We want to find dignity as a people. It is difficult and takes time," said Wiltz, who serves as C.R.E.O.L.E.'s membership chairman. "No one can tell us who we are so we have to define who we are."

It's a daunting task, defining Creole, but the C.R.E.O.L.E. group is determined to put their heritage on the map, so to speak.

The name is an acronym for Cultural, Resourceful, Educational Opportunities and Linguistic Enrichment.

The term "Creole" itself is a leftover from the Colonial period, said University of Southwestern Louisiana history Professor Carl Brasseaux. It defines something native to a particular area and was attached to everything from locally grown tomatoes to the people who grew them.

The Creoles, or "free people of color," as they called themselves in the last century, were of mixed lineage. Brasseaux explains African, he said, was the primary bloodline, but it was mixed through the years with American Indian, French and Spanish.

In Louisiana, Creoles number from 45,000 to 65,000, said USL Professor James Dorman. They were originally centered in the New Orleans area, where they developed a sophisticated society separate from both the black and white communities.

"They were mainly craftsmen and were very successful in the arts," said Dorman, "but when they migrated to the prairies of southwest Louisiana, they fancied themselves as horsemen and ranchers."

Today, populations of Creoles live in New Orleans, St. James Parish, Isle Brevelle and Cane River near Natchitoches, Opelousas, Lafayette and other towns.

But Creole culture in recent years has been overshadowed by the popular celebration of virtually everything Cajun, the white French Catholic population of much of south Louisiana. Ironically, both the Cajun and Creole cultures suffered through a historic period where they were urged to shun their heritage.

"During the Cajun rebirth of the past two decades, Creoles have found themselves left out of Louisiana's ethnic celebration," said Dorman. "Creole was a very negative culture when I was growing up," said Melvin Caesar, president of C.R.E.O.L.E. "I never knew what my culture was."

"When I was growing up, we never talked much about our ancestors," said Gloria Linton, C.R.E.O.L.E. vice president.

Wiltz said they've even established a chapter-on Guadeloupe to study Creole cultures there.

"Creole was a very negative culture when I was growing up," said Michele George, C.R.E.O.L.E. treasurer. "The hair is dark brown to light red and can be straight or curly. Usually, the lighter the skin, the brighter gray-blue the eyes are."

George said where she was raised, Cajun was considered "poor, white trash," so she was taught not to feel part of that culture. Now, being Cajun is OK and George wants the same for Creoles.

C.R.E.O.L.E. members have taken several trips to Caribbean islands like Martinique and Guadeloupe to study Creole cultures there. Wiltz said they've even established a chapter-and friendships — on Guadeloupe.

C.R.E.O.L.E. holds educational forums at about a half-dozen festivals every year across south Louisiana. Wiltz said the forums are one of the main vehicles the group uses to get its message out.

"As Creoles begin to realize it's all right to be Creole," said Caesar, "it will work to educate the people of Louisiana."