Decay of Cajun culture causes many to lament

PECAN ISLAND (AP) — It may have been the oil boom that started the decay of Cajun culture in Louisiana. Or maybe it just hastened change that already had begun and could not be avoided.

Whatever the cause, many Cajuns now despair as things that once defined their existence — French language, life in the marsh, a unifying sense of Catholicism, a close-knit feeling of community, simple domestic traditions like making a garden fade from their lives.

Many of them believe it was the oil boom that brought the change.

Stephen Broussard grew up on a cotton farm in this isolated Vermilion Parish hamlet among people who spoke mostly French and were wary of "les Américains."

When farming was slow, he and his family and friends fished and trolled, snared rabbits and hunted alligators. In the quiet evenings, they played their own music on accordions and fiddles and danced in their homes.

"It was a good living," recalled Broussard, 69, a short, sturdy man with close-cropped, steel-gray hair and eyes that perpetually squint from decades of open spaces and sun.

But after World War II, Broussard and his generation of Cajuns gave up the farms, fishing and French for the oil field.

"The boom started, and the young fellows went over," said Broussard, who went to work for Union Oil of California as a field foreman.

As the money flowed like oil itself, the Cajun motto — "laissez les bons temps rouler," meaning "let the good times roll," seemed to be literally coming true. Many stopped speaking French and put away the accordions to plug in the television.

Now, the oil boom has gone bust as the abundant supply from foreign countries has lowered demand. But the dying off, or at least the dilution, of the Cajun lifestyle hasn't stopped.

"It's a dying thing," said Louis Durand, 32, a St. Martinville insurance salesman, referring to a way of life that flourished for more than 230 years after the Cajuns' French ancestors settled in south Louisiana. "You have your food, recipes and things, but it's dying..."

A local college researcher says it was more than oil that brought the change.

"It's a complex thing," said Glenn Conrad, director of Louisiana's Center for Louisiana Studies.

Conrad noted there were other, earlier factors at work. He said they include the railroad and highway systems, which helped break the Cajuns' isolation; radio and movies, which were entirely in English; the timber industry, which was a harbinger of oil's influence; compulsory education, which forced the Cajuns to begin keeping their children in school in 1846, and the two World Wars, which sent thousands of young Cajuns out beyond south Louisiana for the first time.

Despite the changes, no one regrets the prosperity that oil brought to south Louisiana.

"You got a better opportunity for everything," said Ulysse Arceneaux, 88, a retired barber in Rayne.

But many already miss the traditions. Conrad predicted the Cajun patois, a hybrid of French, will be gone by the 21st century.

"Because we were so cooperative, our language is almost gone," lamented Jules Daigle, 85, one of 17 brothers and sisters and author of a ground-breaking Cajun dictionary.

Ironically, the Cajun lifestyle is disappearing at a time when Cajun food and music are becoming national fads as more people sample blackened redfish and hear the Grammy-winning tune, "My Tou-Too Tool."

But a dish and a song aren't enough to revive a dying culture. "I don't know what you can do," said Odella Pierce, 76, of Cut Off, echoing many older Cajuns' feeling that the slide won't stop.

A large number of Cajuns still do many things their ancestors did. They go fishing and hunting; they eat gumbo and jambalaya; they drink and dance; they go to church.

Many noted that other customs, such as the traditional boucherie, or communal pig slaughter, were bound to change eventually.

But "there's a big difference in the outlook of the people," Max Broussard said. "People's minds are more on profit than on prolonging things. "Even though they're in the modern world, other cultures have kept their shape," he said.

"The Spanish, for example, still take a siesta in the afternoon. But we've fallen right into step." What irks some Cajuns is a feeling that the change occurred too quickly, and that it was forced upon them by outsiders, Max Broussard said.

"I'm 52 years old, and I've been traveling by foot or boat to cars and airplanes," he said. "The Industrial Revolution didn't occur in south Louisiana. It was forced down our throats. We lost control. We were no longer in control here."