Early Acadians had much to learn

Researchers say move to Louisiana caused changes in everything 'Cajun'

By BRUCE SCHULTZ

The Acadians, who came to Louisiana in 1785, had to alter their lifestyles significantly, and the future for them and their culture is still in a state of change.

The early Acadians who came to this state were not familiar with the idea of making a profit from farming, and at first they were content with mere subsistence, said Dr. Glenn Conrad, director of the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette.

"This is why they were perfectly content to receive a small plot of land," he said. "Spain had provided parcels of land to the Acadian settlers.

Their clothing had to be radically altered to cope with the high humidity and heat. Food underwent a drastic change, so much that the bland diet prepared in Acadia is not found in Louisiana.

In fact, practically everything labeled as Cajun today is actually a combination of several influences, including Creole, Spanish, Indian and African, Conrad said.

The Acadians' strong religious fervor was one of the few things which remained intact, Conrad said. While Acadians were strong in their Catholic faith, they were somewhat wary of the church administration.

That wariness continues in a sense today, Conrad said, with many Cajuns now turning from Catholicism to fundamentalism.

"You're beginning to see Protestant ministers with the names Thibodeaux and Broussard," he said.

Agriculture remained the main way of making a living until the early 1900s when "the bulk of the population was offered that tremendous alternative to the farm — the oil industry," Conrad said.

This easier, more-profitable way of living, combined with compulsory education, two world wars and mass media, brought another radical change to the Cajun lifestyle, Conrad said. Cajuns were placed in the mainstream of modern society.

Now, the oil industry is affecting the Cajun population again, he said, and another type of exile is occurring. Until 1982, oil-field companies raked in bigger and bigger profits and employees enjoyed high-paying jobs. But in 1982, the booming oil industry went into a tailspin.

"For the first time since the Acadians arrived in Louisiana, they are now willing to leave to seek jobs elsewhere to maintain that good life that they once tasted," Conrad said.

"I think the long-range factor is that we are continuing to water down the Cajun culture," said Conrad. He believes the food and music will survive into the 21st century, although both will continue to evolve.

"Thirty years from now we might be looking at something we couldn't even recognize as Cajun," he said.

Barry Ancelet, who teaches French and Cajun folklore at USL, said Cajun culture will constantly adapt to new influences, and he believes the prognosis is good.

"It's too early for an autopsy on Cajun culture," he said. "People have predicted the demise of Cajun culture for years, yet we are still here."

A Cajun renaissance of sorts has occurred during the past few years, he said.

In 1974, Ancelet said, work began on a Cajun music festival. The result has been the highly successful Festivals Acadiens which is held one weekend in September in Lafayette.

"At that time, we would not have been able to find a young Cajun musician if we had looked all year," he said.

But that obviously has changed with the groups of young Cajun musicians including Beausoleil and Cush Cush, and Ancelet believes the music festival was responsible.

"Is Jolie Blonde sung in English still Cajun music?" he asks.

In the early 1900s, children were punished for speaking French in school, but that anti-French attitude began changing after World War II, he said. Later, with CODOFIL organizing in 1968, speaking French became respectable in Louisiana again, Ancelet said.

"Are we continuing to water down the culture as an island in this sea of America," Conrad said.

Isolation is the only way for a culture to be fully preserved, he said.

"There's no future for a society that isolates itself," he said, using the American Indian as an example.