Experts reveal clues to Acadian culture, Cajuns

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EUNICE — Clues to the Louisiana Acadian cultural identity can be discovered by examining Cajun music, literature and verbal folklore, several experts on the topic said.

Authors, musicians and historians traced the Cajuns' Louisiana experience by using different genres during presentations at LSU-Eunice last week.

The three-hour program at the LSU-EAcadian Center was funded by a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

Barry Ancelet, director for the University of Southwestern Louisiana Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore, traced the roots of Cajun identity since 1755 when Acadians began arriving in Louisiana.

Mary Alice Fontenot, author of the Clovis Crawfish series of children's books, stressed how her characters depict qualities inherent in the Cajun people.

Cajun fiddler Hadley Castille demonstrated techniques of playing the instrument which often reflect the emotions of early Acadian settlers.

The Cinq Sous music group sang traditional songs in French to reflect different aspects of the Cajuns' personality.

Ancelet said several Cajun personality traits have remained since their 18th-century arrival in Louisiana.

Frontier experiences and Louisiana's harsh environment caused Cajuns to become "fiercely independent," Ancelet said.

Verbal folktales often portray Cajuns involved in hunts and agriculture as clever people who outwit outsiders, Ancelet said.

"(Cajuns) developed an oral tradition that reflected their new place. We often hear stories of fabulous hunts, farming stories," said Ancelet.

Ancelet said Cajun jokes are full of characters who are feisty people living by their wits — inventive and suspicious of outsiders.

Cajun immigrants who survived in Acadiana were tough, strong people who learned adaptation skills from African-Americans and Native Americans, said Ancelet.

In Nova Scotia, the Acadian houses were constructed of stone.

Once in Louisiana, Cajuns built wooden houses above ground to keep materials from rotting and for ventilation, Ancelet said.

The Acadians knew nothing of eating raccoon, shrimp, crawfish, alligator and other traditional Cajun foods until they emigrated to Louisiana, said Ancelet.

Fontenot, who still works as a columnist for a Crowley newspaper, has written 12 books using Clovis Crawfish as the main character.

She said Clovis is a Cajun ambassador to children. The concern Clovis shows for the other animal characters in her books is a trait found in Cajun people, Fontenot said.

"One book, Andrew Armadillo invades the Clovis Crawfish bayou habitat. The armadillo symbolizes Texans who came to Louisiana to develop the oil industry.

Clovis and his bayou friends accept the armadillo although the armadillo is an invader, Fontenot said.

Castille, John Bukelew and Castille's son Blake Castille displayed the evolution of the Cajun fiddle.

Musicians in Canada's Maritime provinces, the ancestral Acadian home, use the fiddle much as Cajuns do, Castille said.

Castille used fingering and bowing techniques on the fiddle to display various emotional images of the Cajuns' struggles and loneliness.

Cajun waltzes have a classical texture, similar to music found in the Middle Ages, Castille said, adding that Acadians' musical roots probably were heavily influenced by Celtic people.

Castille said he remembers when his plumbing company did work at Fontenot's house.

"(Fontenot) gave me a couple of the Clovis Crawfish books," Castille said.