By MILES HAWTHORNE

Adviser City Editor

Folklorist Alan Lomax warned Friday that the Cajun culture is being threatened by attempts to preserve it.

Lomax, professor of anthropology at Columbia University and the former director of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, was the feature speaker at the 25th annual meeting of the Louisiana Folklore Society. His lecture was delivered at USL's Griffin Hall.

Fond Memories

Prefacing his remarks with recollections of his earliest days as a “field recordist” in Southwest Louisiana in the late 1940s, Lomax recounted how he and his father, the noted folklorist John Lomax, traveled to Louisiana to record the music of the francophone Cajuns. The younger Lomax, 17 years old at the time, had his “first glass of wine, my first shrimp creole, my first full-blown love affair and made my first independent field recordings” during his stay in the area.

The elder Lomax, who was working on his autobiography, left his son free to travel the backroads and to seek out the tunes which many hoped would form a foundation for American classical music, hoping to raise America to the level of European culture.

Amerindian Influence

Recording on aluminum discs, Lomax found Cajuns singing cowboy songs and medieval French ballads in side street homes and backwoods cabins. The variety of musical expression included assimilation of African rhythms, American Indian vocal peculiarities and the dialect of the Cajun French. Lomax said the identity of the Cajun culture owes a great deal to early exposure to and contact with American Indians (“Amerindians”) during the days of settlement. He later said that the Amerindians may have become the single most important influence on American culture in all its forms.

Especially memorable for Lomax were the songs of Elida Hoffpaur and her family, which were prominent among the recordings Lomax used Friday night during the lecture.

He also at that time made the acquaintance of Irene Whitfield, still a prominent folklorist in Louisiana.

Various Theories

Lomax expounded several theories concerning folk music, including a system he calls cantametrics, the study of performing styles in various cultures.

Recounting his experiences in the folk revival of the 1950s, Lomax said the American folk song suffered at the hands of modern youths who inflicted arrangements on traditional tunes, producing “phony folklore.” He argued that the evolution of culture transcends attempts at standardization, using as a prime example “this Franco-African music we call jazz.”

CODOFIL Critique

Taking a critical approach to the Coun-

cil for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) and its chairman Jimmy Domengeaux, Lomax said it is a “very dangerous thing” to import foreign teachers to “preserve” the Cajun culture, citing “nice, young Belgians who look down on Cajun culture.”

When a people lose their language, Lomax said, their culture begins to disintegrate. He used as an example the Yoruba tribe men who were transplanted from what is now Nigeria to Brazil. They managed to maintain their language, and in the process preserved their tribal customs and songs.

A step removed from the Yoruba are the blacks of Haiti who lost their language and then lost their tribal tunes. He commended Domengeaux for seeing that music is an important preserver of language.

The next step is seen in the North American blacks who have lost their African language and songs, retaining only traces of the ancient culture, Lomax said.

Citing another example of attempts to preserve culture, Lomax equated the experience of the Gaels of the Hebrides off the coast of Scotland with that of the Cajuns of Louisiana. Great admirers of literature and culture, the Gaels have preserved songs from the “misty dawn” of European culture. Yet attempts to institutionalize that culture has resulted in a standardization which makes the songs more “proper” in the eyes of European critics, but deprecates the ancient qualities of the music, Lomax said.

The Importance Of Culture

Culture, he said, has become more important than nations to the human community. Lomax argued that nations are generally viewed as hostile entities bent on self-preservation or expansion, while culture exists and grows in the private homes and lives of the people.

His criticism of CODOFIL and Domengeaux was most pointed in this context. He asserted that efforts at teaching European French to Cajun children will result in a dilution of the Cajun culture. "Domengeaux has tried to put Louisiana in the pocket of French critics and culture," Lomax said.

Referring to such efforts as “silly centralization,” Lomax said this approach has its roots in the court of Louis XIV who dreamed of “little France on the Gulf of Mexico,” adding that “the dream is gone.”

Lomax said that in the face of “commercial homogenization” which is convenient for mercantile ventures, the next social battle will be for "cultural equity" which renounces attempts to standardize cultures.

"France," he said in half-jest, "is responsible for the whole thing (standardization)."

"We have to defeat Louis XIV," Lomax said, adding with a smile, "You ought not to bow down to these petty tyrants who work for Louis XIV."