French Luncheon Becomes 'Domengueaux' Tribute

By KENNETH B. DALECKI
Advertiser Washington Bureau
WASHINGTON — It started out as a luncheon to promote bilingualism in the U.S. but quickly became a "salute to James Domengueaux" as the former Congressman from Louisiana returned to Capitol Hill Wednesday.

The spry chairman of CODOFIL pleaded for federal support of bilingual education and in return was lauded by educators and politicians for the work he has done to preserve the French language in Cajun country.

"Save Culture"

Domengueaux, who first came to Washington 32 years ago as a freshman congressman, told Louisiana and New England legislators that "if you save the (French) language you save the culture."

He said money is being wasted teaching students a second language which they quickly forget after school. What is needed is practical working knowledge of the language, he said.

"It was essential to have one national language," Domengueaux said. "That has now served its purpose."

He said it is time to overcome America's "linguistic inferiority" because the U.S. is "at a handicap in meeting challenges of a competitive world."

Domengueaux spoke in a crowded dining room in the Rayburn House Office Building where the walls were plastered with such CODOFIL signs as "Vive La Difference La Louisiane Est Bilingue."

But not all of Louisiana is bilingual, as Rep. F. Edward Hebert, of New Orleans, was quick to point out with one of his humorous anecdotes.

"When I first came to Washington I insisted on being called Hebert (with the French pronunciation, "A-Bear"). but I don't speak a damn word of the language," he confessed.

Cites Experience

Domengueaux later cited Hebert's personal experiences as an example of a "tragic mistake" and "misfortune" common to the children of French-speaking parents.

"Eddie's mother spoke a beautiful French," Domengueaux said, "but he can't speak a word of it."

Domengueaux recalled that when he was in school he was punished for speaking French. He said only a few weeks ago a waiter in a Lafayette restaurant refused to speak French to a French-speaking customer, even though he spoke French more fluently than English.

"That's the kind of inferiority complex we're trying to overcome," he said.

Among those praising Domengueaux for founding CODOFIL were Rep. John Breaux, general chairman of the luncheon; Dr. Cecil Taylor, Chancellor of Louisiana State University, and Dr. Marron Ford, head of the University of New Hampshire's language school. Others present included Sen. Ted Kennedy.

Taylor said Domengueaux showed "remarkable insight, dedication and vigor" in promoting CODOFIL's basic message — that French is no more a "foreign language" in the U.S. than English.

Dr. Ford insisted on calling Domengueaux "Doctor" because of his honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters from the College of Notre Dame in New Hampshire.

Deserves Many

"He told me not to call him 'Doctor' because the people in Cajun country would never believe it," Ford said. "But he deserves many doctorates from the State of Louisiana."

Louis Israel Martel, head of a newly established New England Cultural Exchange Commission, also praised Domengueaux for his promotion of second languages.

There was much good-natured teasing between Hebert and Domengueaux who were both elected to Congress in 1940 and who served together for eight years.

New Way Around

Hebert said Domengueaux always knew his way around Washington "and still has an outstanding IOU from a poker game with Harry Truman."

He said the Lafayette attorney has accomplished more with CODOFIL than he ever did while in Congress: "You can call me 'Doctor.'"

Domengueaux also took advantage of Hebert's position as chairman of the powerful House Armed Service Committee by calling on Hebert to divert a few of the billions of dollars spent on weapons to bilingual education.

That comment brought a hearty round of applause, especially from Rep. Robert Drinan, D-Mass., a Jesuit priest and antiwar spokesman whose congressional district includes many French-speaking constituents.

Domengueaux was pleased with the turnout of New England congressmen at the luncheon. "The support of New England will give us new life," he said.