French Movement Gets Attention

Editor's Note — The French movement in Louisiana is attracting national attention these days.


By JOHN P. CORR

Inquirer Education Writer

LAFAYETTE, La., June 28.

A social phenomenon is sweeping the hush bayou country of southwest Louisiana. A million and a half "Cajuns" are learning not to be ashamed.

These generous, intelligent and moral people are emerging from generations of self-hatred, awakening to a sense of their heritage and rediscovering their folklore.

Great Hardship

The Louisiana Acadians — the same from which the slang phrase "Cajun" evolved — were driven from their land in 1815, the Louisiana Purchase.

They were dumped into the West Indies and along the East Coast anywhere along the East Coast, including Philadelphia, where 450 were forced to remain on shipboard for three months.

Many died of exposure and disease and, according to the sentimental Acadians, grief.

The ships dumped the exiles anywhere along the East Coast where they would be accepted. Most communities resisted the landing of the refugees, excluding Philadelphia, where 450 were forced to remain on shipboard for three months in winter while their fate was decided.

Of these, 237 died.

Jimmie Domengeaux, 60, a man Group Scattered by John P. Corr, of enormous force and great prestige in this country.

Only about 1,000 made their way to Louisiana after much hardship. Evangeline, in search of her betrothed, found him at the moment of his death.

Some particularly older people yearning to die at home, made their way back to Canada. Others were sent to France. At some landing sites, the Acadians were placed in bondage and their families dispersed.

The pilgrimage to Louisiana, where the Acadians knew there was of this is the work of Jimmie Domengeaux, 60, a man Group Scattered by John P. Corr, of enormous force and great prestige in this country.

A U.S. representative for eight years, Domengeaux was a gadzillioner to break Huey Long's political stranglehold on the state.

Can't Read It

Ironically, the man who leads the effort to save the French language in Louisiana cannot read or write French. He speaks it natively and with refreshing vigor.

"They've almost killed the French language here," he said. "They have suppressed it in the schools."

Of this is the work of Jimmie Domengeaux, 60, a man Group Scattered by John P. Corr, of enormous force and great prestige in this country.

A U.S. representative for eight years, Domengeaux was a gadzillioner to break Huey Long's political stranglehold on the state.

Editor's Note — The French movement in Louisiana is attracting national attention these days.

Melting Pot

They were told that America was the great melting pot and they were to forge into a single great society. Now, like many other minorities, they are discarding the melting pot notion and are asserting their identity.

Acadian, as a land and as a people, is a vast and beautiful region, a land of crayfish and crocodiles, Spanish moss, sugar cane and pecan trees. Massive oak trees brood over the land, trees of great majesty and dark power.

French Language

The region is dotted with hundreds of small farm communities and “oil towns” in which French is the language of the family and the only language spoken by many.

Yet, many Acadians are ashamed to admit that they speak French and often lie to strangers, denying knowledge of the language. Arceneaux, interviewed in the small towns and the countryside around this city “admitted” to speaking French, but hastened to add:

“It’s not real French, you know. It’s just Creole.”

Their embarrassment is abundantly evident.

“We’re just ol’ boogalees,” they say, “Just ol’ Cajuns.”

Whenever he hears his people speak French, Domeneaux is furious. Once, in a hotel lobby in Baton Rouge and in the presence of the governor of Louisiana, he threatened to thrash a man for using such terms to describe AcadianFrench.

Domeneaux is chairman of the Council for Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) and the flamboyant central figure in the movement.

The movement has existed only two years but, already the Louisiana Legislature has decreed that French will be taught in all public schools and the institutions must include French in the curriculum.

The Legislature has agreed to sponsor a French educational television station and all legal print and public notice are now published in French as well as English.

Billboards Sprung Up

Billboards are springing up all over the state saying: Viva la Difference!

We’re going to make this state bilingual.

Domeneaux, a tough and determined man, seldom speaks about preserving the Acadian culture or history.

“Save the language, you save the culture,” he says.

Crawfish pie and quaint bayou folkways notwithstanding, he said, the movement is concentrated on preserving the language.

The same for history.

“We’ve been brooding over Evangeline long enough,” he said.

The story of Evangeline pervades Acadian folklore and is an important clue to the personality of the people. It is a tender tragedy told to all Acadian children, and it was the basis of the epic poem by Longfellow.

The ancestors of the Acadians came from Normandy in France to settle in southeast Canada probably as early as the 13th century.

Farmers and fishermen, they remained relatively isolated for centuries until the tragic exile of 1755.

Greek Inspiration

Their Canadian home was originally named Arcadia by its discoverer, the Italian explorer Verrazano, “because of the beauty of the trees.” Verrazano probably got the name from a region in Italy called Sannaza, in whose “Arcadia” is described as a region of ancient Greece and its central grove of trees. The grove was said to be the home of Tranquility, Innocence and Happiness. Many Acadians here and in the plantations. The use of French gradually faded and French became the language of the Creole, which is the general term used to describe the Acadian, Spanish and African people of Louisiana and their language.

Status Declined

The suppression of French began after the Civil War.

The French-speaking people of the state thereafter were almost universally poor and their language, habits and culture became equated with “lower class behavior.”

Added to this was the great “melting pot” theory that emerged in America in the last century. It is said that 70 percent of the French became English.

One nation, one people, one language.

Many Americans of diverse background were forging themselves into one great culturally cohesive people. In Louisiana, this was reflected in an attempt by everybody to speak English.

The theory was expressed as “one nation, one people, one language.”

Force Applied

Many Acadians here and in the plantations were beaten or otherwise punished in school for speaking French. The same is true of their parents and grandparents, they said.

The movement has emerged in many ways that their version of the French language was shameful and demeaning.

They could “better themselves” and help their children by refraining from use of “that patois language.”

Gov. John J. McKeithen has given his general indorsement to the entire CODOFIL project and specifically the school laws, which were passed unanimously by the Legislature.

Help From Above

“French instruction can and must start in the first grade,” he said. “We must move aggressively now to accomplish this.”

I am 100 per cent in favor of steps to preserve Louisiana’s French heritage and language. I welcome any legislative measures designed to aid in this preservation.”

He also has recognized the new Acadian Flag, designed by the Acadian scholar Dr. Thomas J. Arceneaux of Louisiana State University.

Dr. Arceneaux agrees that the
Repeatedly, those concerned with the rebirth of ethnic pride among Acadians have, in interviews here, compared “the movement” to what they call the “black is beautiful” or “black pride” phenomenon among young Negro Americans in the North and West.

And there is considerable evidence that the same sort of thing is beginning to happen among many American Indian groups and among Mexican Americans of the Southwest.

Benefits Cited

Domengeaux regards all of this as good for America. The American people, he believes, are diverse and this is one of the nation’s great strengths.

This diversity, he said, gives the American people a rare advantage in dealing with other peoples and in understanding the aspirations of other cultures.

“But mainly, it is good for a man to know and love his culture and his heritage,” Domengeaux said. “It gives a man pride, and I tell you that a proud man is a good man — a good American.”