French President Praises State's Efforts at Preserving Language

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LAFAYETTE — The French renaissance movement of south Louisiana reached its pinnacle Friday when the President of France paid tribute to the revival.

Valery Giscard d'Estaing stopped in Lafayette to pay homage to the job that has been done by the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) in rekindling interest in the French language, customs, history and heritage.

"I was eager to come to Lafayette," d'Estaing told the crowd of 7,000 at the University of Southwestern Louisiana's Blackham Coliseum. The president said "Louisiana has a special place in the hearts and memories of the French people. To them, you are the image of France, our admiration and gratitude," he told Gov. Edwards and the others.

"In congratulating you on the work you have undertaken and in giving you her willing assistance, France has no sense of danger in yielding to an anachronistic inclination; on the contrary, she is convinced that she is responding to one of the demands of our times," Giscard d'Estaing said.

The president extolled the virtues to be found in diversity of languages and cultures, as is present in Acadiana. "In a world where technology tends to make everything the same, the diversity of languages and cultures, and the individuality they reflect, are a wellspring of riches that people are appreciating more and more as this century draws to a close," he said.

Concluding his 20-minute address the president said, "I have come to bring you the friendship of those French people from whom you are descended and of which you were a part. Rest assured that France is a loyal country that will always be happy to welcome you, to share memories and talk about old times the way brothers do."

Lafayette Mayor Kenneth Bowen made Giscard d'Estaing and his wife Anne-Aymone, "Honorary Cajuns."

Gov. Edwards introduced the president to the crowd and acknowledged the fact that Giscard d'Estaing was now a Cajun. "For the first time in four years, I am not the No. 1 Cajun in Louisiana," the governor said.

Edwards noted that in the past, France had always sent its great leaders to America. He mentioned the Marquis de Lafayette, for whom the City of Lafayette is named, and Jean Lafitte.

Both Lafayette and Lafitte played significant roles in some of America's great victories against the English, Edwards said.

"It is less than unusual in my opinion, that here in 1976, France would send again its No. 1 citizen," Edwards said.

He added, "It is especially appropriate that the president and his wife would come to Lafayette, named after the marquis who was so instrumental in helping us to become a free and independent nation."

Giscard d'Estaing opened the address by noting the upcoming elections in Lafayette for mayor said that since he and wife are now Cajuns, they would like to vote.

The only speech he made during his six day journey in his native tongue was in Lafayette.

Prior to the president's talk, Domengeaux, called the father of the French Renaissance and CODOFIL's chairman, gave a speech about the success of the revitalization of the French language in Louisiana.

Sen. Edgar G. Mouton Jr., of Lafayette called the assembly together and state Supreme Court Justice Frank Summers of Abbeville served as master of ceremonies.

State Rep. Allen Bares of Lafayette presented the chief executive with a French copy of a concurrent resolution adopted by the state legislature in recognition of his visit to Lafayette and New Orleans.

Domengeaux presented Giscard d'Estaing with an early map of Louisiana, one that the CODOFIL chief purchased in France recently, and Mayor Bowen gave the French leader a special gold medal recently purchased by the citizens of Lafayette. The medal had an outline of the United States, the area of the original Louisiana Purchase from France, and Louisiana with a diamond representing Acadiana. There are 12 stars on the medallion illustrating the 12 states of the Louisiana Purchase.

Mrs. Ruth Bowen, wife of the mayor, presented Mrs. Giscard d'Estaing a painting by George Rodrigue. The painting depicted a Cajun coffee break. Mrs. Bowen also gave the first lady of France a shadow box illustrating the Acadiana country, a souvenir of Longfellow's poem "Evangeline" and a copy of Judge Felix Voorhies' "Acadiana Reminiscence."