Group calls attention to Creole influence

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They say it's not Creole unless it's spicy hot, or has a beat you just can't ignore.

Creole — a culture bound loosely by its French, Spanish, Portuguese and Black ancestry — eludes a clearer definition. It's influence however, is distinct to those who know its history.

"The food we now call gumbo was actually started by Creoles," says John Broussard. "Even crawfish etouffee has origins with Creole cooks. A lot of the music in this area, too, has roots in Creole."

Broussard is part of a group designed to direct public attention to the Creole contributions to Acadian culture. They group is called CREOLE (Cultural, Resourceful, Educational Opportunities for multi-Linguistic Enrichment).

Most members know several languages including French, Spanish and Creole. They've learned of their ancestry from relatives and from worldwide travels to areas populated by Creoles. (The Creole language is spoken in parts of Haiti, the West Indies, Madagascar and Africa.)

With the influence of spicy Creole dishes and Zydeco music, emerging a new enthusiasm for all things Creole, says Herbert Wiltz, CREOLE vice president. "I sense that there's a new excitement, an aura of something new and attractive about it," he says.

Wiltz — like most members of CREOLE — has been aware of his cultural roots all his life. Fans of his Sunday morning show on KRVS know him as "Monsieur Zydeco." He presently serves as vice principal of Holy Rosary Institute, where he once taught Spanish and French.

Wiltz isn't the only foreign language educator in the group. President W. Paul Cluse, for instance, is former director of bilingual education in St. Landry Parish. He now teaches Spanish at Comeaux High School.

Mary Alice Drake, the group's corresponding secretary, is an elementary school French teacher. She became one of CREOLE during Festival Internationale de Louisiane. "To see so many blacks from different countries speaking French was really exciting," she says.

Broussard and his wife

Wiltz, vice president; John. A Broussard, treasurer; and Geneva Phillips, chaplain. Not pictured is Marlene Broussard.

Founding members of CREOLE include (l-r) Claire Hernandez, financial secretary; W. Paul Cluse, president; Mary Alice Drake, corresponding secretary; Herbert J.

Kids had host families, but suddenly there was a change of attitude and this young man's host family had some excuse for not wanting to bring him into their home."

Festival organizers called Broussard and he was able to find a host home for the youth.

But the incident crystallized a conviction that had been forming in his mind: "We're a good and a proud people...We've got to do something to promote our own culture."

Other founding members are Claire Hernandez, coordinator of the Lafayette Senior Center, and Geneva Phillips, an area French teacher.

The member's obvious enthusiasm toward the Creole culture doesn't mean they are anti-Cajun.

"It's not like we want to establish a dichotomy of cultures," Cluse says, "one of the things we want to work for is harmony is all local concerns. We're not out to antagonize anybody."

After one year spent organizing, CREOLE members say they're ready to tackle a few goals.

They recently completed a "Guide to Dancing and Eating a la Creole." In it are 15 local clubs and restaurants which offer Creole cuisine and entertainment.

They also have in mind a Creole festival and cultural presentations in public schools.

Hopefully, says Broussard, their efforts will revive an interest in Creole culture. "Some of the things we've long since forgotten need to be brought back," he says.