In any language, Cajuns will survive

Editor's note: This column by series writer Ron Thibodeaux ran on the Opinions page on July 30, 2001.

I was in a nondescript, cinder-block cafe on Highway 90 in Scott, early on a Friday afternoon, utterly savoring my lunch. The shrimp in my po'boy were huge and fried to absolute perfection. The bread was to die for, melt-in-your-mouth good. And the conversation ... ah, the conversation.

Sitting alone in a modest plywood booth, I couldn't help but eavesdrop on the chatter at the table next to me. The three men there were the only other diners in the entire restaurant — the youngest looked to be in his late 20s, the other two in their 50s — and they were rehearsing the previous night’s meeting of Scott’s Board of Aldermen.

I couldn’t have been less interested in the finer points of plumbing requirements for zoning variances for mobile homes in this little town west of Lafayette. That didn’t matter. What intrigued me was that their boisterous, animated dialogue was in Cajun French.

Truth be told, I couldn’t bluff my way through three sentences in my ancestors’ native tongue, and I’m only a little better at deciphering the Cajun French spoken by others. But as I endeavored to pick out random words with which to follow the conversation, I reveled in the beautiful sound of the language.

Even when I struggle to make sense of it, I’m drawn to it on a personal level, perhaps because it was the first language of my father, his many brothers and sisters and the Thibodeauxes that came before them in the Acadian homeland of south Louisiana.

As I criss-crossed the prairies and swamps and bayous of Acadiana this spring, interviewing residents, attending events and doing research for the stories that would lead to “Culture at a Crossroads,” The Times-Picayune’s recent series on the Cajun people, I made a point of looking and listening for French speakers, because for so many people, the question of whether the Cajun culture will survive is tied to the survival of the French language in the state.

It was a challenge in many places to find young people speaking French. Indeed, a 1990 survey by the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana and what is now the University of Louisiana-Lafayette indicated fewer than 8 percent of French speakers in Louisiana under the age of 19 were fluent in the language.

Nonetheless, there is much to suggest that the Cajun culture remains alive and well here in the 21st century. After all, over 2½ centuries Cajuns have been nothing if not determined, resilient and adaptable.

French-speaking Catholics who were deported from their homeland after refusing to swear allegiance to the British crown and the Church of England, Acadians began arriving in Louisiana in the 1760s. Aided by land grants from Louisiana’s Spanish governor, the Acadians thrived as simple farmers, fishers and trappers. Accepted by peaceful Native Americans, the Acadians were joined in their new home by Spanish, Irish, German and English settlers, as well as French expatriates and slaves and free people of color from Africa and the Caribbean.

As members of those diverse groups mingled and intermarried, most of those other cultures were assimilated. Before long, families throughout southern Louisiana with names like Adams, Fernandes and Schexnayder were speaking French and observing the customs of their neighbors named Broussard, Hobert and Robichaux.

“It’s amazing how all these Irishmen and the Spanish and all these people came to this melting pot and they all turned out Cajun,” said the Rev. Albert Nunez, a French-speaking priest from Erath.

Meanwhile, the Acadiana’s lifestyle was honed by the influences of the other nationalities: gumbo from the Africans, music of the Irish and Cajun became cool.

Today, some efforts to preserve and celebrate traditional aspects of the Cajun culture are making headway across Acadiana. Even if some traditions — such as that lilting Cajun French language — do flicker out amid the cultural changes that continue to arise from modern American society, don’t be surprised if new ones are fashioned to take their place — and in the end, they’ll still be Cajun.