Locals make pilgrimage to ‘old Acadie’

Acadiana residents search for their roots, language in Nova Scotia

CHURCH POINT, Nova Scotia — It’s a feeling of déjà vu that spans centuries, generations and continents.

The land Acadians called home for 150 years, until their expulsion beginning in 1755, is being rediscovered by their Louisiana ancestors.

Acadiana residents are heading in droves back to the place where their heritage was defined and so tragically wounded in “the Great Upheaval” — when the British sought to obliterate all that was French and Catholic in the region.

The focal point of this return is Pointe-de-l’Eglise (Church Point) and the University of Ste. Anne — the intellectual and cultural center of Nova Scotia’s small remaining Acadian community.

About 100 Acadiana residents have already completed or will attend the university’s French immersion program this spring and summer.

The Louisiana students are of all ages and come from parishes throughout Acadiana, but they all came for the same reason — to explore their heritage and find out who they are.

“I feel a deep connection with my Acadian roots,” said Vivian Yates Andrepont, a resident of Kentucky and a native of Cow Island, who attended the spring immersion program. “There was a thread in my life calling me back here.”

Most of the Acadiana residents who attended the spring program had not met one another before they arrived at Church Point, but they all spoke of a similar feeling and purpose.

“I feel very much at home here, and I don’t know why,” said Louis Michot, 19, of Lafayette, who attended the spring immersion program. “I see and I hear our ancestry. I know this is where we came from.”

Sarah Mouton, 21, of Breaux Bridge, also attended this spring’s program. Separately, she spoke of the same purpose.

“These are the roots of the people in our area,” she said. “This is our culture and our heritage.”

Jean-Douglas Comeau, director of the University of St. Anne’s immersion program, said he too feels the uncanny sensation of déjà vu when speaking with his hundreds of Louisiana students.

“It’s interesting — when you talk to people from Louisiana you get the same answers,” he said. “What is fascinating to me is that we are separated by time, different political constitutions, different weather conditions, different...”
Continued from Page 1A

Pilgrimage

music and different food. All of those things should make us so different. But when we all get together, that's not important."

Pointe-de-l'Église is situated on the southwestern coast of Nova Scotia, along the Bay of Ste. Marie. The University of Ste. Anne overlooks the ocean on one side, and on the other is surveyed by the towering Church of Ste. Marie, the tallest wooden structure in North America.

During their diaspora of the 18th century, most of the Acadian inhabitants of Nova Scotia were forced out — scattered among the 13 American colonies, sent all the way to France or to prisons in England — but some managed to return. The descendants of those Acadians now live primarily in two disconnected portions of Nova Scotia as well as New Brunswick.

In southwest Nova Scotia, the various small Acadian settlements, including Church Point, are governed by the municipality of Clare, which is about the size of Lafayette Parish and has a population of about 10,000.

The Acadians of Nova Scotia are much smaller in number than their Cajun cousins in Louisiana, but they have maintained the French language. Residents of the region slip in and out of English and French with amazing ease. Shopkeepers often hold two conversations with patrons — one English and one French — at the same time.

"It's very impressive that the people here don't want to lose French," Mouton said.

French Acadians speak a French dialect that surprisingly bears little resemblance to Cajun French. At the university, however, standard French is the common language.

Immersion students are required to speak French for all purposes throughout the duration of the program. Many Louisiana students who met each other in Church Point never spoke English together until the university's final soirée anglaise (English party).

"That's the only way we know one another," Mouton said. "When we go home, I want to expand it. You work so hard for five weeks here; you have all that knowledge. I don't want to lose it. I am fortunate because my grandparents speak French."

Michot, the son of Tommy Michot, one of the famed Michot brothers, has a direct application for the language. "My dad speaks French to all of his brothers. French is something I always wanted to learn, especially with my dad and my uncles talking behind my back," he said, smiling.

Michot, like his father and uncles, is also a musician and singer. For one of his class presentations, Michot discussed Cajun culture and played Cajun songs on his fiddle.

"I love Cajun music, so I have to know how to sing it," Michot said. "With the music I can feel my roots and my ancestry."

Michot is also a man of the world with a deep appreciation for other cultures, languages and musical forms. (He gave another class presentation on the legendary Jamaican musician, the late Bob Marley.)

"Music-wise and living-wise, I look at other forms and cultures and take pieces of them that I like," he said. "Growing up with Cajun music just seemed like a regular thing. I looked at other cultures, and thought I wanted to be in one. And then one day I realized I was in the middle of one. My dad and my uncles passed that culture on to me, and I am happy to receive it."

For Andrepont, coming to Pointe-de-l'Église is a long-awaited cultural awakening. She comes from a generation that can see glimpses of the French culture that once flourished in Louisiana.

Andrepont recalled how in the sixth grade she took part in a French play and later went on a tour led by the legendary Dudley J. "Cousin Dud" LeBlanc of state political and Hadacol fame.

"I performed a little song for the group, and they asked me to be on the radio," she said.

But during that same era and earlier, Cajuns were undergoing another "ethnic cleansing" — when the culture was cast as something to be ashamed of and when children were punished for speaking French at school.

"French was the language of my grandparents, but French was not well thought of so they spoke English to me," Andrepont said. "I learned some French from a great-aunt."

For Andrepont, coming to "old Acadie" fulfills an even deeper spiritual purpose.

"The people of South Louisiana had a deep emotional wound caused by the deportation that has never been healed," she said. "In our day what is happening is a full acknowledgment of what happened — and then let it go."

For director Comeau, getting to know his cousins in the South is similarly deep and personally felt.

"There is a thirst of Acadians in the North and Acadians in the South to be together," he said. "For people coming from Louisiana 2,000 miles away, the first minute they set foot here they are family. It's beyond a physical thing. It's almost — or maybe it is spiritual."

When people from Louisiana experience déjà vu in Nova Scotia, perhaps it is that spiritual connection.

"It's the same feeling as having found a long-lost brother. You had no idea where he was. You see the resemblance; you see the same people and feel the same feeling," Comeau said.

Comeau said he had the same experience when he first discovered Louisiana and found his distant Acadian relatives.

"Since I discovered Louisiana, for me, Louisiana is just another extension of Nova Scotia. It is a part of my Acadie. There was a piece missing from my Acadie, and I found it."