Lost generation of French speakers intent on saving the language

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Inspecting a nature scene drawn by a group of students, the teacher asked one lad to count how his pelican had too many legs. "Oh, one, three, four, quater, uh, uh," he answered, and he and his young classmates burst into giggles.

This is French immersion. It is an intensive program of teaching the language to small groups of students in a handful of Louisiana public schools by using French across almost their entire curriculum — math, sci-

ence studies, science, even physical

education — in French.

It also is one of the last hopes for French language in the state.

A tangible tie to the past

So many who hold the Cajun culture dear there is no more critical issue than reviving their version of French in south Louisiana and maintaining it for future generations, because it represents such a tangible tie not only to family members past but also to the overall heritage of this hearty people.

It's a tall order for so much was done over the course of the 20th century to eradicate the Cajuns' native tongue from the Louisiana cultural land-
scape — some of it solely, some of it forcibly. The result was a net loss of almost two generations of Cajuns who, for the most part, ashamed French while other aspects of their traditional lifestyle also were being subjugated by the re-

lentless push of modern Ameri-
nian culture.

The U.N. Educational, Sci-
hetical and Cultural Organization says a language needs at least 200,000 speakers to ebrace cun-

ually from generation to gen-

eration. The number of Louisiana-

ians who spoke French at home dropped by more than half from 1970 to 1980, from 372,244 to 263,678, according to the U.S.

census, which does not distin-

guish between Cajun French and other forms of the language.

The tally held steady at 263,678 in the 1990 census, but a survey conducted that year by the Council for the Devel-

opment of French in Louisiana, also known as CODEL, and what is now the University of Louisiana-

Lafayette found similar indica-

tions for the future: While 70 percent of French speakers older than 40 were fluent in the language, only 27 percent of those younger than 40 were fluent. More worrisome yet:

Of French speakers younger than 10, only 10 percent were fluent.

Desperate measures

Language information from the 2000 census won't be re-

leased for another year or two. Optimists vary widely as to whether they'll show any signif-

icant change over the past decade, but the folks at CODEL ex-

pect an upswing.

They think the previous ten-

tive efforts were too belated because other people were reluctant to admit speaking French, because of past humiliation for doing so in public and because many resi-

dents did not believe the Cajun

or Creole variety qualified them as French-speaking.

Those days, promoting pride and Barrymo in the language is the mission of teachers at Prairie Elementary and similar schools across south Louisiana. Their French immersion program is one of many current efforts to keep alive the language and, by extension, the Cajun way of life. But if Louisiana's fading culture of French speak-

ers isn't already past the point of no return, it could be bitters-

weet.

"At 10 percent, we're saying we're willing to lose a huge part of who we are," said Cajun re-

cent and actor Stephen "Bubba" Baize. "I pray to God that that doesn't happen. I know that we've lost a lot already."

An oral tradition

Cajun, French developed in Louisiana from the language spoken by Acadian and French settlers who arrived in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although most words and sentences struc-

tures in Cajun French can be understood by people fluent in other forms of the language, the

Cajun strain is distinguished by regional variations that evolved during the past three centuries. It has been primarily an oral tradition, rather than a written language. From the time of the first Aradians' arrival in the 1700s until well into the 1930s, the French speakers sewer across the south Louisiana countryside were predominantly an illiterate pop-

ulation of people who knew little of the land.

But the language began to fade away in the 1930s, at the hand of public education. Louisiana's Compulsory Edu-

cation Act of 1917 mandated that students attend school until age 15. By 1932, the state Constitution mandated that education be in English.

"The act that for many years of punishment and humilia-

tion of Cajun students by teach-

ers who wouldn't let them speak French at school and by English-

speaking classmates who would shun them for their "ignoram-

ous" ways. This led to a growing ac-

ceptance by Cajuns of "American-

ization" at the expense of the language, and, indirectly, at the expense of Cajun customs."

The experience left the Cajun people with a collective neg-

ative self-image. Many parents in the 1930s and 1940s refused to teach their children French, hoping these children would not be made to suffer the indignities feared on their parents.

When it was the role

Retired Judge Allen Baldwin of Lafayette is well-

known among Aradians, re-

spected not only as a language

expert but also as one of the first prominent advocates for the Ca-

jun culture, going back to the 1950s. He was born in New Re-

dano, but his family moved to Lafayette when he was 5, after his father was diagnosed with cancer.

He still remembers the time when French was the rule, not the exception.

"When we moved here I couldn't speak a word of French," said Baldwin. "I learned French quickly, because everything within miles around was all in French at that time."

That was an immediate immor-

tional course.

"We kept almost all intact until the time of the Second World War. After that, the Glac-

eans froze, television came about, things changed."

Torn changed much in Lafayette than in most south Louisiana communities. It be-

came a thriving city of substi-

ute and shopping malls, an cot-

ege town, a Vernon center, a place flooded by oil patch people from Texas and Oklahoma. Today the French street signs don't mean a lot to teach, as we are the intelligible tongue because of the

for the Cajuns, the heart of Cajun country. Lafayette is no longer the place to go looking for French-speaking Cajuns. These are easier to find these days in the rural areas, some of the smaller fishing and farming communities not as affected by 20th century progress.

"We're still basically bilingual, but it's changing around," said

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