Louisianians wet their tongues with French language at university

Editor’s Note: This is the second of a two-part series on Acadian residents who are traveling to Nova Scotia in search of their Acadian heritage and language.

Bruce Murray
Staff Writer

This is a view of the campus of the University of Ste. Anne from near the top of the 185-foot spire of St. Mary’s Church — the tallest wooden structure in North America.

Sarah Mouton, 21, of Breaux Bridge, who attended the spring immersion program. “That is a start to preserve and bring back the language.”

Students at the University of St. Anne come from every province in Canada and Louisiana. Upon entering the university, all students are required to sign a contract stating they will speak only French for the duration of the program. The rule extends to off-campus trips.

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doing business in the community and shopping.

"They do a good job at keeping it in French," Mouton said. "I believe in their idea of French tout le temps (all the time)."

The university is indeed strict about the rule. Students caught speaking English are given a citation. Three citations warrant expulsion.

However, virtually all of the students, including the Anglo-Canadians, willingly uphold the contract. An occasional student is expelled.

Acadians just say "No" to British

But for the Louisianians, the contract is an unnecessary formality. Their "contract" might be said to go back 243 years when the Acadians refused to swear an oath to the British crown and paid the grim consequences of expulsion from their homeland.

Vivian Yates Andrepont, a Vermilion Parish native who attended the spring immersion program, said she knew she would take part as soon as she heard about it.

"Something inside me knew. There was a spark inside me. It was something I had to do," she said.

When she was growing up, Andrepont learned some French from a great-aunt, but that was at time when French was looked down upon. Consequently, Andrepont did not fully acquire the language.

"Like W-D 40 on the tongue"

"Since I have been here, it's like putting W-D 40 on my tongue," she said. "I feel I have a foundation, so now I can study some grammar here, and when I get back, I will take some more classes."

Jean-Douglas Comeau, director of the immersion program, is a familiar face in Louisiana. Every year, he visits classrooms throughout Acadiana to convince people to come to the University of Ste. Anne.

"Why do we call ourselves the best immersion program? For the simple reason that we are very strict about the French rule. The entire staff lives on campus with the students 24 hours a day, seven days a week," he said. "And it is rural Nova Scotia, so you don't find the distractions you would find in Montreal or Paris."

A "learner-friendly environment"

"Mouton agreed. "I think this is the way to go," she said. "After the first week, I was really wondering. But people here are really friendly. It's a very learner-friendly environment. They never get frustrated, so you're never afraid to ask another question."

Bruce Murray, who calls himself a "Northern Cajun," said he is excited to be able to give back something that was taken from his southern cousins.

"The immersion program offers pride in the language and shows how much language can be fun," he said. "There is a richness in speaking the language."

The immersion program includes four hours of classroom instruction in the morning. In the afternoons, students work on various elective projects, such as film, theater, dance and forest management. There are also sports leagues, and in the evenings there are concerts, plays and parties.

Filling in the missing pieces

"For Cajuns, even though they know they came from Nova Scotia, there are many missing pieces," he said. "The first thing that happens when they come here is they get history presented to them in a very living manner. They are living history and seeing the results."

Comeau said he expects the number of Louisiana people coming to Nova Scotia will continue to swell. "More and more they are determined to go back to the source to try to understand who they are," he said.

"There's an excitement as the North gets to know the South and vice versa. I'm excited about what is happening. We have so much to offer during the summer and Louisiana has so much to offer during the winter. Birds do it, why not us?"