Misguided Rules Strangle French Language In Area

By HILDA K. GALLASSERO

I see by the newspapers that some of our area leaders are trying to keep the French language from dying out in Southwest Louisiana. I'm all in favor of this project and I agree that it is dying, but it is a death by strangulation. Through the years it has been strangled by misguided rules, regulations and beliefs.

From out of the past, I remember incidents and occasions where it 1) was against school regulations to speak French on the schoolgrounds; 2) many teachers wouldn't or couldn't speak the language; 3) people of French descent tried to hide that fact; and 4) speaking French was not stylish — it stamped you as 'backward' or 'country'.

The Little American

I have no way of knowing just who or what was to blame for this phenomenon. I think that "outsiders" had little to do with it. Although I am a native Louisianian, my family was considered outsiders by the French people of Louisiana. My father was referred to as the "Ti-American." Any one member of our family would have been grateful to have been able to converse in French. We were not excepted. Other "outsiders" felt the same. I do not believe that television had adverse effects on the French heritage of Southwest Louisiana. I have seen many movies in which a touch of glamour was added with the simple addition of a French surname or French accent.

I have noticed that it has always been a matter of minor prestige to be able to speak French and English in other states. But this accomplishment little Cajun children in our area seems to have had more opportunity. One year, there were been minor children living in the area for the first time. When I worked as a Western Union telegrapher in cities such as Chicago, Denver and San Francisco, my traveling companions on these assignments were two little Cajun girls from Opelousas. They spoke two languages whereas this dumb bunny was doing good to make herself understood in plain old English, being handicapped with a strong Southern accent and all.

Country School

I once lived at the "end of the road," at "the jumping off place" — miles beyond the barricades. Beyond our farm, there was just marsh and gulf. There were bullfrog's in the barn and at dusk we could hear the roar of the bull alligators. Any further south and I'd have attended school with the shrimp. Instead, I was enrolled in a little two-room country school called the Live Oak School of Lowry, Louisiana. There was only one teacher and she taught seven grades. Preposterous? Not exactly. And nowadays, it has just dawned upon educators that this type of schoolroom is best of all. (This too, shall return.) However, I remember that one of the most highly enforced rules was that no French could be spoken on the school ground or in the class room. If one word of French escaped a pupil's lips, he was punished.

I had no problem since I could not speak French anyway but out of all seven grades there were only three of us who were "Americans" in that we could neither speak nor understand French. And the warped prestige in which we wallowed was placed upon us by the French pupils themselves.

Out of the Past